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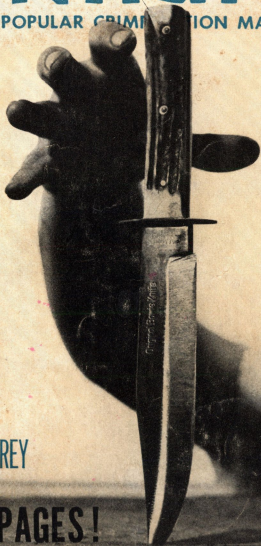
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It just didn't seem possible. After all, it was a small neat, typical American town. But then she was young, fresh out of teacher's college, idealistic and full of enthusiasm.

rape!

BY ALEX PONG

IT WAS trying hard to rain. Every now and then a few drops would spatter down out of the overcast and the wind sweeping across the airport would pelt them at the dull white terminal building. Then the wind would drop, the precipitation would stop, and everything would be still for another few minutes.

Even as she stood alone on the nearly empty observation deck and looked out across the barren expanse of airport she could still not bring herself to believe that what had really happened, had indeed really happened. It was still so fresh in her memory that looking back, all she could feel was confusion and pain. Clinical objectivity would not be possible until much later and presently the only thing to do was to forget, forget, and forget. Later, if need be, it could all be dredged back up, sordid bit by sordid bit for

she would never be able to forget it completely, not even in a lifetime.

She wondered where the plane that she would fly away on was. It was not due for another hour or so because she'd intentionally come to the airport early. Here at the airport there were no painfully familiar faces. All the people were strangers who didn't know, didn't care. Here there was a comfortable anonymity, a temporary pit of non-identity that she could sink gratefully into.

I could, she thought, at least get rid of this suitcase and be free of another encumbrance for a while. So thinking she turned and picking up her suitcase stepped back into the warmth of the terminal.

Her name was Linda Rearwin and she was a pretty girl, a natural blonde and dark eyed. The indoor life of winter would leave her hair almost brown, but it was not yet

winter, it was only fall, and there was still enough sun to keep her hair a light light blonde. It had a naturally gentle curl and about all she had to do besides run a comb through it now and then was to wash it occasionally and trim it three times a year. A ribbon or hair clip was all it ever took to keep it well in place and away from her eyes.

Usually she carried her five foot five inch one hundred twenty-six pound athlete's body with casual grace and pride, but today her chin was just a little too far out and her head tilted back just a degree too much for naturalness.

Deep down she knew it, and wondered how much of the wreckage inside would heal normally and how much would turn into ugly scar tissue. She wondered too if she was pregnant and then forced that thought from her mind, only time would tell.

Inside the terminal she started down the stairs and at the bottom turned towards the ticket counter; but at the same time as she turned towards the counter a man passed in front of her, pivoted towards the stairs and not really watching what he was doing, slammed a knee into her suitcase.

The suitcase came undone with a pop and they froze; then turned in unison to inspect the damage.

Most of her clothes had tumbled out onto the floor even though she still had the handle of the suitcase

clenched tightly in her hand. She stared at the clothes and thought of the many more that she had left at the house simply in order to get away quickly.

The man was tall, tanned, not particularly good looking, and jacketless, but somehow ruggedly attractive and possessed of an aura of impervious invulnerability which made her only more aware of her own terrible sensitivity; and as a pair of pink cotton underpants rolled out and fell to the floor she felt the last of her composure crumble into nothing.

His mouth curved slowly into a smile. "I'm sorry. I wasn't watching . . ."

She shut her eyes. "God damn you."

He watched her as she stood, swaying slightly. Then she burst into tears, and since it was the first time that she'd cried in weeks, and since he hadn't the faintest idea of what had been happening to her, there was little he could do save get down on the floor and start picking up clothes all the while mumbling clumsy apologies.

He could have left the clothes, stepped forward and put his arms around her and held her close while she cried because that was what she needed most, but he had no way of knowing that . . .

. . . it had been sunny then.

Emmettsville, population fourteen thousand three, had once been

a logging town and was named after its founder, William Carlyle Emmett and that was about all she knew about the place.

Linda looked out the tinted glass window of the bus at the flat brown farmland passing quickly by. The airport was twenty miles behind her, Emmettsville supposedly another thirty-one miles ahead. She clicked her seat back down another notch and looked up at the ceiling of the bus wondering what teaching English in a small high school would be like. Presumably the purpose of student teaching was to prepare you for a class of your own, but one class was never the same as another, and that was about all you learned as a student teacher. Classes could be part bad, part good, all bad, all good, and anything in between.

The principal of Emmettsville high was old, fat, balding, and mean looking. He peered owlishly up at her from behind a pair of steel rimmed glasses and fiddled with his pencil. "So you're the new English teacher." He wrinkled his nose. "Think you can handle the job?"

Linda smiled. "I'm sure I can."

The principal put his pencil behind his ear and tipped his chair back. "Naturally. You're young." He was talking to himself as much as her.

It was hard to keep on being friendly. "Mr. Larkin. I wouldn't be here if I didn't think I was cap-

able. I'm inexperienced yes. Young too, but I'm sure I can teach."

He sighed. "No doubt you can." He leveled his chair and put his elbows on the desk. "But teaching isn't all you have to do in a school now-a-days. You have to cope with the school board, the principal, and juvenile delinquents. Hot rodders, bleeding heart parents, and heaven knows what all. And here we have John Alter Thomas Emmett and son to contend with."

"Is John Alter any relation to William Carlyle Emmett?"

"Grandson." He reached up and scratched behind his ear with one finger. "Miss Rearwin. John Emmett owns this town. Lock, stock and barrel. His son Roger Emmett the second will be in one of your classes. When I used to teach we kept the board of education in one corner and a whip in the other. Never used to mind using them either. Now-days we give them understanding. How in hell we're supposed to understand them when their parents can't I don't know. But that's the way it is."

"A principal is supposed to back his teachers. Not here. I back John Emmett. If I don't I lose my job, and don't talk to me about hypocrisy and courage because you're not sixty-nine. I've got a bad heart, ulcers, and arthritis. One foot in the grave, t'other on the banana peel. That's me. I want to live out the rest of my years in peace and harmony. In this town John Emmett

says jump and everyone choruses, how high? He says two and two make three. Then two and two make three. Do anything you want, but don't rub John Emmett the wrong way because you're in Emmettsville, the Emmett County seat.

"It seems as though I've landed myself in an interesting town." This only happens in stories, she thought, and bit her tongue.

Principal Larkin swept his eyes up and down her. "You're very pretty." It was not a compliment, just a simple statement of fact.

Linda smiled again. "Thank you."

Larkin grimaced. "And your hem's too high. You're wearing the wrong kind of dress. Wear something fuller that doesn't show your shape. What's your worst color?"

"Yellow."

"Wear yellow then. Lots of it, and collars up to here. Don't wear a girdle and wear a bra that will make you look flat. Slouch. Wear green lipstick." Larkin transferred his pencil angrily across to his other ear. "Roger Emmett and his hot rod friends will be less likely to bother you." Larkin stared at her noting the doubtful look on her face. "You're young, pretty, female. They're young, rowdy, and male."

She wondered if she was dismissed.

The math teacher who showed her around the school was young,

good looking, unengaged, and unmarried. His name was Gerald Conover. He opened the door into the class room and waited for Linda to enter first. "It's not new, but it's cool and the ceiling's up where ceilings should be." He followed her into the room. "This one's yours."

She looked around the room. Finally, her own room, her own class. "Mr. Conover. I think I'm going to like it."

"What few friends I have call me Connie."

She turned, a serious expression tightening her face. "And I should think we'll be friends won't we?"

He looked into her eyes. "I hope so. Have you found a place to stay yet?"

She nodded and walked over to the big desk at the front of the room. "Other side of town." She sat in the chair behind the desk and smiled. "It's a great old ramshackle house on Marmon Street and it's big enough for ten."

Connie watched her open and shut all the drawers. "You're only a few blocks from me. Why don't I pick you up tonight and we'll go out and eat somewhere. I haven't found it yet, but there must be a good restaurant somewhere near."

"All right."

"I suppose everyone tells you that you're pretty."

Linda shook her head. "Not everyone." She smiled. "Just men. Mr. Larkin tells me that I shouldn't

wear clothes like these on the job. I did in Chicago. Everyone did."

"Don't let him scare you. He never married and he hates women."

After a while, thinking that he couldn't be as bad as Larkin said, she forgot about Roger Emmett entirely.

Roger Emmett was late to his first class with her.

She asked him why he was late and he said that he'd had a flat tire on his way to school. Then she dropped the matter.

Halfway through class when Roger said suddenly and loudly, "You sure are the prettiest English teacher I ever did see," she dropped the chalk. She started to bend down to pick it up, but Roger moved more quickly and picked it up for her. He smiled up at her as he handed her the stub of chalk. "You're cute." Most of the class heard him say that too and she knew then that Roger Emmett was going to be a trouble maker. He was big, he was arrogant, he was rude, and he had a chip on each shoulder. Linda blushed and took the chalk. Roger stood and swaggered back to his desk, a grin a mile wide splitting his face. She watched him, wondering what she was going to do about him and then turned back to the board.

The next day, as soon as the class was quiet, she said,

"Roger. Would you explain why you were late yesterday."

Roger smiled innocently. "I thought I told you that I had a flat."

"You did. Do you still say that?"

Roger glanced quickly around the class. "What is this? Day in court? I thought this was an English class."

Linda nodded. "It is, but I have to know why you were late."

"I had a flat."

"You're absolutely sure of that?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"Mr. Larkin was in the car behind you all the way to school yesterday Roger. There wasn't any flat, but you did run a stop sign."

It was very still in the room. Roger looked at the floor. "I slept late." His voice was low and defensive. His offensive thrust had stalled and then been beaten into retreat.

"How old are you Roger?" Linda pressed her advantage.

"Seventeen."

"By now I should think that you would be able to get up on time. I can send a note to your parents and ask them to get you up earlier."

Roger stared at her. "Go ahead. See if I care."

"Roger. Unexcused tardiness counts on your grade. I have to know whether or not to excuse you when you're late and I don't like people to lie to me. I'll hold off on the note until we find out whether you need your mother's help in getting up every morning. Now. Open your books to page forty." There was the rustle of books and papers as a cowed class responded.

Roger was quietly sullen for a week. Until the day he stood up in the middle of class and said. "Miss Rearwin?"

Linda turned from the board. "Yes, Roger."

"I shouldn't have lied to you when I was late that time. I've been feeling bad and I thought maybe that I should apologize right here in front of the rest of the kids and everything . . ."

"I accept your apology Roger." She wanted to smile and laugh. It had been a long wait and a hard won victory, but she did neither and left the stern expression drawn across her face.

Parked outside her house in Connie's old Buick, she leaned against Connie's shoulder and sighed. "I don't know why the others have so much trouble with Roger Emmett. He hasn't given me any."

Connie smiled and slipped his arm around her. "The lull before the storm."

"Cynic!" She picked a piece of lint from his collar. "Connie. The boy's a good kid. Keep a secret Connie?"

"My lips are sealed."

"He wants to be a writer. Three weeks ago he handed in the first chapter of a novel he started. I kept him after to talk it over with him. His grades are up and he might get an A. He thinks he's writing the great American novel. I'm not sure it will even sell, but he does have

talent. In spots it's terrific. I promised him that I wouldn't tell anyone, but . . ."

"It won't go any farther than me Lindy, but are you sure he's on the level?"

Linda nodded. "I wasn't born yesterday either. He writes some everyday and hands it in the next. He asked me to ask him to come in after school whenever I had time to discuss it with him. Night before last I let him come over here and work on it."

"Lindy, do you ever listen to yourself. You spend all your time talking about Roger."

"Do I? I'm sorry. He's my greatest triumph."

He kissed her hair. "I don't mind. It's just that you haven't given me a chance to tell you that I want to marry you."

And then there it was, out in the open. She'd known that it was coming; sooner or later. She was quiet. "Not so soon Connie. It's too soon."

"No, its not. Falling in love is one of those things that happens in a fraction of a second. After that your judgment's biased, and a ten year engagement won't help you learn anything that you can't learn in two months. Nobody's perfect, especially us, and it will be an imperfect marriage, but it's worth a try because I love you and when it does work out, we'll always wonder why we didn't do it sooner."

"Connie, I . . ."

He tipped her face up and kissed her. "Don't say yes. Don't say no. Not yet. Sleep on it. I know its sudden, but before you go in, Lindy, be careful about Roger."

"Careful!"

"We get to thinking that we're working with kids Lindy, and in a way they are, but they're really a horrid unpredictable cross between adult and child. Just like the bodies they grow. Some grow long legs. They get pimples. The fat ones get skinny and the skinny ones get fat. Their emotions grow the same way. All out of balance. Put that in an adult's body and you never know what to expect."

"I'll be careful."

"And don't let him come over any more. It doesn't look right."

"All right." She kissed him and slipped across the seat to the door.

She leaned against the wall at the back of the classroom. "All right Roger. Go on." She shut her eyes while he read from a pile of notepaper. After a while she opened her eyes again. "That's enough." She walked to the front of the room and shut the door. "Roger, the writing is good. Technically speaking that is. But your people don't live. The boy. He wouldn't look at his nails that way. Girls look at their nails palm down. Boys palm up. The woman. She wouldn't kiss a younger man that way."

Roger watched her. "It's pretty bad, huh?"

Linda smiled. "No. It's good. But you're writing over your head. The woman wouldn't be hesitant. Only a younger girl would be hesitant. An older . . ." She walked down the aisle to his desk, put one hand gently behind his head, tipped his chin up with the other hand, and quickly kissed him firmly, but gently. "Like that. You see."

He had a confused look on his face. "Yeah. I guess."

"Take a notebook Roger. Go to a restaurant or a grocery store. Watch people. Listen to them. Make notes. Then write the chapter over."

There was a noise outside and Roger looked up at the clock. "I'd better get going."

Linda started up the aisle. "So had I."

He called her two nights later. "Miss Rearwin. I got the chapter rewritten. Would it be all right if I came over?"

She hesitated, remembering her promise to Connie. "I don't know Roger. I . . . well. All right, but I can't give you much time."

And then the nightmare began.

They went back to the kitchen and Linda walked over to the stove. "Coffee, Roger? I was just going to make some for myself." She lit the burner beneath the kettle. "Where's the novel?" She flicked out the match, broke it, and dropped it into the waste basket.

"I didn't bring it. I forgot." His voice was close behind her and she

could feel his breath on the back of her neck. She forced herself to relax and adjusted the flame of the burner.

"Roger, this is the last time I can let you come over. It doesn't look right."

"Yeah. I thought after a while you'd say that." His voice was sullen as it hadn't been in a long time and for a moment she thought of reconsidering. She wondered why he was still standing so close. "Roger, I . . ." She felt his hands close over her breast and froze. The rough caress of his fingers, she could hardly feel. Panic had clamped her heart in an icy grip and she could barely speak. "You'd better go Roger. Right now."

His fingers moved against her breasts as he pulled her back against him. She wanted to scream but the walls of the old house were thick, the neighbors were out, and across the street there was only three acres of vacant city park. She relaxed against him, fighting the urge to tear his hands away from her breasts.

"What did you come over here for Roger?" It was hard to keep her voice steady.

His voice was thick. "Why ain't you fighting?" His fingers moved to the top button of her blouse. She fought down an urge to scream.

"Is that what you want, Roger? Is that why you came over?" Relax Linda. Think. Don't lose control of yourself.

"Aren't the girls at school giving you any?"

Her blouse was completely unbuttoned and she felt him force his fingers under the fabric of her bra.

"In about two seconds, Roger, I'm going to scream."

Quickly he clamped one hand over her mouth. "Listen, Miss Rearwin. Nobody calls Roger Emmett a liar. Nobody." His voice went up several notes. "Nobody. Not NO ONE. Y'HEAR."

His fingers stroked the velvety skin of her breast. Limp, Linda, she thought. Stay limp. Go cold. Think ice.

"Callin' me a liar wouldn't have been so bad, but you had to humiliate me in front of the class. Why, Miss Rearwin? Why did you have to do that?"

A dozen reasons flitted through her thoughts and she shut her eyes trying to remember just exactly why she had humiliated him. Oh God. Someone please stop him.

He kept his hand clamped over her mouth. "I planned this, Miss Rearwin. Ain't no one calls me a liar and makes me look bad in front of my friends. Now I'm going to humiliate you. Only I'm not going to do it front of everyone like you did. I planned this, Miss Rearwin, right from that apology in front of the class. Planned every bit of this and you took every bit of line I could give you." He spun her around against him and slammed his mouth down on hers.

She could feel one of his hands tugging at the back of her bra, searching for the catch, and she thought of her old freshman biology professor, the one with a penchant for shocking the girls. "It is physically impossible to rape a conscious girl. Hersphincter muscles are far too strong for . . ." A conscious girl. What happened when you lost consciousness . . . ? Old Chinese saying, Linda. Relax and enjoy it. The Chinese had to be savages. Oh God. Roger, stop. Please. What do I do. Someone tell me what to do. Fight him? Let him have his way until . . . and then use my mighty sphincters to bar his entry? All he has to do is knock me out. Relax? Go limp? Go cold and make it as unenjoyable for him as possible. Fine idea, but he isn't out for sex pleasure. He only wants to humiliate me.

She wrenched her head violently to one side as he backed her up against the wall. Before he could clamp his hand over her mouth, she said, "Do you have to, Roger?"

"Yes, I have to. I vowed I'd get you from the day you called me a liar." His eyes were strangely dull. She'd expected them to be bright, on fire.—She twisted weakly in his arms. "Please. You'll regret this more than I will."

"I don't think so. God, you're beautiful. He forced her face back to his and she sensed that he was beyond reason. His mouth was against hers again, sucking, tug-

ging, teeth grinding against hers. He yanked horribly at the back of her bra and the straps cut into her shoulders.

She twisted her head away again. "It fastens at the front Roger. I'm not going to fight you. If you must, hurry up and get it over with." Then she forced herself to go absolutely limp and sagged in his arms.

That was unexpected and he fell to the floor on top of her.

She felt him break the catch at the front of her bra, and his right hand slide over her left breast squeezing, ever searching. His mouth came down on hers. Like the sucker on a squid's tentacle, she thought. Her mouth was forced slightly open by his pressure, and as she felt his tongue go between her teeth she thought of biting it and thought the better of it. She felt dizzy. Everything was whirling into black. Mustn't lose consciousness, she thought. Got to fight that at least.

He'd released her breast and rammed his hand beneath the band of her skirt. Did he have to be so violent? God that hurt.

Then suddenly she felt detached from her body. It was as though someone else, weightless, ever so much lighter than air, and floating around by the ceiling, listening disinterestedly to the bubble of the water boiling in the kettle, watching this monster have his way with a girl beneath the glare of the hundred fifty watt bulb. The girl on

the floor was protesting feebly and she looked down at her. "Fight girl. Stop him. All right then. Don't listen to me. See if I care." She watched the monster unzip the girl's skirt and hook his fingers over the top of it. "Oh, my God. Don't lift up your hips and help him get your skirt off. Fight him for Heaven's sake." The monster was tugging at his pants. "Stop him. Clamp your legs together. Foolish girl down there. Why are you arching your back to meet him?" There was a sudden shock of pain, a lot of colored lights and whirling activity that she could not follow and then everything subsided into velvety blackness.

She was looking at the baseboard. She was huddled in a corner, naked, crying, cold. Steam was whistling out of the kettle. She wondered for a moment where she was and what had happened. And then as it all came back she knew she was going to be violently sick. She struggled to her feet and over to the sink. She was sick over and over again, but she could not rid herself of the full sick feeling in her lower body.

The desk sergeant was a fat heavily jowled man with a red nose. Why do desk sergeants always have to be fat, she thought. His eyes were little blue marbles beneath the thick gray lines of his brows. He reached up, lifted his cap, scratched his head, and then put his cap back. He shook his head then and leaned

back in his chair as though he was trying to get farther away from her. She half expected him to hold out his hand to her in the classic gesture of a traffic cop, but he didn't.

"Miss. You shouldn't be telling me all this. You better see the Chief."

He sounded nervous. "And if you want the advice of a fat old man who's lived all his life in this town I'd say you'd might as well just forget that it happened. Best for everyone that way. John Emmett is very important hereabouts."

The Chief sent her to the DA, who was shocked, but very reluctant to let her file the complaint.

John Emmett saw to it that the trial was publicized and open to the public. He wanted everyone there for the show. And after the prosecution had Linda tell her story, the more important parts of it went like this:

Defense, idly leafing through a sheaf of notes, "Miss Rearwin. You said that in these after school sessions you were helping the defendant with his work. Is that correct?"

Linda: "He did good work."

Defense: "Would you say that it was considerably above average?"

Linda: "Yes."

Defense: "You could say in other words then, that the defendant was a good student?"

Linda is hesitant. "Yes. You could say that."

Defense: "Would you say that he was an excellent student?"

Linda: "He was sometimes."

Defense: "I see. Did you have any poor students in your class Miss Rearwin?"

Linda: "Every class has poor students."

Defense sounds tired. "Answer the question Miss Rearwin."

Linda: "Yes. I had some poor students."

Defense: "Why, then, Miss Rearwin, did you keep the defendant who was doing excellent work, who you admit was not in need of help or discipline, in after school when there were other students who did need help?"

Linda hesitates . . .

Defense dramatically: "No further questions."

Judge: "You may step down."

Linda stands and looks at the prosecutor, but he has turned his back and is staring at John Emmett who is standing grimly at the back of the courtroom. She looks at the judge again, then at the prosecutor, and then looking slightly confused steps down.

Then the defense called the first of a long list of witnesses.

Defense: "Did the defendant stay after school of his own accord?"

Boy: "No, sir."

Defense: "Miss Rearwin has said that he was in need of no extra help or discipline? Whose idea was it then?"

Boy: "It was Miss Rearwin's idea, sir."

Defense: "How often did Miss

Rearwin keep the defendant after school?"

Boy: "Pretty often."

Defense: "Once a week. Twice a month? Every day? How often?"

Boy: "It was nearly every day."

Defense: "Did the defendant ever complain to you about being kept after?"

Boy: "Yes, he griped a lot."

Defense: "Did Miss Rearwin ever keep any of the other students after, when she kept the defendant after?"

Boy: "Not that I know of."

Defense: "How long was the defendant usually made to stay?"

Boy: "It was never less than an hour. Sometimes it was longer."

Defense: "You usually waited for the defendant did you not?"

Boy: "I usually rode home with him. I didn't mind waiting because I could usually get most of my studying done then."

Defense: "Tell the court in your own words what happened on the afternoon of the sixteenth."

Boy: "Well, Roger and I had an appointment for a job interview at five. Miss Rearwin asked him to come after school, and so after my last class I went down to the library. I studied there until about four thirty and then I thought I'd better go and tell Roger, and maybe Miss Rearwin too, that we had to get going. So I put away my books and went up to three oh five."

Defense: "That is Miss Rearwin's classroom?"

Boy: "Yes. When I got to her room the door was closed and Miss Rearwin wasn't at her desk like she usually was. I didn't see her at all until I was close enough to see towards the back of the room."

Defense: "You say you saw her at the back of the room?"

Boy: "Yes."

Defense: "Was the defendant with her?"

Boy: "Yes."

Defense: "Go on."

Boy reddens and hesitates. He looks at Linda and then down at his feet. His voice is almost inaudible. "Well. I was going to go in, but then when I saw what they were doing I decided that I'd better not just barge in."

Defense: "What were they doing?"

Boy: Blushes again. "Roger was sitting at one of the back row desks and Miss Rearwin was kissing him."

Defense looks shocked and surprised: "You say the plaintive was kissing the defendant?"

Boy nods uncomfortably: "Yes, sir."

Defense: "What did you do then?"

Boy: "I banged on the lockers outside and made a lot of noise. I whistled and dropped some of my books a little ways from the door. Then I walked into the classroom. Miss Rearwin was back at her desk and Roger was still at the back of the room."

Defense: "That will be all."

Then he called one of the girls.

Defense: "Miss Potter. How did you and Miss Rearwin get along?"

The girl is a striking brunette with sparkling blue eyes. "We got along fine."

Defense: "Was there anything different in your relationship to Miss Rearwin as compared to your relationships with other teachers?"

Girl: "Yes. I liked her better than the others."

Defense: "Why?"

Girl: "It was like she was one of us. She wasn't stuffy like the others."

Defense: "Would you say that she was friendlier than the others?"

Girl: "Yes."

Defense: "In what ways was she friendlier?"

Girl: "Well, except for when we were in the class room she let us use her first name. And she understood us better because she knew what was going on. She wasn't as dumb as some of the other teachers."

Defense: "In some ways you might say she talked your language then?"

Girl: "Oh, yes."

Defense: "Was she friendly just to you girls or to the boys too?"

Girl: "All of us. She'd even flirt, well not exactly flirt, but like you say, she knew our language."

Defense: "Can you give the court an example?"

Girl: "Oh, yes. One time one of the boys said something out of turn and she said . . ." The girl looked at the defense for encouragement. "She said, 'All right handsome. Your corners are showing . . .' She was just like one of us."

Defense: "What boy was this that she called Handsome?"

Girl: "Roger Emmet. He . . ."

Defense: "That will be all."

The Defense went through about six more witnesses who gave the same sort of testimony. Most of them weren't really sure whether they were helping Roger or Linda. Then the Defense put Roger on the stand. He'd cut his hair short and dressed in clean slacks and sport shirt instead of his usual tight jeans and T shirt.

Defense: "You stayed after school almost every day didn't you Roger?"

Roger, very subdued: "Yes, sir."

Defense with seeming embarrassment: "Whose idea was it for you to stay after Roger?"

Roger hangs his head and looks at his feet. "It was Miss Rearwin's sir."

Defense: "Did you ever think of not coming in when you were asked?"

Roger: "Yes, sir. I thought of it every time."

Defense: "But you didn't want to disobey your teacher. Why didn't you go to the principal, or your parents?"

Roger: "I was afraid to."

Defense, in a booming voice: "AFRAID?"

Roger in a whisper: "Yes, sir."

Defense: "Why were you afraid?"

Roger: "I wasn't at first. The first coupla times I didn't think anything of it, but then she started acting kind of funny."

Defense: "Oh? In what way?"

Roger: "She kept asking me if I thought she was pretty, and did I like her, did I think about her much. That sort of thing."

Defense: "What did you tell her when she asked you these things?"

Roger: "I said yes."

Defense: "Were you telling the truth at that time?"

Roger: "For a while. Sometimes she'd have those pictures that she wanted to put up above the blackboard and it was too high for her to reach. She could have gotten a ladder, but she always made me lift her up. She said she liked it when I touched her."

Defense: "And what did you do when she told you that?"

Roger: "I told her that maybe I'd better stop coming in after school, but she said that I'd better keep coming whenever she asked or that there would be a good chance of me not graduating."

Defense: "She threatened you?"

Roger: "Yes, sir."

Defense: "You had a girl friend that you were, as you people say, going steady with, didn't you?"

Roger: "Yes, sir."

Defense: "And what happened as a result of your staying after every day?"

Roger: "We broke up. She said I wasn't giving her enough time."

Defense: "Did Miss Rearwin ever kiss you in the class room?"

Roger: "Yes."

Defense: "Tell the court about it."

Roger: "I came in after school and she gave me some sophomore papers to correct. While I was doing that she asked me again if I liked her. I said yes, and then she asked me if I would like it if she kissed me. I said I didn't know and then she came over and kissed me."

Defense: "Did you like it?"

Roger looks at the judge and then at the defense: "I . . . Do I have to answer this?" He looks at the judge, "Yes. I guess I liked it."

Defense: "Do you think Miss Rearwin is pretty?"

Roger: "Yes, sir."

Defense: "What did Miss Rearwin tell you after she kissed you?"

Roger: "That if I ever told anyone that I'd never graduate."

Defense: "Tell the court about the night of the eighteenth."

Roger: "She called me just after I'd finished supper and asked me to come over."

Defense: "Was this the first time Miss Rearwin asked you to come to her house?"

Roger: "No. I went over once before."

Defense: "What did you do that time?"

Roger: "We had a cup of coffee and watched TV. She made me sit next to her on the couch. It was a play that we were supposed to read for English class and she said this would be easier and more fun than reading it."

Defense: "She called you and asked you to come over. What did you do then?"

Roger: "I told my parents that I was going out and went over."

Defense: "What did you do when you got there?"

Roger: "We went into the kitchen and she offered me a cup of coffee. She lit the fire under the kettle and then . . ." Roger's voice shakes and he cannot go on.

Defense: "Go on."

Roger: "Then she drew the shades and asked me to kiss her."

Defense: "Did you?"

Roger: "Yes. I kissed her."

Defense: "Was it a long kiss or a short one?"

Roger: "I was going to make it a short one, but she sort of held on and then . . ."

Defense: "I see. Then what?"

Roger looks wildly at the judge and then at his father. He shakes his head. "I . . ."

Defense: "Roger, you are facing a very serious charge. You must tell the court what happened."

Roger: "While I was kissing her she unbuttoned her blouse and made me touch her."

Defense: "Made you?"

Roger: "She took my hand and put it on her breast."

Defense: "Then what?"

Roger looks at the court. He is about to cry. "I didn't want to do it, but she made me. I told her I couldn't. That I didn't want to. I asked her to just let me go home, but then . . ."

Defense mildly: "Yes?"

Roger: "I knew that if I let it go any further that I might not be able to control myself and I told her so. She said she didn't want me to control myself. She said that it was all right. That she'd taken precautions and that I didn't have to worry about making her pregnant. She took off her bra and then I guess I did what she wanted me to."

Defense: "Which was?"

Roger: "I guess I lost control of myself."

Defense: "And then you had sexual intercourse with her. Is that right?"

Roger, in a whisper: "Yes."

Defense: "What happened when it was over?"

Roger: "I said that I couldn't keep quiet about it. That I would have to tell my father."

Defense: "What did she say then?"

Roger: "That if I did that, she would say that I raped her."

Defense: "What did you do then?"

Roger: "I said I was going to tell my father anyway. She begged me

not to and said that we could have a wonderful relationship. That I could come over any time I wanted. Then she asked me again if I was going to tell my father."

Defense: "What did you tell her?"

Roger: "I said I was still going to tell him. She said I was going to be very sorry and told me to go home to my daddy and sit on his knee if I couldn't act like a man."

Defense, sounding very tired and shocked: "No further questions."

In his summation about all the prosecution could do was to cite Linda's unblemished record and call Emmett a liar. During the trial he had objected only occasionally and spent much time looking apologetically at John Emmett. His heart was hardly in his summation which lasted eight minutes and twenty one seconds.

The defense called up all his oratorical talents and went on about a sick woman despoiling an innocent young boy. His summation lasted over an hour and a half.

It was no contest. Roger was acquitted.

Not guilty. She'd expected that after the first half hour of the trial, and no doubt, she thought, the prosecutor expected it before it ever began. She stared blankly out the window wishing that whatever it was that was making her feel sick would go away.

People were filing out of the

room and the prosecutor was touching her shoulder. "That's the way it goes, Miss Rearwin. That's the law. Trial by jury. We have to abide by what they say."

"Sure."

I knew it, she thought. Why did I try? Why didn't I just leave quietly in the first place. She shut her eyes, but the nightmare was within and could not be shut out. Harlot. Witch. Not long ago they'd have burned me at the stake. She opened her eyes. Everyone was gone. The judge had left. The Emmetts had gone, along with their lawyers, friends and relations. The gallery was nearly empty. Was that Connie standing by the rail? Yes it was. What does he think of me now?

She pulled her sweater around her and walked over to him. She stopped a few feet away and they looked at each other for one long searching moment. The answer to her question came as he looked away and turned. She watched him go. "Connie. Oh, Connie," she said when he was gone. Then she too started for the door, but someone else was standing there to confuse things. He was looking at her and blocking the way. Is that Mr. Larkin? I suppose it is. What does he want? To cackle and point and call for the tar barrel. She looked away.

"Please. I want to go home."

"Everyone left?"

She nodded. Larkin's pinched face looked as mean as ever, yet somehow grayer than usual.

"I heard the verdict Miss."

His voice was sharp, like his beak of a nose she thought.

"So did I Mr. Larkin. I'd rather not discuss it."

"Didn't come to discuss it. Come on in here and set yourself down for a spell." He took her arm and she was too tired to resist. She sat in one of the chairs.

"What do you want?"

He stared at her. "Look at me when you talk to me."

Obediently she looked up at him.

"That's better. Prosecutor wanted him acquitted as bad as the defense. Kid raped you sure as hell. You know it. I know it. Prosecutor knows it. Old man Emmett knows it. Probably the jury thinks he did too. I suppose you're going to leave now and not never come back."

She could smell a trace of alcohol on his breath and wondered if he was drunk. "I'm leaving as soon as I can Mr. Larkin."

"It isn't my idea you should leave Miss Rearwin. I like you." He shrugged. "But the school board would never let you stay. Emmett controls that too."

She looked away. It was hard to look at anyone. "You warned me didn't you Mr. Larkin? Collars up to here. Cast iron bra. Juvenile delinquents."

He shook his head. "I'm a mean old bastard, but I've never said I told you so to anyone and I'm not going to start with you. It was circumstances. That's all. Another

town, another place, and no Emmetts. Things would have gone fine. Maybe someday someone will do something about the Emmetts and then you can come back."

She stood. "Maybe. Maybe not. I don't care because I'm not coming back. Ever." She paused. "It's your town. You do something about them."

"I'm just a cowardly old man Miss Rearwin."

"The universal human malady . . ."

He stepped in front of her to keep her from walking away. "Don't rub it in. I guess what I came to say was, that I enjoyed having you with us and whatever happens I wish you'd write sometime."

"I don't know. I could try I suppose."

They said good-bye then.

There was a roar of a jet hurtling into the sky. He pushed the lid down and fastened the snaps. Then he stood up and placed the suitcase beside her. She was crying softly as he touched her shoulder. "It's not the end of the world Miss." He squeezed her shoulder for an instant and then started away, but she caught his arm. "Wait."

He stopped and turned towards her. "Don't thank me. It was my fault."

"Please. Don't leave. I have to talk to someone. Right now."

He still hadn't any idea what was wrong, but he knew something

was. "What you need is a dim lit room and a drink. The cocktail lounge is open." He held out his hand.

She stared at him and then quickly moved against him and began to cry again. "I'm not insane if that's what you're thinking. I know it looks that way, but I'm not. I don't know who you are or what you are and that's good. If you have time I . . ."

"I've got all kinds of time."

She moved away from him. "I'm getting tears all over your shirt."

"It's all right."

"No. I'm going to tell you a horrid ugly story and all you have to do is listen."

"I'll keep very still." He started towards the cocktail lounge, but she held him back.

"I have to check my luggage."

When she was all through she leaned back against the soft black leather of the luxuriously upholstered booth and finished her drink. It left a warmth down inside and she knew that she would no longer have to try to forget. It was out now. It would always hurt, but there wasn't going to be any great mass of scar tissue. She reached across the table and took the man's hand. "Thank you for listening, and don't tell me your name. I'd rather think of you as a stranger."

He squeezed her hand. "Have a good flight."

She wriggled out of the booth

and stood. She turned then to look back at him.

He smiled. "I should keep quiet and be a good stranger, but . . . I'm a pilot. I have my own plane, rather the company's plane here. I'm tempted to offer you a lift. This isn't the time to be telling you this, but there won't be any other. You are a beautiful girl and I'm not sure I want you to just walk out of my life. I don't know where you came from, or where you're going."

She smiled sadly and shook her head. "I could never accept."

He nodded. "I suppose not."

"Lindy!"

She looked over her shoulder at Connie. He had a hurt look on his face. "Lindy, I had to think. I

would have called you but . . . Lindy, I don't know what I was thinking. I still want . . ."

She cut him off with a shake of her head and looked back at the man in the booth. "Can you remember addresses?"

He shook his head and pulled out a notebook and pencil. "No, but I can write."

"Eight seven six, J Street, Tacoma, Washington. That's home, more or less. Name: Linda Rearwin. Don't tell me yours. I'll remember you if you remember me. Someday maybe . . ." She nodded at Connie. "Tell Connie here that I don't want to talk to him. Someday maybe."

She turned then and walked away.



Truisms have a way of proving themselves. In this case ... You can't judge a book by its cover.

THE BROTHERS

BY JIM MUELLER

THE TAXI let Banders off in front of Police Headquarters. He made his way slowly up the rain spattered concrete steps to the door. Inside he was stopped by a neat uniformed sergeant.

"Help you, sir?"

"My name is Jim Banders. I'd like to see a Detective Lieutenant Hacker."

"I'm not sure if the Lieutenant is in yet. Is he expecting you?"

Banders flipped open the newspaper he had clutched in his hand. "I'm Tom Banders' brother. The morning paper says Lieutenant Hacker is in charge."

The sergeant's eyes flicked quickly to the outstretched paper. "If you'll have a chair, please, I'll see if he's in his office."

Banders walked tiredly over to a line of straight backed, wooden chairs and sat down, a slender, tall man in a wrinkled brown suit. He spread the newspaper on his lap and looked again at the black headlines—"TWO DEAD IN KILL-

ING"; and in smaller print, "Murder and Suicide Police Believe".

The sergeant at the desk hung up the phone and made a motion. Banders went over.

"Lieutenant Hacker's office is at the top of the stairs, second door on the right. You can't miss it."

Upstairs, Banders paused ready



to knock when the door suddenly opened.

"Jim Banders?"

Banders faced a thick shouldered, short, nattily dressed man with sharp grey eyes that seemed to widen suddenly as they looked at him. He acknowledged his identity and after introductions, Lieutenant Hacker led the way into the office.

When they had taken chairs, Lieutenant Hacker said, "Excuse me for staring at you in the doorway, Mr. Banders. But there's a strong resemblance between you and your brother, isn't there?"

Banders nodded and said, "I think you know why I'm here, Lieutenant".

Hacker peered at him across the desk. "I think so, Mr. Banders." He sat more erect in the chair. "A police officer's job is never easy at times like this. The department fully realizes that . . ."

"What's the story, Lieutenant?" Banders asked, bluntly.

The detective's face stiffened into a frown. Then he shrugged and took a notebook from his pocket and began flipping through the pages. "Okay, Mr. Banders," he said, straight from the shoulder.

"Yesterday afternoon a Mr. William Innis, your uncle, arranged a week-end pass for your brother, Tom Banders, from the State Hospital. He'd done this on several occasions in the past, I'm told. He mentioned to the doctor on duty

that they were going to his apartment to meet you." The detective looked up from his notes. "You weren't there?"

Banders shook his head. "I'm a highway engineer and travel a lot. I thought I'd be back by yesterday afternoon but a last minute problem slowed me up. I didn't get in town until this morning. That's when I saw the newspaper."

"I see. Well, about seven o'clock yesterday evening we got a call that someone had jumped or fallen from one of the apartments in the building where your uncle lived. The body landed in an open courtyard in the center of the building. When we got there and examined the identification on the body, we found it was your brother.

"Naturally, we checked the apartments. Your uncle was in the kitchen, stabbed a dozen times with a butcher knife. Your brother's fingerprints were smeared all over the handle of the knife. We compared them with his fingerprints on file at the hospital. According to the Lab there were also stains of your uncle's blood on his clothing."

Banders lit a cigarette and leaned forward over the desk. "And?", he murmured.

"That's about all there is to it. We had the bodies sent to the Medical Center. They'd like you to come down and make the formal identification as soon as you can. For the record."

Banders squashed his barely smoked cigarette in the ashtray on the desk. "Lieutenant," he said, "I don't believe what you're trying to say. Tom was sick but you'll never get me to believe that he could have murdered Uncle Bill and then killed himself. Not in a thousand years."

"Mr. Banders, I know how you feel. But there are certain facts to . . ."

"I know what your facts are, Lieutenant. But I know what mine are, too. I understood my brother better than any person on earth. We were identical twins but it was more than that. We were closer than most brothers because Mom and Dad died when we were just kids. Uncle Bill raised us. We grew up together, played together, went to war together. I watched him come apart inside when he found out his wife was a tramp. I had him committed to the State Hospital myself when I couldn't do anything else. But damn it, Lieutenant, I *knew* him. I know what he'd do and what he wouldn't do."

"You just said yourself that you had to commit him to a mental institution," Hacker argued. "The hospital record shows that when he and his wife were having trouble, he threatened to kill her and himself. If he was that bad, how do you know what he'd do?"

Banders beat a fist slowly on the desk in front of him. "*You—don't—understand!* Tom wasn't insane.

There was a good chance he could eventually be released from the hospital."

The detective reached into the right hand drawer of his desk and pulled out a white manila folder. He spread it open on the desk in front of him. "Mr. Banders, I'm not a psychiatrist and neither are you. This is a copy of the hospital admission report on your brother Tom. 'Schizophrenic . . . definitely psychotic . . . under provocation could very well be homicidal'." He closed the folder and looked up patiently at Banders.

"Lieutenant, the hospital released him on a week-end pass! And it wasn't the first time. I'd had him out on pass before. Several times. So had Uncle Bill."

"I checked on that," Lieutenant Hacker said. "They're psychiatrists at the State Hospital, not mind readers. It's true your brother hadn't been violent for the time he'd been confined. And there had been some apparent improvement. Under the circumstances, the hospital staff agreed to put him on leave for short periods as long as he was properly supervised. They thought it was beneficial."

"Well," Banders said, "doesn't that prove something?"

"Not necessarily," Hacker replied. "The hospital also said that lately your brother Tom seemed agitated because he couldn't be released permanently. He kept insisting there was nothing wrong

with him. Several of the doctors even mentioned that he seemed to be putting on an act for them, so he could be released quicker. That's all hindsight now, of course," he finished, wryly.

"What of it?" Banders questioned. "It's only natural he'd want out as soon as possible."

"But the point is this. Suppose he told your uncle when they were at the apartment that he wasn't going back to the hospital. Maybe there was an argument. Maybe this was the 'provocation' the hospital report mentions that could make him homicidal. And then suicide when he realized what he had done."

"It isn't right, Lieutenant. It can't be."

Lieutenant Hacker got up from his chair and walked around the desk. "Mr. Banders, I've told you before that I'm not a psychiatrist and neither are you. Your uncle was found stabbed to death last night in his apartment. Your brother Tom's fingerprints were on the handle of the knife, there were stains of your uncle's blood on his clothing, and his body landed eight stories below in the courtyard when he jumped from the win-

dow. I'm afraid the facts are clear enough."

Banders rose to his feet and stood facing the detective. "Tom had enough bad breaks in life without this, Lieutenant."

"Go home and think about it awhile, Mr. Banders."

"I'll do that," Banders muttered. He closed the office door behind him.

Outside, he paused on the steps of the Police Station to tip the collar of his coat closer about him. The rain had stopped and a chill wind was beginning to stir.

But Banders felt warm inside.

Superb acting, he thought. Magnificent as always. And the whole thing was so simple. Knocking his brother unconscious and then the handy butcher knife for Uncle Bill . . . dear, befuddled Uncle Bill. After that the change of clothes and identification and the quick tossing of his brother's unconscious body from the window of the apartment. The fools, both of them, to think they could force him to go back to the State Hospital when he was as sane as . . . as his brother.

Softly, Tom Banders began to chuckle to himself.





video vengeance

BY PAT MACMILLAN

Mr. Blakely was a sweet and gentle man . . . an indulgent father. But there's a limit to what any man can endure.

MR. BLAKELY hunched resignedly over his breakfast, trying with little success to erect a mental barrier between himself and the simpering, fawning creature cavorting in front of him on the TV set. The voice, now cajoling, now a husky whisper, now a raucous laugh, never failed to hypno-

tize Sally, Blakely's five-year-old daughter. The inevitable box of Toasty Tasty Tidbits, lauded daily by Lieutenant Lollipop, and religiously consumed by Sally, sat mockingly in front of him, daring him to enjoy his eggs and toast.

The weird red and white spiral protruding from Sally's head was

not a deformity, but a Lieutenant Lollipop Official Hat. (Two box-tops of Toasty Tasty Tidbits and \$1.35. Send no stamps, please!) A Lieutenant Lollipop Deputy Badge (Absolutely free with the purchase of the Lieutenant Lollipop Long Play Record of Stories in Stereo For Only \$5.98 at all *Better Stores*) proudly decorated her pajamas.

Lieutenant Lollipop had just completed a bit of nonsense with his imbecilic sidekick, Corporal Candylegs, and was now sliding into a commercial with all the subtlety and finesse of a wrecking crane, and with every bit as much effectiveness.

"Yes, boys and girls, the Talking Twins ACTUALLY talk to you! Think of it! Your own little pal to have with you all the time! One for Sister, and one for Brother! It says 14 different things! (At this point, one of the dolls obediently said "I-want-to-play) Be the envy of all the kids in the neighborhood! Tell Mommy and Daddy that you just HAVE to have the Talking Twins! And they're only \$12.98 apiece! AND you can buy a whole wardrobe of clothes for them for only \$2.88 an outfit! That's right, only \$2.88! Isn't that wonderful, boys and girls? Remember, the Talking Twins . . ."

"Daddy, Daddy! Did you see the Talking Twins? I just HAVE to have them! They're only \$12.98!"

Large trusting, excited brown eyes danced up at Blakely, and the

angry words died, unspoken, in his throat.

"Maybe for Christmas, Baby," he said defeatedly, and looked up to catch the triumphant gleam in Lieutenant Lollipop's eyes as he stood poised, a twin in each hand.

"Goody, goody," the tiny voice squealed, and little hands clapped together. "Did you hear that, Lieutenant Lollipop?", and Sally was again seated in front of the screen in cross-legged fascination, waiting for the modern day Pied Piper to lead on.

Blakely rose wearily, his appetite for breakfast gone. He placed a kiss on the cheek of his preoccupied daughter, kissed his wife, feeling a deep pity for her, for she was to be trapped for another 45 minutes with Lieutenant Lollipop, and left for work.

Oh his way to the bus stop Blakely could not rid his mind of the Lieutenant Lollipop syndrome. The program had dominated their lives for 6 months now. It had started with a two-hour show on Saturdays that met with such immediate popularity that it was quickly expanded into a daily one-hour show.

The Leaping Lizard had been the first really big item that it had been necessary for Sally to have in order to hold her head up among her peers. The lizard leapt agilely in the air and caught balls that were thrown at it. The initial outlay had been \$14.98, but it ap-

peared that the mechanism that enabled the lizard to "feel out" the balls was very delicate and needed to be replaced about once every 3 weeks. (Only \$1.98 a replacement). Blakely was firmly convinced, and rightly so, that the good Lieutenant was a major stockholder in the Titanic Toys Corporation, an outfit that made more in replacement parts than it did in the original over-priced item.

Blakely admitted that it was his own fault that Lieutenant Lollipop had them in his grip. He knew that after the Leaping Lizard incident he should have put his foot down to further expenditures of this type. He knew it, but Blakely was a father of a five-year-old, and parenthood had come late in life to the Blakelys, when they had given up hope of ever being so blessed.

Thus it was that the Leaping Lizard had been followed by a seemingly endless stream of breakable toys that the Blakelys could ill afford. Now with Christmas only "three months away" (the hot September sun scorched down on Blakely) the Lieutenant and Corporal Candylegs had stepped up their advertising program.

With a superhuman effort, Blakely dismissed the whole unpleasant situation from his mind and turned to his paper.

Blakely was glad to be home. He had been wrestling with a design problem all day at the office, and

was no nearer to the solution than when he began. On the bus he had thought of a possible solution and planned to develop it in the quiet of his home.

As he stepped through the doorway the cheery words of greeting never materialized. An all too familiar voice was ranting, raving, laughing, sobbing, supplicating, joking in the living room:

"Madge, Madge!"

Blakely's wife came hurrying from the kitchen, a look of dismay on her face.

"Madge, is it who I think it is?"

"I'm afraid so, dear. I turned on the set this afternoon, and HE came on! It seems he has an afternoon show from 4 to 6 now, for the benefit of the older kids who can't see him because of school!"

Blakely moaned, and wished he had stayed at the office late.

The last straw came at dinner.

Sally toyed with her food in her usual disinterested manner, rearranging the objects on her plate in such a way that an undiscerning onlooker might think she had eaten something.

"Daddy," she finally said, "Daddy, you gotta help me!"

"What's the matter, baby?"

"Nothing's the matter," Sally said disgustedly. "MAN!! You gotta help me in a contest! Lieutenant Lollipop said everyone's daddy should help." Sally was oblivious to her mother's frantic gestures designed to silence her.

"What kind of a contest is it?" Blakely asked guardedly.

"Well, you need six boxtops of Toasty Tasty Tidbits, and \$2.00 to enter, and then you have to write why Daddys are important. You can write down what I say!"

"Well!" The price momentarily escaped Blakely's notice, so flattered was he by the implication. At least the contest was worthwhile, for a change!

"Well, pumpkin, why do you think Daddy is important?"

Without hesitation Sally said happily, "You're important because you go to work and earn lots of money so I can get the Talking Twins, the Magic Horsey, and lots of other things!"

"And wait'll you hear what the winner gets!" Sally rushed on, oblivious of the storm warnings on her daddy's face. "A duplicate Daddy!"

"A WHAT!?!?" Blakely shouted.

"A duplicate daddy."

Blakely fought for control and with an effort worthy of stronger men, he choked out,

"And just what is a Duplicate Daddy?"

Sally favored him with a look that has been all too familiar to all parents throughout all ages—a look that said "You poor slob, don't you know anything?" But Sally knew better than to voice such a sentiment, and so she contented herself with explaining patiently,

"A duplicate daddy is a real man who comes to the house every day for a week and plays with me, because my own Daddy is too busy. I sure hope I win!"

Blakely's pent up emotions exploded with the inevitable result of tears from the bewildered Sally, condemnation from Madge, and apologies from Blakely.

"That man has gone too far this time, Madge," Blakely said later that evening after Sally had taken a bath in her Lieutenant Lollipop Bubble Soap and gone to bed in her Lieutenant Lollipop Nightie clutching her Lieutenant Lollipop clown.

After Blakely's apoplectic outburst at dinner, the matter had not been discussed, but Madge knew immediately what he meant, having been waiting for the outburst.

"I know, Dear, I know. Other parents must feel the same as we do! Maybe if we wrote to the newspaper and try to get them interested?"

"That's not fast enough, and not effective enough. Is his show local?"

"Of course, that's right, it is!"

"I'm fed up, Madge! I'm going down there tomorrow, and I'm going to give that man a piece of my mind!"

Blakely almost missed Lieutenant Lollipop when he left the studio. The small, scowling man bore little resemblance to the vivacious personality on TV. Stripped of his

braided uniform, makeup, and impossible wig, he would have been unrecognizable if he hadn't called a farewell to someone in the studio. Blakely could easily have picked that voice out of a thousand voices, which wasn't remarkable when one considered he heard it at least one hour every day.

"G'nite, Joe! That oughta keep the brats happy for another day."

Blakely stepped quickly up to him.

"Lieutenant Lollipop?", he asked, feeling slightly foolish addressing the non-descript, brown-suited man in this fashion.

"Who wants ta know?" the little man said belligerently.

Sally would never believe this, Blakely reflected.

"Er—my little girl watches your show every day . . ."

"So? What else is new?" He said in bored tones. "Hurry it up will you? I got a date that won't wait!" He snickered suggestively.

"Listen, Lieutenant . . ."

"The name's Sam Jones."

"Listen, Mr. Jones. Has it ever occurred to you how much influence you have over children?" And Blakely proceeded to explain his dilemma.

Jones looked at him incredulously.

"Lemme get this straight. You want me to let up on using my influence to get the kids to buy expensive toys? You outa your mind? That's my living, Buddy. Sorry if

you can't afford to buy toys for your kid, but that's your tough luck!"

With another amazed look at Blakely, Jones skittered to the elevator and was gone. Blakely turned with discouraged steps toward home. He reflected sadly that he might have known the outcome.

Christmas grew nearer and nearer, and the promotion efforts of Lieutenant Lollipop and Corporal Candylegs reached new heights. And what had begun as an irritation with Blakely reached the point of an obsession.

Madge worried about her husband. He was irritable to the point where she avoided talking to him, and she knew his work was suffering. It seemed incredible to her that he was taking Lieutenant Lollipop so seriously, but every man has his breaking point and she realized that her husband was dangerously close to his.

Then one night, Blakely seemed his old self. He was smiling and cheerful when he came home, ignored the TV, and later played with Sally in the evening. Then he went down to his workshop in the basement, and remained there until late. He followed this pattern for several nights.

One night he came up the stairs with a package in his hand. He carefully addressed it to Lieutenant Lollipop and hurried to mail it before Madge saw it.

The Board of Directors of the

Titanic Toys Corporation was in an emergency session. The members wore shocked, grieved expressions, as befitted the situation.

"I just can't believe it! Granted, old Jones was a pain in the neck, but who would hate him enough to kill him?" Hargraves, Chairman of the Board, exclaimed.

"You've gotta admit it was an ingenious method," Candylegs said irreverently. "I was lucky I didn't get it, too. I'd just gone out of the studio for some papers in my office."

"You said it was a toy cannon?"

"Yeah, a tiny toy cannon, that you load, and pull the string and it actually fires—only this guy had rigged it up so it backfired, and it contained enough explosives to blow up the works of us!"

There was a moment of silence.

"They got the guy that did it?" Someone asked.

"Yeah, someone named Blakely who had a little kid—guess old Jones was just too much for him, got to be an obsession." Corporal Candylegs said. "Now, about this cannon . . ."

"What about it?" Hargraves said.

"Well, with all apologies to Jones, the firing mechanism is really very unique. I've never seen anything like it before. Kids go wild about destructive toys—and it would be cheap to make!"

As he spoke the indignant look on Hargrave's face slowly faded, to be replaced by a speculative look.

"If we hurry," he mused, "we could have them out before Christmas!"



Detective Belton picked up the phone. The voice said, "This is Carl Rebas, Belton. Remember me?" In the heavy summer heat of the squadroom Belton shivered.

TO KILL A COP

BY

ROBERT

CAMP

Two detectives—Phillips and Seivers—were pecking out reports on ancient typewriters. A third, Sam Belton, ruffled his gray-ing hair and wondered for the fifteenth time since noon when the heat would break. He looked out through the wire mesh that covered the open window and yawned. The phone rang. Belton reached over and picked it up.

"Homicide East, Detective Belton."

"Well, well . . . just the man I'm looking for!"

Belton, puzzled at the introduc-



tion, sat silently for a moment.

"Oh? Wh . . ."

"This is Carl Rebas, Belton. Remember me?"

The squadroom was heavy with summer heat, stale sweat, and even staler cigarette smoke, but a chill whipped through Belton. He remembered. Rebas had ripped a switch-blade into Belton three times before the detective had clubbed him to the steaming pavement on an equally hot day two years ago. His imagination brought back the searing pain of the blade, and his hand went involuntarily to his ribs. Rebas had been convicted and sentenced to prison on both counts—assaulting an officer and possession of narcotics.

"Hello, *punk*. Who let you out of the sewer?"

Belton waved frantically at Seivers. The latter looked up, and immediately divining Belton's semaphor, began tracing the call on another line. Sam brought his attention back to his call.

"What do you want, Rebas?"

"Oh, nothing really, I just thought I'd call and let you know that I hadn't forgotten you. Two years is a long time, Belton. A man can work up a lot of hate in two years . . . I wanted to let you know that."

"Well, that's real sweet of you, Rebas. Really, I don't know how I could have gotten through the week without that sentiment."

"Yeah . . . I knew you'd be glad. We'll have to get together some day. Maybe *real* soon, Belton."

Belton was flipping quickly through the file of bulletins on his desk. Finally, he found the right one.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN . . . CARL VINCENT REBAS, MALE WHITE, AGE 35, BROWN HAIR, BROWN EYES, DARK COMPLEXION, SMALL SCAR RIGHT CHEEK, APPENDECTOMY SCAR, SLIGHT NERVOUS TIC LEFT EYE, HEIGHT SEVENTY TWO INCHES, WEIGHT ONE HUNDRED NINETY FIVE POUNDS . . . ESCAPED PRISON HOSPITAL CARTERETTE AFTER ASSAULTING PRISON DOCTOR AND GUARD . . . BELIEVED ARMED AND IS CONSIDERED DANGEROUS . . . ALL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES ARE REQUESTED TO ADVISE THIS OFFICE ON RECEIPT OF ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING CARL VINCENT REBAS . . . MARLOW BARRACKS, STATE POLICE . . .

Belton cursed himself for not seeing the ABP sooner. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Seivers nodding his head as he scribbled rapidly on a pad.

"You still there, Belton?"

"Yeah, I'm still here punk. What do you really want, Rebas?"

Rebas suddenly laughed . . . a short, barking laugh that literally stood Belton's short hairs at attention. *He's flipped*, Belton thought.

Then the phone went dead.

Belton stared at the instrument for a second before placing it gently

in its cradle. He mopped a film of cold sweat from his brow, and then looked up into Seivers blue eyes.

"Did you get a make on the call, Joe?"

Seivers just stared at him . . . eyes slightly widened.

"Who was that, Sam?"

"Carl Rebas. You remember him? We've got an APB on him that I missed when it came in." He flipped the yellow teletype pages on his desk. "Just called to let me . . ."

"Sam!"

"What in hell is the matter with you, Joe? Did you trace it or not?"

"Yeah, I traced it."

"Well . . .?"

"He . . . he called from your house, Sam!"

Ed Phillips stopped typing.

Sam Belton sat back in his chair—his face chalky. His jaw trembled slightly, and then he got control—but it was only for an instant—then he exploded from the chair. The heavy wooden swivel chair slammed into the wall as he charged around the desk and legged it for the rail divider leading into the hall. Seivers and Phillips caught him in mid-stride.

He fought wildly, and Seivers got an elbow in the ribs before he and Phillips could wrestle Belton against the wall. Belton was a dynamo, but they were professionals now, and in a moment had him immobile in their grasp. Seivers jerked the .38 S&W from its belt

holster on Belton's hip, and jammed it into his own waistband.

"HARRY!!! HARRY, GOD-DAMMIT GET IN HERE!!!"
Seivers roared.

Detective Harry Glanzner skidded into the squadroom from the darkened hallway. He gaped at the still squirming Belton.

"Chrissakes! What happened?"

"Get the Lieutenant!"

"But . . ."

"GET THE LIEUTENANT!!!"

Sam was cursing wildly, but he soon realized that he was powerless. With the realization, he seemed to forcibly sublimate the rage than had propelled him from his chair.

Detective Lieutenant George Edwards burst into the room with Glanzner on his heels.

"What in the name of hell is going on?"

Seivers told him.

When he was finished, Edwards nodded grimly. "Okay. Let him go."

"Sam? Sam?," Seivers asked softly.

"Yeah?"

"You gonna take it easy?"

Belton nodded. All the fire seemed to be gone. When the two detectives released him, his heavy frame slumped back against the wall. Two hundred pounds of weary, sweaty Sam Belton. A very much frightened, tough cop.

"Helen! He's with Helen!"

Edwards was silent for a moment. He hitched his spare frame up on the corner of Belton's desk and looked Sam square in the eye.

"What do you think, Sam? Does he know you've traced the call?"

"I don't know what to think, Ed. He must know I had enough time to do it, but he may figure that the shock effect would slow my reactions down. I . . . I just don't know."

"Well," Edwards said, "it's a cinch we can't go roaring in there with a platoon of cops. Maybe he wants you to just walk into him—knowingly or not."

"Well, he's going to get his wish!"

"Now take it slow, Sam!"

"But . . ."

"That's just going to get you into the morgue with a tag on your toe!"

"But . . ."

"You want to turn in our shield?"

"Of course not, but I . . ."

Then shut up and act like a cop listening to his Lieutenant, will you?"

Belton hesitated—his eyes locked with those of the Lieutenant. Then he walked slowly over to the window and sat down on the chipped radiator.

Edwards let out a slight puff of satisfaction. He turned to Glanzner. "Harry, get Carson, McAllister, Winston and . . . one more."

"How about Carruthers?"

"Fine! Then get two others on a

surveillance of Sam's house. Make it a good team or else he . . ." he shot a glance at Belton "or else we might make him nervous. Understand?"

Glanzner nodded and left.

The room fell silent except for the restless shuffling of feet and the small sounds of cigarettes being fired. Everyone seemed to avoid Sam Belton's eyes—but they were with him, and he knew it. They were all good cops—they would—and had—risked their lives in upholding the law. But somehow, this was different . . . a personal thing. Each of these men knew it. They also knew that the worst thing possible on a case was personal involvement. But . . . there was no help for it . . . Sam's wife was in a bind. Sam could be killed if he tried to save her himself. The men of Homicide East wouldn't let him go it alone—even if it cost a few lives. This was a tough, but sentimental, brotherhood.

Within five minutes, Edwards had a team together. They lounged around the room, trying for Sam's benefit to look casual. Some stood—restlessly shifting from one foot to the other. Others lounged against desks—smoking nervously. They all avoided Sam's eyes.

Edwards stepped to the large wall map of the city. "Okay Sam, pinpoint your place and give us a rundown on the best way to approach it."

"For God's sake, Lieutenant! Just let me go in there and drag him out. I handled him before, and I can do it again. I . . ."

"Sam, you can do this my way or you can sweat it out in the drunk tank downstairs. Which is it?"

Sam saw his own pain reflected in the soft brown eyes of the older man. George Edwards was basically a gentleman. He had a wife and three kids, and he was well aware of what Sam was enduring. He was, however, a true professional, and this professionalism just wouldn't let the job be down in any way but by the book.

"All right!" He stepped up to the map and everyone crowded in to get a close look. Swiftly, he described the locale and house in detail—interrupted now and again by questions. Finally, it was over, and Lieutenant Edwards took over again to assign positions and detailed actions for each of the team.

"Okay, that's it until we get in place. Any questions? Good! Sam, you'll be with me."

The phone rang. Ed Phillips scooped it up.

"Homicide East, Detective Phillips. Who? Just a minute . . . uh . . . who's calling? Well, excuse me!" He covered the mouthpiece with his palm. "It's for Sam . . . he told me to mind my own business when I asked his name. It could be the same guy!"

Seivers jumped to the other extension and flipped the switch on

the automatic recording device attached to the base of the instrument. He nodded to Belton.

"Belton!"

"Hi, Sam ol' buddy! Just thought I'd call you back and see how smart you were today. Did you get the call traced?"

Edwards, who had taken the extension from Seivers, shook his head violently.

"No, Rebas. As a matter of fact, I never thought of it, you surprised me so . . . but I will this time."

"Don't bother. I'm at your pad, *big man*. A pretty crummy joint, really. But you've got good taste in women, Belton. *That* I've got to give you, Sam ol' boy!"

"Rebas, you *bastard* . . ."

"Shaddup! Now listen! You tell anyone where I am, and you'll never recognize your little bit of fluff when you get here!"

"What do you want, you louse? *Me*? Alright, you've got *me*! Now let *her* go . . . let her go or no deal on me! I'll . . ."

"*You* listen to *me*!!! I'm running this, Belton! You come home just like normal see! You bring your gun—but make sure it's empty! Bring a box of ammo for your gun too!"

"Listen, I can't . . ."

"*The hell you can't!!!* If you want to see that pretty face stay pretty, you'd better!"

"All you want is a gun and ammo . . . and then what?"

"That you'll find out when you

get here . . . *alone!* ! And no cute little gimmicks with your buddies, or you'll regret it. *Listen . . .*"

It sounded like a cat mewling, but Sam knew what it was . . . it was his wife, and she was moaning a pathetic, heart-shredding sort of plea for him to help . . . and then the line went dead.

For a moment, Belton just looked at the receiver . . . then he slammed it down and cursed . . . he cursed until he was hoarse. . . and they let him get it out of his system. Then Mc Allister came over and laid a heavy hand on Belton's arm. Sam started . . . then looked up into the red-head's craggy face.

"Take it easy, Sam. We'll get him."

But then they played back the tape, and the encouraging looks gradually slipped in grimaces. Edwards looked at his watch.

"Well, this changes things a little. We've got about an hour to set things up, and then Sam's got to walk into that house."

He leaned over Belton's desk and flipped the switch on the intercom. "Carlton! Get me someone from Ballistics! . . . I don't care *who*, just get someone up here *fast!* Then get me Mathews in the Armory. Okay?"

In another minute, Cribbs from the Ballistics Division had arrived, and stood quietly while Edwards finished revising his plan.

". . . that's about it! Oh! Caruthers better switch with Winston

on the sniper rifle in the back. Winston's a little bit smaller, and will fit better in the attic. Phillips, you make sure you and Joe get into the basement before Sam even gets into the neighborhood. Sam, you're *sure* we've got this common attic and basement deal straight?"

"For the *third* time . . . yes, *Lieutenant*. After all it is . . ."

"Okay, Sam simmer down!"

"Sorry!"

Edwards turned to Cribbs.

"Okay. I want a box of .38 S&W are going to do your bit in this. You catch the drift?"

"Yeah!"

"Okay. I want a box of .38 S&W slugs with no loads. You've got to be good enough so that no marks show and that the weight is right. Can do?"

"Piece of cake, Lieutenant. How much time do I have?"

"Thirty minutes!"

"*Thank you O-Beneficent-One!*!"

"You won't get it done standing around making lousy cracks!!"

Cribbs fled with a grin.

Edwards looked around, and flipped the intercom on again.

"Carlton, *goddammit*, when I say I want somebody, I mean *now* . . . not next week. Get Mathews and tell him to haul his . . . never mind, he just *strolled* in. *Good Afternoon*, Sergeant, I do hope I haven't inconvenienced you?"

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but . . ."

"Never mind! I need a small gun

—automatic would be best—stripped down to the bare essentials. I want the grips off and the frame taped so his hand won't slip. It's got to be as thin as you can make it 'cause Sam has to wear it in a hide-out holster. How about a crotch rig—so he can get at it by unzipping his fly?"

"I've got a .25 Colt automatic that would do the job. It's a little worn around the edges, but still in good firing condition. How soon?"

"Yesterday!"

"Okay, Lieutenant. Give me ten minutes."

"No more! Blow!"

"Lieutenant," Sam said, "I've got a five-shot Browning automatic shotgun in the house. He's probably got that. I wonder if . . ."

Edwards just looked at him for a moment.

"We don't have much choice Sam—shotgun or not, we go in."

Fifteen minutes later, a TV repair truck nosed into the curb in front of the Melvern half of the twenty-odd year old duplex they shared with Sam and Helen Belton. Two men got out and fussed around with tool boxes and other gear before they casually sauntered up the sidewalk and rang the doorbell. On the backs of their white coveralls was lettered TILTON TV. The two men were Detective Sergeants Joe Seivers and Ed Phillips. Their arrival at the front door was timed so that Detective Wen-

dall "Wendy" Winston could be assured of an unobserved and surreptitious approach to the rear door.

Carl Rebas heard the truck pull up, and observed the arrival of the bogus TV repairmen. Suspicious, he forced Helen Belton to verify the trouble call under the guise of needing some repair work herself. By that time, however, other detectives had called Tilton's service manager, and that slightly shaken gentleman had carried off the telephoned check with surprising ease.

In the Melvern's, Harriet Melvern—who had been advised by Sam via the telephone—sat quietly while Phillips eased open the rear door to admit Winston. She sat and prayed for the safety of Helen Belton while the three detectives went rapidly to their posts—Winston into the attic and the other two into the basement. In three minutes, they were crouched in stockinged-feet at the doors leading into the Belton kitchen and upstairs hall.

Lieutenant Edwards, with Sam beside him, was in an unmarked police cruiser around the corner from the Belton's Sharon Drive duplex. He checked by radio with the others in the raiding party. Satisfied that all were in place, he switched off the handie-talkie and turned to the fidgeting Belton.

"Okay Sambo, you're on! Make it good, but for *chrissakes* don't

take any chances. I don't think he'll blast right away . . . it looks like we've got one of these sadistic bastards on our hands. He'll probably shake you down and stick the needle in for a while. We'll have to gamble on the hide-out gun, but the first shot brings us in—Helen or not."

Edwards checked his watch and then nodded to Belton. "The other three should have been in place five minutes ago. Good luck, Sam. Remember, you've got three men in there with you."

Belton bobbed his head and got out of the cruiser. Edwards and three uniformed officers watched him walk back to his own car. Sam kicked it into life and gradually eased into the stream of home-going cars.

"Don't be a hero, Sam!" Edwards breathed, "*please!*"

Sam drove steadily and unhurriedly around the corner and down the street to his house. Without a glance at the curtained windows, he parked the old Pontiac in the driveway—carefully leaving the car so that Detective Bill Carson would be somewhat protected when he commando-crawled across the lawn from the next duplex. He got out and started toward the front door. The curtains quivered slightly in the living room, and he felt his belly meat quiver in response as his muscles tightened involuntarily—as if they could ward off the disem-

bowling force of the shotgun load.

But no belch of flame came from the window—as he all the time felt it wouldn't, and he walked unharmed up onto the porch. He twisted the polished brass door knob, and was mildly surprised when the door opened. Pushing the door gently, he stepped in. The heavy oak hissed closed behind him, and Sam stopped—muscles and mind tightened to their limits. He waited.

"Hello sucker! Welcome home. Sweetie-pie is waiting for you. She's been moanin' for you all afternoon . . . especially when I helped myself to a little . . . HOLD IT! ! !"

Sam spun anyway. His body was curled tight. A low agonized snarl dribbled through his lips, and he was edging to the point of hurling himself into the big-bored shotgun. Rebas thrust at him. The rage boiled up—and then ebbed as he forced himself to become *Detective* Sam Belton rather than Sam Belton—husband.

"Okay, face the wall and put your hands flat against it. You know the routine, Belton."

Sam complied, and felt the rough hands run quickly over his body. Rebas slipped the .38 from its hip holster. In another second, the box of shells was jerked from his pocket. Sam heard the cardboard tear as Rebas checked the contents. Rebas laughed and prodded Sam with the muzzle of the 12-gauge.

"Okay, in with sweetiepie."

In his election, Rebas had missed the hide-out gun, and Sam almost breathed an audible sigh of hope.

Helen was huddled in a corner of the couch. Her clothes were ripped and disheveled, and she clutched them to her body in desperation. Sobs shuddered through her slim body, and her hair hung in strings around her pale face.

"Helen!"

She looked up listlessly. Shock and indignation dulled her beautiful violet eyes, and her mouth—normally ripe and pouty—was tight-drawn and bloodless.

"Sam! Sam . . . why didn't you come . . .?" Her eyes sparkled a little as they impaled him accusingly. "Why, Sam?"

Belton found he couldn't answer—could only stare at her in horror and revulsion for the bestiality of Rebas and his own helplessness. He forced himself to turn away from her—to slide the shade of professionalism down over the agony of love that raced through his mind. He turned to Rebas.

"What now, knife-man? Now that you've had your filthy fun?"

Rebas grinned, and Belton could see the small tic that did a small jig at the corner of his left eye—the tic hadn't been there two years ago. The tic belied the grin—as did the nervous flickings of the glistening eyes. His hair was thinner, and he looked gaunt and strained. The narcotics cure and prison had not been kind with Carl Rebas.

Sam looked anxiously at the hands clutching the lightly oiled stock of the shotgun. His own .38 was tucked carelessly into the waistband of those soiled trousers—he had to convince Rebas to switch from the shotgun to the revolver *before* he could make his move.

"I've got big plans for you, Belton. I'm gonna make you crawl a little. Then I might even let you watch me'n sweetie-pie have another go. Then I'm gonna kill you slow and easy. It's gonna be so slow that you'll be able to feel yourself die. Then I'm gonna take sweetie-pie along as a little insurance policy when I blow this lousy town."

"You'll never make it!" He hurried on as Rebas stiffened. "*Oh no!* I didn't let anyone in on your little deal, but it just figures . . . that's all. You can't run for very long, and you know what they do to a cop-killer. You can't out-gun a couple of dozen cops—you know that! Why not just forget the revenge bit—tie us up and you'll get a long start. Think it over!"

Rebas just laughed. "What's the matter, gettin' chicken in your old age, Belton? No! Not only *no*, but *hell no!* I only had one reason to bust out of prison—to kill you. Your wife is just a little bonus. I'm not leavin' 'til I've blasted you, and *then* I don't really give a damn if your buddies nail me—as long as *you're dead*."

Belton shrugged his heavy shoulders, and carefully eased himself

down in the big easy chair that faced the hallway. He had to get Rebas to turn his back on the hall since both access doors—to the attic and basement—led off the single hall. But Rebas didn't cooperate, and Belton saw that the archway was still in the periphery of his vision. He had to try something else—so he did the only thing left to do. He stood up and stepped cautiously to his right.

"*Steady*, Belton. I don't want to kill you accidentally—so don't make me jump like that."

"That 12-gauge is going to make quite a ruckus when it goes off, Rebas!"

Again Rebas laughed. "Oh, no, Belton. You don't get it that way—that would be too quick. I'm going to chop you down with your own .38! What do they call that . . . ironic or something, isn't it?"

In the silence that followed the jibe, Sam heard a board creak in the hall. He began talking to cover any other, but Rebas had heard it too, and started to turn. Sam started forward, but Rebas spun back and slammed the butt of the shotgun against the side of his head. Sam reeled backwards across the chair—blood pumping from a jagged rip in his scalp. Rebas whirled back towards the archway—the shotgun thrust out in front of him.

An agonized second dragged by—broken by the soft sobs of Helen and the harsh breathing of Belton as he tried to regain his addled

senses. Then Winston cannoned into the room—his Police Positive sweeping toward Rebas.

The roar of the big Browning split the room, and the full load caught Winston square in the solar plexus. The tremendous shock slammed his wiry body like a pile of bloody rags into the corner. The .38 bucked once in Winston's death spasm, and then skittered to the floor.

Helen shrieked again and again, her hysterical cry ricocheting through the room. Sam struggled to rise, but his knees were still jellied. He struggled—spurred on by Helen's screams—but only succeeded in falling forward onto the floor. The jar seemed to clear his vision, and his mind stopped its kaliedoscopic whirl.

Rebas threw him a quick glance, and then moved slowly toward the hallway. Suddenly, he dove through the archway—rolled like a gymnast—and was on his knees when a .38 blasted from the kitchen and slammed into the wall near his head. Rebas didn't even flinch, and the big automatic boomed again. There was a shocked moan—a vague curse—and then Rebas fired again. There was a sodden thud and another moan.

Rebas swung toward Belton—hate spilling from his slitted mouth. "BASTARD!!! LOUSY STINK-IN' COP!!!"

He rose and took one step when the front door splintered under

gunshots and the heavy shoulders of the two uniformed officers. Rebas roared in rage, and whipped the Browning across his chest to squeeze off the fourth load. Sam heard twin screams from the hall, and then Rebas was stalking him again—hate lancing from his eyes and mouth.

Sam—holding the Colt in both shaking hands—shot him through the throat. Rebas swayed. The light .25 stopped him, but couldn't put him down. Sam could see the spurting blood typical of a cut jugular, but Rebas still tried to bring the shotgun into line. He was still trying when Sam—still flat on the floor—put two more slugs into his forehead. Rebas toppled over—his forehead caved in and the back of his head and neck almost one gaping wound.

Belton struggled to crawl over to his wife. He was almost to the couch as Lieutenant Edwards

charged down the hall, shouting.

"*Christ!!!* This looks like a slaughterhouse! !! Where-in-hell is that ambulance! !! Sam? SAM?"

But Sam Belton didn't answer. Every bit of his strength and will power was forcing his body across the room toward his wife. When he reached her side, he stopped short—held in check by the horror in her eyes . . . and the rejection.

"Helen! Helen . . . it had to be this way . . . understand?"

"You didn't come, Sam . . . then when you *finally did* . . . it was to get him . . . not for me!"

Sam's head was spinning again, and he was fighting to retain consciousness. "But . . ."

"He . . . he *raped me!* !! While you were weaving your little plot . . . HE WAS RAPING ME! !!" She turned her head screamed again and again into the cushions.

And Sam Belton knew Rebas had won after all.



Side-Bet Benny was a horse lover . . . no question about it. He was not however, what you'd call a member of the horsey set.

losing streak

BY BERNARD EPPS

BUT it's five hundred fish you're into us, Benny."

"I know it. I know it. But I been on a losing streak long as a spinner's night."

"Look, I *feel* for you, Benny," said Lew the Shank without meaning it. He was leg man for half a dozen different enterprises around town—from dice to numbers to the juice-game—and he had long since given up feelings.

"We know each other a long time," he said, "but if you don't get me that scratch by tomorrow night, I have to blow the whistle." He stood up, trying to be taller than he was. "You know the ropes, Benny. You get in hock with a Shylock and you put up life and limb as colateral. You understand what I'm talking?"

"I understand you got ambition

to be a big man," said Benny. "But I'll get you the scratch somehow."

"You'd better," said Lew the Shank. "Why don't you get it from that twist you been squiring?"

"Sam? No. She thinks I'm off the horses. I made her a promise."

Lew shook his head. "Ain't none of my business but if I had a twist like that with all her scratch, I'd forget about horse-race gambling."

"You would," said Benny. "You're the ambitious type. I guess that's why I hate your guts. Get out of here, you over-paid errand boy!"

Lew's eyes narrowed. "Tomorrow night," he snarled. "Tomorrow night with the five hundred fish or we foreclose." His fingers flicked across his throat to make his meaning clear. Benny laughed and the little man turned on his heel and stormed out of the joint.

Side-Bet Benny swung around on his stool and looked over to where I was busily pretending to polish glasses.

"You heard?"

"Not a word," said I. "I should get a hearing aid maybe."

"You heard," he said. "How about a short shot on the management? I got some heavy thinking to do."

I put a drink in front of him and leaned on both elbows.

"You're in trouble, Benny. You gonna listen to some barkeep's advice?"

"Nope. I kind of like playing the long shots now and again. Stick to stealing from the bar. I'll work out something."

I shrugged and went back to polishing glasses. What can you tell a horse-race gambler anyway?

Horse racing was Benny's whole life, see. Everything else, he didn't care about. He used to follow the tracks all around the country—Hialeah, Saratoga, Churchill Downs, Santa Anita, Caliente—wherever there was a big meet, you could lay even money Side-Bet Benny was in the crowd. He made a fair to middling living out of it, too, considering it is a very competitive business. Then he met this screwball society blond.

He never cared much before for fillies that couldn't sprint six furlongs but the blond named Sam had him racing wide. Her real name was Samantha something

but Benny always called her Sam and the name seemed to fit. She was a business dame, sharp and efficient. Her family owned a very long chain of shoe stores—up to the dewlaps in coin of the realm—and they didn't much care for welcoming someone into the family that considered currency in denominations of win, place and show. So Sam tried to make him over, tried to reform him. She insisted he give up the ponies and go into the family shoe business but Side-Bet Benny could no more quit the horses than he could work up a passion for English Oxfords or patent-leather dancing pumps.

"She even asked me to join Gambler's Anonymous," he cried at me one night. "I keep telling her that it's for losers, but you think she listens? She says, 'Gambling is a debilitating habit prompted by feelings of emotional insecurity!'"

"You should have popped her one," said I.

"And she wants me to go into the shoe business! A shoe-store yet!"

But he couldn't leave her. She had a figure could drive any man to ruin—even a hardened horse-race gambler. She was an A number One lollapalooa.

"O, she's generous enough with the scratch when it comes to clothes or liquor or fancy parties," he continued. "But she won't fork over a fin to help me lick this losing streak. She said she's cutting off all

the cabbage until I go to work in the family firm."

And that's how he got into hock with the Shylock. A Shylock is one who plays the juice game and the juice game is played usually from a moving car where a guy can borrow mazoola at fifty per cent interest. And a Shylock is the world's worst loser. In fact, they're very unpopular in F.B.I. circles because of the bodies that occasionally crop up in canals and cause such embarrassment to the force. Benny had troubles.

"Pass me the scratch pad," he said at last. "I've got an idea."

"Is it honest?"

"Honest as my dear old mother."

He wrote slowly, painfully, like a school kid doing his homework. He rubbed out words and wrote in others, chewed his pencil and scratched his head. He used six sheets of paper before he was satisfied and shoved the finished message over to me.

"What you think?"

"You asking my advice for a change?"

"Just read it."

It was addressed to his girl and written in a queer sort of back-sloping capitals, as if it had been done by a left-handed wino.

"YOUR BELOVED BENNY HAS BEEN KIDNAPPED!" I read. "NO HARM WILL COME TO HIM IF YOU DO JUST AS WE SAY. PUT \$500 IN TENS & TWENTIES IN A PAPER BAG

AND LEAVE IT BESIDE GENERAL SHERMAN'S STATUE IN THE PARK MIDNIGHT TONIGHT. DO NOT DIAL THE FUZZ IF YOU WANT TO SEE YOUR BELOVED BENNY ALIVE AGAIN!"

I stared at him.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Let me get this straight," said I, trying to keep my voice down. "You're shaking down your future bride for five C's by pretending to be kidnapped. That right?"

"More or less."

"Honest as your dear old mother?"

"She used to teach insurance falls on the Lower East Side."

I tossed the sheet on the bar in front of him.

"You're nuts. You flipped. You'll never get away with it. You any idea what a dim view the fuzz take of the kidnapping dodge these days? What'll you do if they grab you?"

"I'll refuse to press charges."

"Then they'll get you for fraud or extortion or obtaining money under . . ."

"It's five to one she'll never call the fuzz," he said. "She loves me very much."

"Five hundred smackers worth?"

"Peanuts! She gives that much to a home for wayward girls every month." He studied the letter, holding it at arms length. "But you've got a point," he said and he added a third zero to the price.

"Five grand?" I squealed. "You had your head tapped for echoes lately?"

"She can afford it," he said. "And it'll be a good test race. I ain't marrying anyone who thinks more of wayward girls than she does of me."

I gave up. "You are a dirty dog."

"And I'll be a dead duck if it don't work."

"You need the loot tonight," I said. "How you going to get the note to her before the banks close?"

"Special delivery! I'll send it by Lew the Shank. He just finished another stretch in the Louisville Lockup and if the cops nab him, they won't believe a word of his squeal."

You had to admire a guy like Benny. He figured all the odds and bet the limit. It seemed to me a lot easier to just go visit Sam and confess the situation to her but Side-Bet Benny was a gambler through and through.

I poured him another shot on the management and he took off to find the Shank. The joint started filling up and I was kept busy pulling drinks the rest of the afternoon. In fact, I had no time to worry about Benny until later that night when who should step into the joint but Sam the society blond. And who should be leading her by the arm but Lew the Shank.

"Benny around?" she asked arranging her beautiful package on the bar stool.

"Haven't seen him since noon," said I. She didn't look much like a dame worried sick over her boyfriend's health.

"Pity," said she. "I have some bad news for him."

Lew the Shank avoided my eye and ordered me about like I was his personal flunky. I bided my time until the dame went off to powder her nose and then I cornered him in a booth.

"The note," I said. "You deliver the note?"

He wasn't near as nervy now the dame wasn't watching.

"I meant to," he said. "But after one look at that chic and the pent-house, well, what would you do? I mean, Benny's not cut out for that style of living."

"And you are?"

"That was the bad news for Benny. Samantha has a passion for reforming people and I need it more than he does."

"She know you run for a Shylock?"

"Sure. I told her. I'm quitting and going into the shoe business."

"That's what *you* say," I snorted. "What does the Shylock say?"

"I'll take care of him. You stick to pulling drinks!"

I grabbed him by the collar and hauled him out of the booth. One swift kick in the rump and he was out on the sidewalk. The dame returned to catch the last of the action and started in to call me all kinds of names you'd never think a

society dame would know so I tossed her out too and shut the door on them both.

Side-Bet Benny was sitting at the bar when I came on shift next morning. He looked like a man with a load of woe all right. I'd never seen him so low. I poured him a jolt on the management and he downed it without a word.

"So it didn't work?" I asked and I knew very well why.

"I'm dead." He stared straight through the bar mirror and didn't seem to like what he saw. "General Sherman and I waited all night long. Nothing. You've got a dead man sitting at your bar."

I shrugged. "You can't win 'em all."

"Have them put that on my tombstone," he said.

I handed him the morning paper and pointed to a paragraph on page one. "Maybe that'll make you feel better."

He read it out loud.

"LOAN SHARK ARRESTED!"

Late last night police arrested a ruthless loan shark who has been preying on unfortunate people on the East Side for months. Acting on an anonymous tip, Detective L. D. Roberts apprehended Lawrence J. . . . The Shylock!" he roared, "It's my Shylock! Somebody blew down the Shylock! Buddy, old buddy, I just got a reprieve."

"I guess there's a guardian angel watches over horse players."

His face darkened. "Yeah. But there's still the society dame. She wouldn't fork over five grand to save my skin."

"Forget her," I said. "Why don't you listen to me when I'm talking?"

"Go ahead."

"Okay. Listen, now. It's my theory she's the reason you been on this losing streak."

"How you figure?"

"It began about the time you started squiring her around, right?"

"I guess it did. Now that I think of it."

"And it'll stop as soon as you get your mind off her and back on the scratch sheet. Dames and horses just don't mix. You pick a nag to-day and see if I don't know what I'm talking."

"I got no bread."

"I'll lend you a ten spot," said I. "Pick a pony and see what happens."

He grinned. "Yeah! You know, I should listen to you more often. Barkeeps ain't as dumb as they look."

"Turn to the sports page and get to work."

"Right. Being a millionaire would take all the fun out of gambling, anyway. Let's check the entries."

"And we'll have a little snort on the management."

He had no objections. And he found a hot horse in the fifth called 'High Society'. We couldn't pass up

a trick like that so he stepped right around to the drugstore book with my ten-spot and laid it on her nose.

He was laughing when he came back.

"Know who I thought I saw on the street? Riding in a big black limosine with a liveried chauffer? Lew the Shank! That little sawed-off Louisville numbers runner! I must be losing my eyesight!"

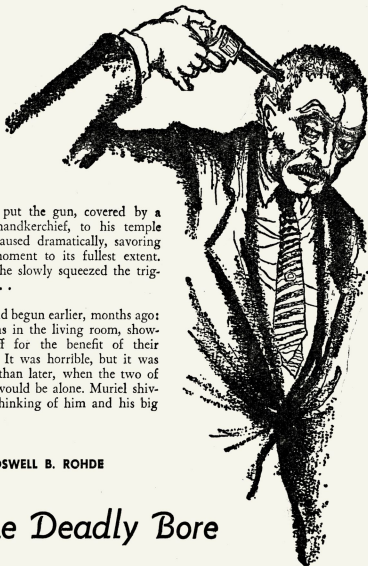
I thought of Lew sitting behind a mahogany desk with his feet on the blotter and a cigar between his teeth. With Benny scratched and the Shylock in the can, he had a

clear field. Good luck to the runt, I thought.

'High Society' won by five lengths and paid seven-to-one. Benny's losing streak had taken it's first beating in two months. To celebrate, we had quite a few jolts on the management.

A week later, I saw an announcement in the society pages. A lady named Sam and a gentleman called Lew had posted the banns and it was to be one of the biggest events in the social calendar. Benny didn't read it. He was too busy shouting home his sixth straight winner.





He put the gun, covered by a handkerchief, to his temple and paused dramatically, savoring this moment to its fullest extent. Then he slowly squeezed the trigger. . . .

It had begun earlier, months ago: He was in the living room, showing off for the benefit of their guests. It was horrible, but it was better than later, when the two of them would be alone. Muriel shivered, thinking of him and his big

BY ROSWELL B. ROHDE

The Deadly Bore

It was the highlight of every evening. Martin took out his big pistol and, with an injured air, played Russian roulette.

sweaty body. She was always glad when he was off to Guiana or Nairobi or the Australian bush country hunting or exploring, or whatever it was that he did.

Muriel moved closer to the French doors and caught the eye of James Whitcomb, the poet. His pale face lighted at sight of her; plainly he'd been hoping to see her, alone if possible. He slipped out of the room, onto the terrace. If only he weren't exactly what he was—and what he was exactly, perversely she loved—gentle, sensitive, tender. He worshipped her, he probably loathed Martin for a bore and a pig, but his code of honor was such that he would do nothing about either of them so long as her husband lived and was her husband. Martin was astonishingly healthy for fifty. He thrived on his journeys into the far corners of the world. Now he was insisting that she accompany him into Kenya in a few weeks, a prospect that both frightened and appalled her. There was something about the tropics that opened Martin's pores, so that he was in a perpetual lather, and the thought of his hot stickiness against her cool skin was unbearable.

She could not divorce him, since he had the money, and her own peculiar code was based, irrevocably on the wedding ceremony as set forth in the Common Book of Prayer—"until death do us part."

"What's he up to now?" she asked. James had come close, but he

made no move to touch her. He never touched her, though her nearness made him tremble.

"Usual thing," he said. "Bragging about his exploits. Showing off his new animal heads."

"He . . . hasn't reached the roulette bit?"

"He will. He always does. If only . . ."

"His damnable luck! It never fails him—never!"

"Oh, oh. He's calling for you now. He wants to torture you. Why do you let him?"

She looked at him coolly, her eyes like saucers, too-large in their misery for the fineness of her face.

"Why do you?" she said, and instantly regretted her words, and the pain they brought to his face.

There was nothing he, or anyone could do. She was stuck.

They went in. Everyone turned to look at them, and there was sympathy in every eye. They knew, all of her friends knew.

"Ah, there you are, my dear. Just in time. I was just explaining Russian Roulette to our friends, Muriel. Now I will demonstrate?"

"Martin, must you?"

"Why not? After all, I'm miserable. What does it matter what happens to me? You'd be glad if I were dead, you know you would."

"Martin! This is not entertaining talk."

"You despise me, I have nothing to live for . . ." He was savoring the moment, feeling self-righteous

and sorry for himself. Yet he half-believed it; when he talked like this sincerity crept through the hamminess.

"You simply put one shell in the revolver, thus," he held it up, so that all might see it. Then, with a quick flurry and the innate sense of timing of the born show-off, he pulled the large silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and shook it out.

"Then you place the gun under the handkerchief, so . . . spin the cylinder, and press the barrel against your temple. . . ."

There was absolute silence in the room, followed by the gasp of one of the men, and a little scream from a woman. It was certain that once they escaped this place, they would not come again.

Martin Cambridge squeezed the trigger. There was a dull click. That was all.

A slow smile overspread his heavy features, and a little tear slipped from one corner of his eye, down his high-colored cheek.

"You win again, my dear," he said. Then, with a little bow, like a performer who has just completed, successfully, a difficult feat requiring skill, concentration and genius, he turned and left the room.

After that it became a mania with him, a sordid form of entertainment, more frequently performed as their guests grew fewer. After a while he simply pulled the gun from its drawer and slipped it beneath his handkerchief, and went

through his routine. It was nauseating, unnerving to Muriel.

She never meddled with his things. She had no desire to read his letters; if he had secrets, he was welcome to them. But something, a moment's rashness, a recklessness born of the constant razor's edge existence to which he subjected her, a peculiar state of wonder and worry and fear compounded, made her do it. Slowly she slid open the drawer, after unlocking it with the key she had "borrowed" temporarily from his pocket. There was his revolver, huge and blue and shiny. A box of shells lay beside it.

Hardly knowing why she did it, for it repelled her enormously, she picked up the gun. The single bullet was still in one of the cylinders, and there was a tiny nick near its rim. At the risk of her perfect nails, she removed it. When it lay, finally, in the very white palm of her hand, she knew at last the secret of his longevity, of his seemingly charmed life, his luck. It was a casing—an empty shell. . . .

They could stand it no longer, she and James. They had fought it, struggled with themselves, parted, not seen each other for six months—and rushed back together like opposite poles of two magnets. They went to her husband.

"Martin. I can't go on longer this way. I want a divorce."

The air exploded from his nos-

trils which were distended in a red nose set on a very red face.

"James and I love each other."

"What?" His disbelief was very nearly pathetic, coming as it did after his constant ridiculous claims that she did not love him. It was apparent that these had been utter sham, that he had never for a moment doubted his fascination for her, nor that she loved him other than to distraction.

His smile was self-satisfied as he adjusted his tie and watched his face resume its normal color and supercilious expression in the mirror.

"You'd have no money, Muriel darling. Nothing. No prestige, think of the Cambridge name!"

"We don't want your money," James Whitcomb said. "I have a small income now. We will get along."

"Think what you're doing to yourself Muriel, to me." Martin permitted rage to creep into his ordinarily untra-cultured tones. "Condemning yourself to penury—and me . . ." his voice broke and there was a suspicion of a tear in his eye, which might or might not have been part of his act, ". . . what will I have left? An emptiness. A void as vast as the veldt, the pampas. . . ."

He rushed to his drawer, nearly

twisting the key off in his haste to get at the gun.

"You can't do this to me, Muriel. Say you'll never leave me! Say you love only me! Otherwise I shall pull this trigger and keep pulling it until . . . until. . . !" He choked, overcome with sympathy for himself.

He put the gun, covered by a handkerchief, to his temple and paused dramatically, savoring this moment of scientific torture fully. Once, twice, perhaps three times, even, he would pull the trigger and then Muriel, weak, gentle, tender, would be broken by fright, would be on her knees before him, begging forgiveness, ordering this insufferable whelp, this weakling poet away forever, and he would feel once more the coolness of her young flesh against him.

Slowly he squeezed the trigger, his smile malignant, self-satisfied.

James Whitcomb had to touch Muriel then, for the very first time, because he caught her as she fainted and fell.

The police came and took the gun from Martin's fingers.

"Suicide," one said. "No question whatever."

"None," said the other. "He certainly wasn't chancing failure—he'd loaded every chamber. . . ."



DEATH'S HEAD

*A
Manhunt
Classic*

**BY
RICHARD
S.
PRATHER**

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Their waiter was dressed in a skeleton costume, skull mask and all. The trouble was . . . instead of a tray, this waiter carried a gun.

THE cab dropped me off on the outskirts of Silver Beach and I looked around before I walked through darkness down the narrow alley. I didn't see anybody who looked like Bruno, the guy Ellen had told me was due for a stretch at the cackle factory. Any guy who'd try twice to kill a sex-charged hunk of dreamy tomato like Ellen *had* to be one step removed from the net. The crazy guy was probably still around here somewhere; he had been when Ellen phoned me, fright twisting the words in her throat.

I was eighty miles from the Los Angeles office of "Sheldon Scott, Investigations," and I didn't think Bruno had ever seen me. But I'm damned easy to describe: six-two, short-cropped hair, almost white, the same color as my goofy eyebrows, and the face you might expect on an ex-Marine. I didn't see anybody eyeballing me, so I walked to the alley entrance of The Haunt, a gruesome Silver Beach nightclub with lively corpses and a hot orchestra.

Knowing that Ellen was inside made my throat dryer, my pulse faster. She had a shape like a mating pretzel, and the normal expression in her dark eyes always made me think she was about to tell a pleasantly dirty story. I walked past the grinning Death's head and a luminous skeleton and on into the club, banged against a table and spilled somebody's drink, barked

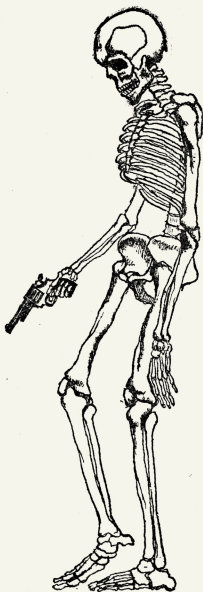
my shin on a chair and got a perfect barrage of highly complimentary language. Man, it was dark.

When my eyes were used to the gloom I saw dark blurs, presumably people drinking or feeling or whispering in ears, or Christ knows what all. Anything could have been happening in some of those corners, absolutely anything. Strike a match and you're dead. The orchestra was just beginning a number. I expected a funeral march or "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal, You," but it was the bright and bouncy "Love Me."

It was bright and bouncy like Ellen. I'd known the gal only a week, but she was already under my skin. And I felt sorry for her, though it's hard to be sorry for a twenty-three-year-old beauty with a million bucks. But she'd had it tough otherwise: both parents killed when she was nineteen, and the man she loved, her husband Ron, had been killed in a train wreck six months ago.

I found her at one of the small tables on the edge of the dance floor. I took a chance and lit a cigarette, and it was Ellen, strikingly lovely, the warm light melting on her high cheekbones, caressing her red, parted lips, and showing me fright in her dark eyes before the match went out.

"Oh, Shell," she said. "Shell, I'm glad you're here." Her hand slid



across the table and found mine, held it. My spine wiggled to "Love Me." "This is a *horrid* place," she added. "I'm half out of my wits."

This wasn't the cheeriest spot for a gal who expected to have her throat cut by a crazy man. I squeezed her hand, thinking that no matter how dark it was, this had better be the extent of my squeezing. Ellen Benson was a Reno, Nevada gal vacationing at California's Laguna Beach a few miles from here—with Joe Benson. Uh-huh, honeymooning with the new husband. What the hell; I squeezed Mrs. Joe Benson's hand some more.

"The Haunt," I said. "Our motto is 'We scare you to death.' O.K., honey. What's with Bruno?"

Bruno was the crux. Apparently the nut had tried to murder her twice. She and hubby Joe had seen Bruno get off the bus in Laguna Beach yesterday afternoon; last night the trouble had started. She'd been visiting friends in San Clemente; driving back to Laguna, the brakes on her big Caddie went out, but luckily she wasn't hurt. Then, walking from the car to a service station nearby, where she could phone, she'd been shot at. She'd screamed, run to the station, been lucky once more. Tonight, just half an hour ago, she'd seen Bruno again and phoned me. Because she could reach it easily, and because it was dark enough to hide her—or anybody—I'd told her to meet me here at The Haunt.

She said, "He must have followed me, Shell. Again. It's driving me crazy. Joe and I are going to a party tonight—same friends I visited last night—and we were shopping here for gifts for them. I saw Bruno in front of the shop and told Joe. He told me to get out of sight quick, then went out front to talk to Bruno. I was so terrified I just ran out the back way and phoned you."

I had talked the mess over with both Ellen and hubby Joe last night at the Surf and Sand Hotel in Laguna Beach, where we were all staying. We'd got fairly chummy, and they knew I was from L. A., a private detective vacationing. So when Ellen had got back to the hotel, ready to split at the seams because of the kill attempts, and told Joe what had happened, they'd given me the story. Joe had seemed ready to go to pieces himself. I didn't exactly cotton to the guy, though he seemed nice enough and Ellen had told me he knew everybody in Reno from shoeshine boys to judges, and ex-cons to preachers and they all liked him—probably it's just that I seldom cotton to husbands. A tall, quiet, good-looking man, he'd seemed an odd choice for Ellen. She was hot, sexy, bubbling with life, while Joe impressed me as a guy whose idea of living dangerously was to pick his nose.

I said, "Give me that first Bruno bit again, Ellen."

She said quietly, "After Ron

died I was pretty mixed up. This Bruno kept hanging around, but I only went out with him once. He's terribly stupid, and he's some sort of criminal. I think he was in prison for a while. I couldn't stand him, but I was nice to him—too nice, I guess. When I told him I wouldn't see him any more he went into an awful rage. Said he loved me, he'd follow me everywhere. He did, too. Then just before Joe and I married a month ago, Bruno caught me on the street in Reno. He sliced the dull edge of a knife across my throat and said if he couldn't have me nobody else could either, he'd kill me. He's crazy, insane." Her voice got tighter. "He *kept* following me around. Joe and I didn't tell anyone where we were going on our honeymoon, so I didn't think I'd have to worry about Bruno—and now he's here, he's even come down *here!*"

"Relax, honey, unwind. What say we have a drink?"

We got two highballs as the orchestra began another number and what I call the gook lights came on. The management was putting on its fluorescent act, and in gook light even Marilyn Monroe would look sexless. Ellen's eyes glowed like blue coals. I peeled my lips back and my teeth glowed horribly.

"Oh, my God," she said. "Don't *do* that."

"Sad, huh? You look pretty gruesome yourself."

She smiled and her teeth seemed

to leap at me. It was disgusting. "Haven't you been here before?"

"No," she said. "Do people come twice?"

"Sure. It's fun. Look at all the hilarious people."

Dim bodies were wiggling on the dance floor in a whole sea of appalling eyes and teeth that floated in the air. "You ain't seen nothin' yet; pretty quick the skeletons come out." I grinned horribly some more. "But first—let's figure what—" I stopped. Somebody was breathing on my neck. In The Haunt you can almost believe it's a ghost's fanny brushing you as it floats by, but this breath was warm, scented with garlic.

I turned around and almost banged into a head angled toward our table. The guy was scrunched over right behind me with his ear practically flapping.

"Hey," I said. "The ear, friend. Do you like the ear? If you do, take it some place else before I remove it."

He jumped back at my first words, his eyes glowing at me. He was alone. I stepped to his table, bent my face down close to his and peered at him. "You get it? Vanish. Get lost."

He didn't say anything. I could see his lips move in an attempt at a smile, but his teeth didn't glow. False teeth wouldn't glow in this light. I sat down with Ellen again and said softly, "This egg looks like nobody I ever saw, what I can

see of him. Does Bruno have false teeth?"

"No. Big and crooked, but they aren't false."

"O.K." I looked back at the man behind me. "The car, friend. I'll take it." He left, and I asked Ellen, "Any chance Bruno could have followed you here?"

"I . . . don't think so. I don't think he could have seen me go out and down the alley. It was dark."

I kept thinking about that guy at the next table. The loony Bruno would hardly have anybody else teamed up with him. He sounded like an insanely jealous crackpot, and the crack didn't make him less dangerous. Jealousy is one of the best 'murder motives I've run across, but the crime of passion is usually swift, vicious. I wanted to know more about Bruno—and I was starting to want out of this creep-joint.

"Maybe we'd better take off, Ellen. Anybody wants trouble, I'm all set." After Ellen had phoned and before I'd left Laguna Beach, I'd strapped on my .38 Colt Special.

"Let me finish my drink first, Shell. I'm not scared when you're around. You're . . . good to be with." Her hand tightened on mine, squeezed gently. "Anyway, you'll have to dance with me once. Maybe it'll calm me down some more."

"Ha," I said, "it won't calm *me* down." I knew what would hap-

pen if she laid that long curved body up against me on that dark dance floor. But she was already standing by the table, pulling my hand. I got up.

She sort of oozed into my arms, and into my blood, her free hand restless on the back of my neck. She pressed close against me, following easily, her body soft and warm, even bold. After about a minute of that I said, "Look. This is lovely, ecstatic, but I, uh, it's too—"

She interrupted. "Shhh. What's the matter?"

"You know damn well what's the matter. What I mean is, hell's bells, after all, you're on your honeymoon—"

"Just a minute." She stopped dancing, put both arms around my neck. "Let me tell you something. Joe wanted me to marry him even before I met Ron, but I just wasn't in love with him. Joe was around all the time, came to the house to see Ron and me while we were married, and after the accident he was wonderful to me, sweet, somebody I could lean on. He was Old Faithful, always there, and good to me—and I thought maybe that was enough. But it wasn't, Shell, and it never will be. A fast honeymoon and a fast divorce, that's it. So there's the sad story of Ellen Benson."

"Joe know how you feel, Ellen?"

"He knows, but he thinks maybe it'll work out. After last night he swore he wouldn't let me out of his

sight, and he never did until he went out to see Bruno. He's sweet, Shell; it's just not enough. Now, let's dance."

There was no more conversation until the music ended. We went back to our table and I finished my drink. The gook lighting was still on and I could see two glowing skeletons, or rather waiters dressed in fluorescent skeleton suits with skull hoods, moving around at the far side of the dance floor.

I asked Ellen, "You about ready to go?"

"One more plug," she said.

I looked out at all the teeth and things again. The two skeletons, looking amazingly lifeless-like, were walking toward our table. Probably something scary was about to happen.

I turned back to Ellen and said, "Glug your glug before we get into the act. Are you afraid of ske—"

It felt like a bony finger poking me in the ribs. For a brief moment light from a pencil flash gleamed on the long-barreled revolver in the man's cloth-covered hand, then flicked over my face and winked out. Ellen gasped, "Shell—"

"Take it easy, honey." I was taking it easy myself. They do some screwy things in The Haunt, but I'd never seen a gun in here before. Maybe it was a gag.

"Look, bony," I said, and that was all I said. I got the gun across my jaw, and a skeleton hand pulled my .38 from its holster, then jerked

me out of my seat. The gun jabbed my spine and I was shoved toward the club's entrance.

This was no gag, for sure—and these guys weren't waiters. I stopped, but before I could even think about doing anything, something hard slammed into the back of my skull. I almost went down, and when the guy shoved me I staggered forward. We went out and started down the alley. My head cleared a little as we reached the back of a building, indented a few feet from the alley. The guy shoved me into its darkness. I stumbled and fell to the soft dirt, still confused, wondering what was coming off.

Then I heard a *click* as he cocked the hammer. I was still down on one knee, and as the knowledge that the guy was actually about to *plug* me jumped in my brain, I acted instinctively, scooping up a handful of soft earth and hurling it toward him, diving to the side and rolling. The gun roared and the bullet dug into earth as I slammed into his legs, grabbed them and yanked. He fell on top of me, and the gun thudded into my arm. Then I was all over him, slicing with the thick edge of my palm, unthinking, just trying to fix him before he fixed me. I felt my hand jar flesh; I saw his face before me and cut at it with all my strength. He went limp. I grabbed him and his head hung like a rag from his neck. I swore, felt for his pulse,

jerked off his skull hood, traced my fingers over his split lips, then found the mashed-in bridge of his nose. He was dead.

I didn't know how many other unfriendly guys were back in the club, or what they looked like—but they'd flashed that light in my face and knew me. There was at least one other skeleton there, maybe waiting for this one to return. So two minutes later I walked inside the club wearing the dead man's skeleton suit over my clothes and the Death's mask over my head, peering out of the eye slits. Deep pockets in the black outfit's pants held my .38 and the dead man's gun. Some girls pointed at my glowing skeleton and giggled. I went to the table where Ellen had been. She was gone. The table top was wet where a drink had been spilled.

A voice behind me said softly, "All right?"

I turned. The scent of garlic filled my nostrils. The man smiled, his false teeth dark in his mouth. I nodded, and he seemed satisfied, walked toward the exit. I followed him outside, grabbed the big revolver by its barrel, and when he started to get into a new Buick parked in the alley, I helped him in, with the butt of the gun on the back of his head.

I got into the car with him, and in a minute he groaned, tried to sit up. I grabbed his coat and yanked him to me.

"Talk fast, you son! Where is she?"

He gasped and sputtered. "What . . . what . . ."

I'd yanked the hood off so he could see my face. He looked ready to pass out.

He babbled that he didn't know what I was talking about, so I swatted him alongside the jaw. His false teeth skidded half out of his mouth, and I kept slapping him with the gun until the choppers landed in his lap.

"You've got two seconds," I said. I cocked the gun, and as it clicked he yelped, the words distorted and almost unrecognizable, "All right, O.K. She's—*stop!*"

"Keep it going. All of it. And where is she?"

He fumbled for his teeth. "With Frank Gill. Just picked up her Cad and left. Please, man, watch that gun." He shoved his chipped teeth at his mouth, anxious now, trying to talk even while his teeth clicked in his shaking hands. "You don't want me, man, it's Bruno Karsh. He phoned Sammy Lighter in Reno last night. Sammy sent three of us for the job."

I broke in. "Where is she? I won't ask you again."

"Other side of Laguna Beach, that bad spot, curve and cliff. He'll knock her out and she's . . . she'll go over in her Cad. Frank's got a Ford out there to come back in."

He kept talking as sickness crawled in my stomach. The next

time I laid the gun on him was the last time. I locked him in the Buick's trunk to keep him on ice, then I got behind the wheel and roared out of the alley. I hit seventy going up the winding road beyond Laguna, fear and sickness mingling inside me as I thought of that curve ahead. I knew the place; it was bad enough in the daytime, with a hundred-foot drop off the cliff at the road's edge to the sea below. I shoved the accelerator all the way down, thinking of the Cad tumbling end over end off the cliff, Ellen unconscious behind the steering wheel at the start, and at the end . . . I shivered.

The guy laid out in the trunk had told me more of what had happened, and I knew the Sammy Lighter he said Bruno had phoned last night. Lighter was one of the top racket boys in Nevada. Bruno had wired him money, explained the job was to tail Ellen and her husband, grab her the first time she was alone, and "accidentally" kill her. The men had reached Laguna this A.M., tailed Ellen, and had seen her and Joe spot Bruno at the Gift Shop in Silver Beach. When she'd ducked out the back way they'd tailed her to The Haunt.

It looked as though Bruno, after a couple of unsuccessful attempts to kill Ellen, had decided to call in the professionals. It also looked as if Joe Benson had been wise not to let his wife out of his sight. But all Bruno had to do was get Joe away

from Ellen, knowing the pros would then pick her up, and he'd managed that.

I was peering through the Buick's windshield and suddenly I saw the two cars a quarter mile ahead, above me at the crest of the road. They seemed to be parked, facing in opposite directions, and I saw a man running to the Ford as the blue Cadillac started to roll down the road toward the curve I knew was ahead of it. I lost them for seconds, tires screaming as I slid around the last curve between us, trying not to look to my left at the awesome blackness that was the sea there below me, the wall of earth at the road's right only a blur at the corner of my eye.

As I swung around the last curve the Ford was moving toward me; beyond it the Cad picked up speed as it neared the sharp curve fifty feet ahead of it. I flashed past the Ford, right foot on the brake as I started down the incline, my hands slippery with sweat. The Buick ate up the distance between me and the car Ellen was in, but I didn't think I could possibly reach it before it hurtled over the cliff's rim. The Cad was only yards from the drop when I shoved on the brakes with all my strength, knowing that at this speed I'd never stop in time, fighting the wheel as the Buick swerved, drawing alongside the Cad's left as my headlights fell on the blackness almost in front of me. I yanked the wheel to the right and

the jar slammed through my wrists into my shoulders as fenders scraped and crashed, the sound grinding in my ears.

The Caddie swerved and my own tires screamed, sliding closer to the edge on my left as I tried to pull the car around the curve. I saw the Cad angling to the right, pulling away from me now, blackness looming all around me, and then, with the car slowing, I felt the left wheels bite at the road's edge, slide in the dirt, drop suddenly. The car shuddered, hung for a moment, and panic leaped in my brain as I threw my body automatically away from that blackness, clawing for the door handle, jerking at it as the car tilted crazily and moved beneath me. I slammed my feet against the floorboards as the car seemed to jerk and rise above me, and then I half jumped, half fell, through the open door and slammed against the earth, my fingernails ripping and breaking as I clawed at the ground, felt myself sliding backwards, dug with fingers until they bled, then felt the asphalt at my fingertips, pulled myself toward it and sprawled forward on my face.

Behind me I head pounding from inside the car, hoarse shouts—and suddenly I remembered the man who was in the Buick's trunk. Then the car scraped the cliff's side, crashed with a grating of metal, and there was silence for seconds as it hurtled through the air, followed

by a faint splash as it hit the sea. I heard sounds closer to me, looked up. The Cad was a hundred feet away, moving slowly, its side rubbing against the wall of earth at the right edge of the road. I sprinted to it, jerked the brake on.

Ellen lay motionless on the front seat. As I reached for her, light fell on us and I looked back to see the Ford rounding the curve, fast, veering in toward us with brakes squealing. I pushed Ellen to the floorboards, crawled over her and out the door as a gun roared and I saw the Ford stop, its lights off. I grabbed for my .38, yanked it from the deep pocket and dropped on my belly by the rear wheel of the Cad.

Light winked as a man fired and ran toward me; dirt splashed, inches on my left, and the slug ricocheted away whining. Then I was pulling the trigger of my .38, aiming at the man and pulling the trigger again even as he fell and I heard the slugs smack into his body. I jumped up and ran to him, slapped the gun from his hand and bunched his coat in my fist, jerked him up off the ground. I could feel his blood oozing warmly against my fingers. He coughed and a dark stain spread from his lip to chin.

"Where's Bruno?" I realized I was shouting. He shook his head, coughed again. I kept after him and he talked—for a little while. It was the same story I'd got from the

other guy. Gill told me the same things about Bruno, except where he was. Gill also said that after the kill he was to phone the Laguna police and anonymously report the "accident." Then Gill's dead weight hung heavy from my hand and I let him drop to the ground.

It seemed likely that Bruno, perhaps frightened by the mistakes last night, might be fixing himself an iron-clad alibi for tonight's kill. I wondered where Bruno would go if that were true. Probably where there were a lot of people. And right then I remembered some things I hadn't thought about enough; I thought about them. When I finally stood up I was pretty sure I knew where to find Ellen's would-be killer. I left Gill where he was and went back to Ellen.

After what seemed a long time, her eyes fluttered. She started screaming. "Hey, baby," I said, "this is Shell, remember? Hell, I wouldn't hurt a flea." She kept screaming. And she didn't stop until I remembered I still had on that stupid skeleton suit, minus the mask. No wonder she screamed. She thought she was dead and the ghouls had got her.

When we parked in front of the white two-story house with lights blazing inside all the windows, I told Ellen to wait for me away from the car, then I put the Death's mask on, walked to the door in

complete costume, and knocked.

A woman opened the door, then stepped back, one hand at her throat. I could hear laughter and music in the room behind her. "What . . ." she gasped. "What in the world . . ."

She backed away from me; I followed her inside the room. People were talking, drinking. Joe looked up, his face shocked and surprised, then flushing with anger as he walked toward me.

Joe Benson, Ellen's new husband. He had stood out like a bright light once I started wondering about him.

As I'd thought earlier, the crime of passion is usually sudden, seldom carefully planned like this one—and the *click* of that skeleton's gun hadn't seemed part of a crazy man's kill. I'd also wondered, finally, how Bruno happened to learn where Ellen was.

Joe shoved me out the door and slammed it behind us. Light fell on his twisted face as he swore at me.

I said softly, "It's all right, she's dead."

In his anger he answered automatically. "But that outfit! And how did you know I was here? None of you knew—" And then he stopped very damned suddenly, his face frightened and ugly, as I pulled off the skelton hood and he saw my face.

"Now, wait. You don't understand." His voice shook.

"The hell I don't, Benson. I un-

derstand a million bucks worth."

His eyes focused on the gun in my hand, and I used it to slam him one between the eyes—and then they stopped focusing.

I dragged him over to the car, shoved him inside, and began to work him over there. At first, I just softened him up, using my fists and not the gun. I didn't give him a chance to cry out; all he could do was moan a little as I kept working on his face. Finally, I took the gun and raked the barrel across his cheek, just once, as hard as I could. That did it. He suddenly starting squirting words. He was really trying to please me now.

"Where's Bruno, Joe?"

"House I rented by phone in his name," he mumbled through puffed lips.

"Where is it?"

He mumbled the address, and I took off my necktie, yanked his hands around in back of him, and bound them together with the necktie. I made the knot as tight as I could, pulling hard until the flesh on his wrists puffed out around the silken tie. Then I locked the car door on his side, shoved him down on the seat, and took off.

It didn't take us long to get to the house, and Joe didn't say a word while we were travelling. He just lay there on the seat, sucking in air through his mouth in huge gulps.

The house was completely dark, and I dragged Joe from the car and

shoved him ahead of me up to the front door. I pushed him to one side and tried the knob. It was locked. I turned to Joe and held the barrel of my gun under his nose.

"The key, Joe," I said softly.

"In my coat pocket," he blubbered, getting the words out so fast that he almost stumbled over them.

I held the gun on him, fished the key out of his pocket, and opened the door. I grabbed Joe by the elbow, held him in front of me, and pushed him through the open door ahead of me.

From somewhere in front of us, I heard the muffled sounds of movement, something scraping on the floor. I pulled Joe to a stop and felt along the wall until I found the light switch. I flicked the lights on, and a few feet in front of us was a man sitting on the floor, his hands reaching out for a rope which held his ankles bound together. In back of him were strands of rope that must have come from his wrists.

"Hold it, Bruno," I said, shoving Joe to the floor and pointing the gun at Bruno.

He swivelled his head around and glared at me with eyes that were hate-filled and deadly. Then he caught sight of Joe.

"You dirty son of a bitch!" he screamed. "You tricked me. Where's Ellen?"

Joe just stared at him. I dragged over a chair with my foot, sat down on it, and looked at both of them lying on the floor. I waved the gun

back and forth slowly in my hand.

"I think I'll untie him, Joe," I said. "Looks like he wants to get at you."

Joe's eyes rolled toward me and then back to Bruno. "No!" he said quickly. "No!"

"You tipped him off about Ellen, didn't you, Joe," I prompted. "You met him outside the Gift Shop and told him you'd take him to Ellen."

Joe stared at me for a moment, then nodded his head.

"Let's have the rest of it, Joe."

His bloody face twisted up, and then the words began to pour out. "I had to kill her. Had to make it look like an accident and make sure I was in the clear. Half of Reno knew Bruno had threatened her. I knew if I could get him down here when she died he'd be suspected if anyone was. Sam Lighter in Reno is one of my closest friends; I phoned him yesterday and had him trickle word to Bruno where Ellen was. I figured the fool would come down to pester her if he knew."

His voice trailed off, and he looked at Bruno, staring wild-eyed at him.

"Then you tried to kill Ellen after that, didn't you?" I said.

He pulled his eyes away from Bruno and swung them back to me. "Yes. Lighter let me know when Bruno hopped the L. A. plane, and I checked the bus schedules, made sure Ellen saw him get

here. Last night, when she went to Sam Clemente I said I was sick. I followed her in a rented car. I'd messed with her brakes, but that didn't do it so I took the shot at her."

"So when that didn't work," I said, "you got Lighter to send his boys to get Ellen, lured Bruno here, tied him up, faked the accident, and then tried to have me killed because I would be the only one who knew it was murder, and not an accident."

Joe nodded.

"Bruno was your patsy," I went on. "You had an alibi, Lighter's boys wouldn't talk, and once you had let Bruno go free, the heat would be turned on him. All that was left then was to get me out of the way."

Before Joe could say another word, Bruno let out a wild yell, snaked his hand inside his coat, and pulled out a knife, snapping the blade all in one motion.

"Drop it, Bruno," I yelled at him and started to swing the gun on him.

He never even looked at me. He moved forward, fast for a big guy, and I saw the knife flash upwards.

The knife caught Joe in the throat and stayed there. Bruno started to laugh and rock back and forth on the floor. He was still laughing when I picked up the phone and dialed the police. . . .

* * *

I lay in my bed, alone in the wide

bed, in my room at the Surf and Sand, and thought about the mess just ended. Bruno was in the clink; Joe was dead; so were some other guys; and two innocent waiters at The Haunt must still be rubbing their sore heads wondering what happened to their skeleton outfits.

I listened to the whisper of the breakers outside and thought about the Bruno gimmick that had made me concentrate on jealousy, a good substantial motive for murder, and made me wait almost too long to look at the best motive—Ellen's million bucks. That's what Joe wanted, and he had to plan her death when he saw their marriage going on the rocks.

I thought, too, about my own

motives. I'd wanted to help Ellen for a lot of reasons. She'd been like a frightened kid; she'd had it tough, even if she did have all that dough. And once, at the beginning, she'd hinted at a fabulous fee for me if I could help. But that wasn't all of it. I suppose I had another motive.

The bathroom door opened and soft light outlined Ellen's full, sensual figure, filtered through the dark lace that hugged her lush curves. It was only for a brief moment, but a moment heavy with promise, and then the light snapped out. I heard her moving through the darkness toward me.

Yeah, I did have another motive. Can you think of a better one?



the junkie trap

BY CLARK HOWARD

Lester Talman was an assistant Public Defender. His particular interest was in defending narcotics violators.

NIKKO sat on a soiled cot in a one-man cell on the Narco tier of county jail. He chewed his fingernails relentlessly one after another all the way down to the quick.

Lousy piece of luck, he thought nervously.

Rotten lousy piece of luck.

Dirty rotten lousy piece of luck.

Goddamn dirty rotten lousy piece of luck!

He had been busted five hours earlier in a raid on a garage down on South Central. That had been at one o'clock in the morning. Now it was six and the screw was walking up and down the tier dragging a nightstick across the barred cell doors to wake everybody up.

Lousy screw, Nikko thought.

Rotten lousy screw.

Dirty rotten lousy screw.

Goddamn—

He bit off his last nail and spat it onto the concrete floor. Then he started on the skin.

Third rap, third rap, third rap—

The thought kept running over and around and through his brain. Third rap. Third time around.

Nikko had been lucky the other two times. The first bust, three years ago, they had sent him to the cure ward at county hospital. Twenty-seven days later the monkey was dead. And buried. So they told him. But they didn't know. He stayed off the stuff eight days. And that was his endurance record on the street.

The next set had been eighteen months ago. No hospital ward that time; no reduced fixes, no therapy, no slow withdrawal. None of that crap for monkey number two, no sir. Jailhouse time that time, baby. Three months. Cold turkey. The snakes in his mouth, the little balloons in his guts, those goddamn bugs that crawled all over him—all over him—all over him—Jesus!

Nikko shook violently, uncontrollably, at the memory. I'll ride the Big Horse till I die, man, before I'll go to the turkey farm again. And I don't care. I just don't care.

A trusty with a mess cart came by and held a metal bowlful of steaming lumpy oatmeal through the bars. Nikko looked up at him with heavily drooping eyelids.

"Shove it, fink," he said. "I don't eat that garbage."

The trusty went away.

Nikko held his right arm up in front of his face and looked at the line of needle scars that stretched from behind his elbow nearly to his wrist. Crazy tracks, he thought. Crazybird tracks.

He held up his left arm and looked at it. That line of tracks was not as long. Not yet.

Gonna beat the mothers this time, he thought gladly. They can't pin me this time, got nothin' on me this time. Smart fuzz got there little bit too soon this time; he hadn't shot up yet. So he had none of the stuff *in* him, and none *on* him. Oh, it was there, all right; over on a spread-out

blanket in the corner. And Jiggs and the spik and the broad had already shot up; but not him. Not him, man. He was in the john taking a leak when they busted the joint, so he was clean. Real clean. Man, like the driven goddamned snow. *Clean.*

Yeah, he'd beat it this time. No hospital ward and no withdrawal. No jailhouse time and no laced-up coat with no sleeves. No chilly bird, man, no frozen fowl, no Cold Turkey.

Because there was no evidence.

He'd be arraigned this morning and go up for a preliminary hearing day after tomorrow. They'd have to let him go then; insufficient evidence to hold him to answer on the complaint. Oh, he knew a little something about the goddamned law, all right. He knew enough to know he'd walk out of that courtroom as free as a bird. A crazybird.

All he had to do was make it through two days and two nights and about six hours of the third day, without folding. If he could do that, he'd be right back in Easy Alley. But if he folded, they'd hit him with an addiction rap instead of possession. As it stood now, they couldn't make him on the possession bit, but if he folded they'd sure as hell make him easy on using; he'd go as wild as a cat with kerosene up its ass.

But I'll make it, he thought slyly.

He had it figured. He could go the rest of the day without a fix,

probably last until eight or nine that night. Then after lights out, he'd be okay. He had one cap taped behind his testicles (booking office fuzz never searched there; afraid they'd catch something), and a straight pin concealed inside his shirttail, and he had matches and there was a metal cup in the cell. He could fix half a cap at nine or ten tonight and that would carry him until tomorrow night; then he could shoot the rest to brace himself through the prelim the next morning.

Yeah, I'll make it, he told himself. Only it ain't gonna be easy. Going from a cap and a half down to just the half—

Nikko started chewing the skin around his nails again. After awhile one of his fingers started to bleed.

Lester Talman, Assistant Public Defender, ate lunch across the street from Justice Hall and returned to his office shortly after one p.m. When he got back to his desk he found seven new files containing the complaints against six men and one woman who had been arraigned that morning in Department Sixty-two and who, having pleaded poverty to the bar of justice, were assigned to the Public Defender's office to be provided with legal representation courtesy of the taxpayers (the same taxpayers they were alleged to have offended in some way).

As was his policy, the first thing

Talman did was take a quick look at the charges. He found two armed robberies (co-defendants), one grand theft auto, one public soliciting (the woman), one lewd vagrancy, one ADW and one narcotics violation. It was the latter, the narco complaint, that interested him the most, and it was that file that he sat down to read.

When he finished reading, ignoring the other complaints, Talman took the narco file and went down the hall to the office of his superior, a man named Mills, who was the Chief Deputy Public Defender.

"This narco complaint indicates that Nicholas, alias Nikko, was arrested with three others," he said to Mills, "but I didn't get their files."

"I gave those cases to Dean," said Mills. "You haven't been batting too well on narco charges lately. I thought maybe I'd give you a change in routine."

"I do the best I can," Talman told him evenly.

"I know you do, Les, and I know you prefer narco cases to any other kind; but some of the other boys have to get experience along those lines, too."

"They can't do any better job than I've been doing," Talman argued. "I feel very strongly about helping narco violators. I go all the way for them, you know that. Everytime I handle a case, I think of my sister; that *makes me do a good job.*"

"I know, I know," Mills said softly.

It was common knowledge around Justice Hall that Lester Talman's sister had been an addict. She was one of those unfortunate high school girls who was lured to marihuana for kicks, graduated to heroin and was dead from an overdose before she was eighteen. What amazed most people was that Talman was not bitter about it, did not blame the addicts who started her on the needle; instead he promulgated the theory that they were sick, not responsible, entitled to treatment rather than punishment. In his position as an assistant public defender, he represented as many of them in court as he could. And, until recently, virtually all narcotic defenses reaching Chief Deputy Mills' desk were assigned to him.

But today three cases had not been assigned to him.

"You've got to look at my side of it too, Les," Mills told him. "The people upstairs don't know anything about you or your sister or how you feel about junkies. All they know is what they see on the saw for the last quarter wasn't good; you've got to admit that."

"I did the best I could," Talman urged again. "The D.A.'s boys aren't the easiest people in the world to deal with, you know."

"Granted. But, Les, in the past three months you've gone to bat on forty-three narcotics *without a single acquittal*! Now you know yourself that—"

"All right, all right," Talman said wearily. "I get the picture."

"There's nothing personal in it, Les—"

"Of course not. I understand."

Returning to his desk, Talman put the narco file in his briefcase and quickly lined up the dispositions of his other new cases. The two armed robberies he could easily get continued; likewise for the auto theft and assault cases. The lewd vag and the soliciting charge he could wrap up in half an hour the morning of the preliminary. Right now he wanted to see this defendant Nicholas, alias Nikko, on the narco beef.

Just before leaving his desk, he picked up the phone and dialed a direct line. Momentarily a woman answered on the other end.

"Is Paul in?" Talman asked.

"He hasn't returned from lunch, sir," she told him. "May I take a message?"

"No, I'll call later, thank you."

He hung up and left the office to walk over to the jail.

Nikko kept clasping and unclasping his hands as he sat facing Lester Talman across a ten-inch glass partition in the visiting room.

"If you weren't shooting up, what the hell were you doing in the garage in the first place?" Talman wanted to know.

"I told you, man," said Nikko, "I was just walking past the place. I was on my way to a movie an'

I hadda take a leak, so I just stopped in. I been off the stuff for months, no lie."

"The others were shooting, weren't they? This Jiggono and Cutez and the Peacock girl?"

"Yeah, man, but they done fixed by the time I got there. I seen 'em over ina corner but I didn't pay 'em no attention. Like I said, man, I hadda take a leak, bad."

Talman flipped a few pages in the file. "How long have you been on the street since your last fall?"

"More'n a year now. An' I been clean all that time."

"Got a job?"

"Well, like I been looking, you know; but things is tight right now."

"Yeah, sure." Talman had heard it all before. A hundred times.

"Two priors all you've had?"

Nikko grinned stupidly. "Sure, man. Ain't that enough?"

"Don't get wise," said Talman. "You might find out whether it's enough if you get a tough judge on your preliminary."

"Aw, what they got?" Nikko said indignantly. "I'm an innocent god-damned bystander. How they gonna make me? You can get me off without even being held to answer. All you gotta do is—"

"Don't start telling me my job," said Talman. He stood up and put his file back together. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Crazy," said Nikko. He sat and watched the P.D. leave. As he wait-

ed for the guard to come get him, he started chewing his finger again. Right then he would have traded that finger for an extra cap. In another few hours he was going to need it bad.

Real bad, man.

Talman entered a phone booth in the jail lobby and called the same number he had tried to get earlier. A man answered this time.

"Paul? Les. Have you seen a file on a Nicholas alias Nikko yet?"

"Just read it," was the answer. "What's the scoop?"

"I just talked to him. He thinks he's getting off at the prelim—and he could be right. I don't think the possession charge will stick; he hadn't shot up when the arrest was made, and he didn't have any junk on his person. What do you think?"

"I saw that, too," said Paul. "You wouldn't even have to offer any defense; just move for a dismissal. Any possibility of the complaint being amended?"

"Maybe," said Talman. "If he sticks to his story about being off the stuff, and since he was clean when they arrested him, it could end up looking like he was a pusher instead of a user. I don't really think he was, but he could probably be made on it nevertheless. How much money did he have on him anyway?"

"Let's see here; cash in possession, eight dollars, ten cents. Not enough if he had just made a sale."

"No, but he could have flushed some currency down the toilet, along with any other caps he had; that would seem reasonable if he was a pusher about to be caught."

"Possibly," admitted Paul. "There'll have to be some sort of corroboration, though. The other two guys in the garage, Jiggs Jigono and Euremio Cutez, are both pros; they'd never tip on a pusher. The Peacock girl's only seventeen, though, and her record's clean. Probably hasn't been hooked too long. Maybe she'd come through if there was a deal in it for her. Say, how come you didn't get her case too, and the others?"

"Mills says I haven't been connecting with enough acquittals lately. I've got a feeling I won't be getting too many more narco cases anymore."

"Well, it doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, you'll be moving up into trial work in a few months, won't you?"

"Yeah."

"Don't worry about it then. When you start handling trials there'll be plenty of narco cases to work on."

"I hope so," said Talman. "You know how I feel about narcotic offenders."

"I know," said Paul. "Listen, how about dinner tomorrow night? Down at the Italian Pantry."

"Okay. I'll meet you there after court."

"Right. See you."

Talman hung up and left the

booth. He walked out of the jail building and started back toward his office. He had to read those other new files now that the narco case was taken care of.

Preliminary hearings started at nine o'clock the following morning. Nikko's was the third case on the calendar. A deputy brought him in from the lockup behind the courtroom and he sat next to Talman at one end of the counsel table. Opposite them sat Assistant District Attorney Britton.

Britton addressed the court first. "Your Honor, at this time the People will make a motion to amend the complaint to add the charge of illegal sale of narcotics to a minor, of which the present charge is a necessarily included offense."

"Objection," said Talman at once.

"What that son of a bitch saying?" Nikko whispered urgently, pulling at Talman's sleeve.

"Shut up," he said quietly to Nikko. Then to the court: "On the ground that the complaint lists the names only of six arresting officers and three other arrestees charged with the same offense, to wit, possession of narcotics; and that the necessary corroboration could not be found among those persons to support such a charge; this based on the rules of evidence prohibiting a co-defendant or co-arrestee from testifying to establish the commission of a greater offense than specified against the parties originally."

"Well taken," said the judge. He turned toward the Assistant District Attorney. "Any comment, Mr. Britton?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I believe we have a substantially different set of circumstances here. One of the arrestees in this case, Laura Peacock, is a minor, seventeen years old. Her age has been verified and that portion of the matter pertaining to her turned over to juvenile court under the unified charge of juvenile offenses. Therefore we contend that Miss Peacock is no longer a co-defendant within the accepted legal definition and submit that she is eligible to testify against this defendant in order to establish a greater offense."

The judge nodded and turned back to Talman. "Mr. Public Defender? Do you wish to add to your objection?"

Talman sat down heavily. "No, Your Honor."

"Very well, then; objection overruled, motion granted. Mr. Britton, present a copy of the new complaint to the Public Defender. The matter will be continued at two o'clock this afternoon."

A deputy took Nikko back to the holding cell. Talman went over to Britton's end of the counsel table.

"Mind if I take a look at the Peacock girl's statement?" he asked the Assistant District Attorney.

"Not at all," said Britton."

He handed Talman a carbon of several bound pages. Talman took

them and followed Nikko toward the lockup.

"That bastard is off his nut!" Nikko protested vehemently. "He's got the fever, man! I wasn't selling no stuff! I never sold no stuff in my goddamned life! Bought a lot sure, but never sold none!"

"The Peacock girl said she made her buy from you," Talman told him. "She said you had a pocketful of caps and that she had just paid you four five-dollar bills. And she says she heard the toilet flush in the bathroom just before the officers broke into the garage. There's a small window in that bathroom, Nikko; you could have seen them coming, you could have ditched the stuff."

"You crazy as a goddamned loon!" Nikko spat. "An' so's that D.A. son of a bitch!"

"This is the girl's full statement right here," said Talman, holding the sheaf of papers in front of Nikko's face. "The D.A. has got the original of this in the courtroom right now and she signed it. And that's how she's going to testify. And that's all they'll need; that and the fact that you weren't fixing when the raid was made. Only two kinds of people show up at a hype party, Nikko; users and pushers. They've got you cold."

"Well, it's a dirty goddamned frame, that's what it is! The lousy sons of bitches got it in for me because I been clobbered twice for

using. They trying to hit me with a phony rap so I get put in the big joint. They know goddamn well I ain't never done no pushing; just look at my record!"

"What were you doing in the garage then, Nikko?" Talman asked.

"I went there to shoot up, that's what!" Nikko said defiantly.

"You told me you'd been off the stuff for months," Talman reminded him quietly.

"Oh, man, don't be such a hick. When a guy's hooked, he's hooked. Look, don't you know what hooked means? It means like on a goddamned hook, like a piece of meat on a meathook. Hell, there ain't no way off."

"I guess not," said Talman softly, thinking of Janet, his dead sister. "Where'd you get the stuff to shoot?" he asked. "Was Jiggono or Cutez the pusher?"

"No, man, no. The chick got the stuff. She's got plenty of loot, gets it from her old man. Jiggono met her at a dance and got her hooked. Now she's so far gone she'll buy for all of us just to get a cap and have a place to shoot up."

Just like Janet, Talman thought. Just being used. Just a tool. Not like she's a human being at all. More like—like a piece of meat. On a meathook.

Rotten, he told himself. Rotten all the way through. All of it. The whole goddamned business.

"So what happens now?" Nikko asked sullenly.

Talman shrugged. "You're stuck, Nikko; you might as well face it. The girl's going to say she made her buy from you. They're going to get you for selling to a minor. You can fight it all the way through the preliminary and a trial and an appeal if you want to, but they're still going to get you. Or you can plead guilty, waive a trial and maybe get a light sentence on the preliminary."

"Cop out, huh?" Nikko licked his lips nervously. "And get how much time?"

"Well," said Talman, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "first offense on a selling complaint; judge might forget the two addiction raps; give you maybe two to five."

Son of a bitch! Nikko thought. Two to five—and he hadn't even shot up! The dirty bastards. Had everything on their side—the money, the cops, the judges, everything—and still wouldn't give a guy a square shake. Two to five, and on top of that he'd have to kick his habit cold turkey again. Those lousy little bugs would crawl all over him again—

Suddenly Nikko could sit where he was no longer. He had to get up and get back to his cell. He had to have that last half cap. If he didn't get out of that lousy rotten dirty goddamned holding cell, he'd start climbing the walls!

"Okay, okay, man," he said nervously. "I'll take the two to five. Tell 'em to take me back to my cell."

"Got some stuff stashed, Nikko?" Talman asked knowingly.

"Come on, man, come on, hear? I don't feel so hot, like I'm going sick, okay?"

"Sure, Nikko."

Talman had Nikko returned to his cell, to be brought back to court at two o'clock that afternoon. He himself went into the attorney's conference room and sat down to study the Peacock girl's statement. But he found he wasn't able to concentrate on the case.

He kept thinking about his dead sister.

The judge looked down at Nikko, who stood before the bench with mouth slightly agape, right arm itchy, head nodding spastically from time to time, pupils widely dilated.

"You have entered a plea of guilty to the amended complaint charged against you," said the judge in a measured tone. "Do you now waive your rights to a trial by jury?"

Talman, standing beside him, nudged Nikko with an elbow. "Yeah," Nikko mumbled.

"Counsel join?" asked the judge.

"Counsel joins, Your Honor," said Talman.

"Is it your desire to be sentenced on this charge at once, without further proceedings?"

Again the elbow and Nikko said, "Yeah."

"Counsel join?"

"Counsel joins."

"Any objection, Mr. Britton?"

"No objection," said the Assistant District Attorney.

"Very well," said the judge. He faced Nikko impassively. "Eugene George Nicholas, alias Gene Nikko, alias George Nikko, *et al*, this court accepts your plea of guilty to the amended complaint. This court also finds from the record two prior convictions for narcotic offenses; and although these convictions were not for crimes as serious in nature as the crime of selling narcotics to a minor, they were nevertheless within the scope of the general classification of the narcotic statutes as set down by law. The court is therefore permitted to consider them in passing sentence for the present offense, and, for the record, the court now does so.

"It is the judgment of this court, then, that you are sentenced to serve fifteen years in the state penitentiary."

Nikko smiled sickly and half turned to be led away by the deputy. Then the judge's words seeped through the heroin blockade set up around his brain, and they reached that tiny part of his consciousness that had not been drugged by the half cap he had fixed himself with two hours earlier, and he thought frantically:

Fifteen years!

Nikko broke loose from the deputy's grasp and leaped over the counsel table toward the judge's bench.

"You rotten lousy dirty god-damned screw! It's a frame! I didn't even shoot up! I was taking a leak, you hear me, you rotten lousy dirty—!"

The deputy's arm tightened around Nikko's throat and closed off the rest of Nikko's snarling protest, and two guards from the holding cell rushed out and grabbed flailing arms and kicking legs and carried the half-drugged, half-mad addict from the courtroom.

"Fifteen minutes recess!" the judge said, slamming his gavel down with a loud crack.

Assistant District Attorney Britton and Assistant Public Defender Talman stood up as the judge left the bench.

At the Italian Pantry that evening, Talman sat in a rear booth sipping chilled Chianti. He was thinking that the Nicholas case would probably be the last narco preliminary he would handle. After Nikko getting slapped with fifteen years, Mills wouldn't be inclined to let him represent any more addicts.

But it really didn't matter. As Paul had said on the phone the previous day, in a few more months he would be moved up to trial work. Then there would be plenty of narco cases. And no one to keep tabs on how many were acquitted

or convicted, either. They only kept statistics like that on preliminaries; that was done to satisfy the county supervisors that poor poverty-stricken individuals charged with crimes in their county were getting adequate representation, that their constitutional rights were not being violated. And the fact that they were getting good legal advice at preliminary hearings was construed to be evidence enough that they would continue to get it if the matter went to trial.

At any rate, when he moved up to trial work, no one would be on his back about losing so many narco cases. Then he could handle things the way he wanted to.

Talman looked up just as Assistant District Attorney Britton came in the door and walked back to the booth.

"Hello, Les," said Britton, sitting down.

"Hello, Paul."

"Well, we racked up another one, didn't we, Les? Good thing you came up with that idea about making a pusher out of him. The other complaint never would have held up. Guess you were pretty happy with that fifteen-year bit Nikko got, eh?"

"You bet your sweet life I was," said Talman coldly. "You know how I feel about junkies, Paul. I hate them."



WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

Darlan was getting old, and he was sick. The last thing in the world he wanted was another case. But suddenly he was the only private eye in town.

BY EDWARD D. HOCH

DARLAN was taking the last armful of books from the dusty shelf when he heard the door to the outer office open and then close. It might only have been the mailman, bringing a dull assortment of bills and ads, but the closing of the door had been a more tentative sound, suggesting that his visitor remained inside.

"Who's there, anybody?" he called out, stooping at the same moment to fill the remaining box space with the armload of books.

The inner door opened just a bit uncertainly, and a balding man with heavy cheeks brought his head into view. "Al Darlan?"

"That's right."

"The private detective?"

Darlan sighed and sat down in the chair behind the desk. Stooping over the box of books had brought the blood dizzily to his head, as it always did lately. "Yes," he admitted. "But I'm just about retired."

"Retired!" The man came all the way in then, revealing to Darlan a body that matched the face. He knew it too would be balding, like his own. "But you can't retire!"

Darlan smiled a bit at that. "Have a chair, Mr. . .?"

"Browse. Wilmer Browse. My card." He extended a bit of white pasteboard that Darlan accepted reluctantly. There was always something about the acceptance of a calling card that established an unwanted bond.

"*The Magger Museum*," Darlan read. "I've heard of the place, but I'm afraid I'm not much on museums. You're the director?"

"Correct," Wilmer Browse answered. "Though these days it's more of a gallery than a museum. You've no doubt read the newspaper accounts of the Magger collection. Finest examples of modern French art in the United States."

Darlan nodded vaguely. "Sure.

But like I was saying, Mr. Browse, I don't think I could see my way clear to take on a case."

The heavy-set man let out his breath. "Why not? If you don't take the case, where else can I go?"

"I can give you the name of another investigator."

"Cadan?"

Darlan blinked his eyes. He felt a headache coming on. "Yes, I was thinking of Sam Cadan."

"He lost his license. It was in the papers a couple of days ago."

Darlan felt a bit dizzy. "You'll have to excuse me. I'm just out of the hospital. Guess I haven't been keeping up on the news."

"It was this police scandal thing. And the other one, Kane, moved away last year."

"I knew about that."

"So you're the only one."

"The only what?"

"The only private eye in town," Browse said.

"Please, I don't care too much for that term. In my younger days, perhaps—but not any more. Not ever any more."

"You won't take the case?"

Darlan blinked. "Mr. Browse, I'm fifty-one years old and I've had two heart attacks. I'm not good for much of anything any more."

"You look healthy enough."

"Looks can be deceiving."

"Could I tell you about my problem, at least, please?"

"I'll listen. I'm not promising anything. You can see I'm in the

midst of packing." He gestured toward the boxes scattered across the floor.

"That's all I ask—that you listen. Have you ever heard of a woman called Laura Fain?"

"I don't believe so."

"You probably wouldn't have. Actually, her activities until now have been mainly in Europe." He took out a package of mints and popped one casually into his mouth. "Interpol rates her as one of the leading art thieves currently operating. Certainly she's the leading female one."

Darlan nodded as if he'd heard that sort of thing before. Perhaps he had, in his younger days. It was even difficult to remember at times. "Why isn't she locked up?"

"They've never caught her with the goods. And I understand that she does have a certain amount of charm. For a woman of thirty-five."

Darlan grunted. "Has she taken anything from you?"

"Not yet. But why else would she be in this town?" He took another mint. It wasn't bothering his appetite.

"Have you been to the police?"

"What would I tell them?"

"Sergeant Nellis is a good man, and a friend of mine. He could help you."

But Wilmer Browse was shaking his head. "I don't want that kind of help. I want someone to warn her off and then make sure she stays off. It won't do me any good to

have her arrested after my paintings are halfway to Europe."

"Your paintings?"

"I think of them as mine. Old Mr. Magger was a personal friend. His last wish before he passed on was that I should care for them as director of the museum."

"What else do you have in the place?"

He shrugged. "A few statues. A collection of newer American artists. And some old Greek and Roman relics. The paintings are the important thing, though. That's what she's after. Do you know what Cezanne and Degas and Matisse bring these days among art collectors?"

"I've no idea."

"Plenty! And Laura Fain knows it! I want to give her a scare, make sure she knows we're onto her. And that's the sort of thing the police can't do for me."

Darlan stirred in his chair, feeling old. "I'd like to help you, but it's a job for a younger man."

"There *isn't* any younger man, Mr. Darlan. It's you or no one."

"You surely can find someone down in New York to take the case."

"It's a matter of finding her here in town, and keeping an eye on her. I don't think a New York detective would know this area well enough. I'd be paying him a fortune to ask questions in bar rooms."

"What makes you think I'd have any better luck?"

"At least you'd know where to look."

"Yes," Darlan admitted. "I'd know pretty well where to look."

"And you have friends in the police."

Darlan eyed the packing cases full of books and files, the bare spot on the wall where the sailing print had hung ignored for so many years. Maybe one more. Maybe just one more. "Who told you she was in town?"

"A European dealer I know has friends in Interpol. They traced her here a week ago. But of course they don't operate in this country."

"They would have notified the local police, surely."

"Oh, yes," Browse agreed. "I'm sure the whole thing is sitting on somebody's desk down at Headquarters, waiting for the crime to occur. Then they'll make a quick arrest, *if* they can find her, *if* she still has the paintings at that point."

"Does she have a gang?"

"She doesn't need one, from what I hear."

Darlan spread his hands before him on the desk, studying the blueness of the veins that seemed more pronounced every day. "You mean this woman is just going to walk into your gallery and walk out with the paintings?"

"She's done it in other cities. Interpol believes she's behind at least a third of the big art thefts in recent years."

Perhaps there was something of a

challenge in it. Darlan looked away from his deeply veined hands and said, "My fee is fifty dollars a day."

"That's all right."

"Plus expenses."

William Browse nodded. "Of course the ideal course of action would be to scare her out of town, convince her she's being watched every minute. Could you do that?"

"I could if I can find her."

"Then you'll take the case?"

Darlan sighed and nodded. "I'll take the case. For one week. If it goes on longer than that, I might have to drop out. Now, let me know where I can reach you, and let me know anything else you have on this woman."

He was back in business, and the feeling wasn't so bad after all. . . .

Sergeant Nellis was a big man who looked like a cop. Even after three years in the detective division, he still seemed ill at ease out of the familiar blue uniform he'd worn so long. Darlan had known him off and on all his life, starting in grammar school when Nellis had been two years behind him, and continuing on into the complex relationship which always exists between a private detective and the local police force. There'd been a brief hiatus in their relationship when Darlan had ventured into New York and opened an agency there, on a grimy corner of 42nd Street. But he'd come back. The life of the big city was not for him. Now, at

fifty-one, his only memory of those New York years was of the man he'd killed there. It was odd thinking of how he'd gone through the war without ever firing a shot in anger and then come back to New York to kill a punk hoodlum in an alley.

But those had been other days. He no longer even carried a gun, though he still owned one which he kept in the bottom desk drawer. It hadn't even been cleaned in years, and sometimes when he thought about it at all he wondered if it would still fire, or only explode in his face when he pulled the trigger.

"Is Nellis around?"

"In the back."

He went around the wooden railing and stepped between the desks of the squad room, nodding here and there at a familiar face. Finally he found Nellis, crouched over a filing cabinet stuffed tightly with manila case folders.

"Hi, boy. How's the world treating you?"

The big detective looked up, surprised. "I'll be damned! Darlan! I thought you were still in the hospital."

"They can't keep a good man down. I've been out a couple of days."

"That's swell news. How've you been feeling?"

"I'll live." He patted his chest. "The old heart's good for another thousand miles."

"Another million, you mean.

What are you doing? Getting out of the business like you promised?"

"I was going to, Nel. I really was. Hell, I had everything all packed. And this guy comes in and tells me I'm the only private detective left around."

"Yeah," Nellis said a bit soberly. "It was too bad about Cadan."

"I didn't even know he was implicated."

"A lot of people were implicated. A hell of a lot of people."

"Where's Sam now?"

"Somebody said he left town. I don't know for sure. He hasn't been indicted, but the evidence was strong enough for the state to lift his license."

Darlan leaned against the filing cabinet. "Anyway, I'm working again, mostly because I'm the only man available."

"That heart won't be good for anything if you don't slow down. You're no youngster, Al."

"I'm no old man, either. I've got one case left in me."

Nellis closed the drawer. "So you want information."

"So I want information."

"About what?"

"Wilmer Browse, out at the Magger Museum."

The detective smiled as he lit a cigarette. "Getting pretty artsy in your old age, aren't you?"

"Maybe. What do you know about him?"

"No more than I read in the papers. Magger died and left the place

sort of in his care. It's more or less exclusive, I guess. Only open to the general public one afternoon a week. The rest of the time it's strictly for the scholars and art critics. Lot of recent French paintings. Worth a pile."

Darlan nodded. "Did you ever hear of a woman named Laura Fain, from Europe?"

"Should I have?"

"She's been mixed up in some art thefts. Browse is afraid she's here in town. I'm supposed to find her and call her off."

Nellis grunted. "I can check the files for you."

"He knows next to nothing about her, except that her age is in the mid-thirties and she's English. But you may have an Interpol report on her."

"We don't get those very often. They usually contact someone in Washington. But I'll check for you."

Darlan waited while he went through a file basket filled to overflowing with FBI *Wanted* posters, teletype messages, fingerprint cards and the like. "You're a little behind in your filing," he commented.

"Yeah. Too busy catching criminals." After a moment he held up a letter on yellow paper. "I think this is what you're looking for. *Laura Fain, alias Madame Laura, age 35, born London, England, suspected art thief, three arrests, no convictions, often masquerades as fortune teller.*"

He passed the notice to Darlan, who read it over carefully. "This is an unusual step, warning the police when there haven't been any convictions. They must have plenty of reason to suspect her. You took no action on this?"

Nellis shrugged. "What action could we take? Why waste time looking for her when there's no evidence she's committed a crime or is planning to commit one?"

"I guess it is a job for me, after all. Thanks, Nel."

"Be careful, Darlan."

"She doesn't sound too dangerous."

"They're all dangerous under the right circumstances. Or the wrong circumstances."

"Thanks, for the advice. See you around." He went down the steps to the street at a quick, unhesitating pace, wondering if the detective's eyes might still be on him. After a half block of rapid pace he slowed almost to a crawl, feeling the dangerous throbbing of his heart.

It was a job for a younger man, but there just weren't any around.

...

It took him only two days of diligent questioning in the right places to come up with the fact that a new palm reader thought to be English had recently opened up shop on Hudson Street.

"Recently?"

"Last week one day. Old store front. Used to be a grocery store

before the days of the supermarkets."

"What's her name?"

"Who knows? Calls herself Gypsy something."

"Gypsy Laura, perhaps?"

"Yeah, I think that's it. Gypsy Laura. Friend of yours?"

"I expect to make her acquaintance. Thanks."

The store front was a wide dusty window, still speckled with bits of advertising matter from its days as a grocery. A dull purple drape had been hung behind it, giving to all the impression of drab mystery. In the glass door was hung a make-shift cardboard sign, crayoned with the message *Madame Laura, Readings*. Darlan pushed open the door and went inside.

It was a single medium-sized room, with bare floor and walls broken only by a large chart of a human hand. In the center was a stout-looking table with two chairs in position, the whole of the scene lit by a single roccoco lamp whose nearly opaque shade cast more spell than light. Darlan looked for the crystal ball, but there was none.

"Can I help you?" a voice asked behind him. He turned to face a woman of surprisingly fair complexion who seemed quite out of place in such surroundings. If she was thirty-five, she carried the years well.

"You can if you're Madame Laura, or Gypsy Laura."

"I go by either name," she said calmly.

Darlan took out a cigarette, because the moment called for one. The doctor had forbidden smoking after the first attack. "You give readings?"

She seemed to be looking right through him. Perhaps she was. "I give readings. My customers are usually women."

"My money's as agreeable as theirs."

"I don't doubt that. Are you a policeman?"

"Should I be?"

"They bother me sometimes."

"You're English, aren't you? The voice sounds like it."

"I'm English. Do you want a reading?"

"You should wear a black wig. It would go better with the setting."

"Do you want a reading?" she asked again.

"Yes. That's why I came."

"Cards or palm?"

"Cards, I think."

"Tarot or regular deck?"

"Regular."

"That will be two dollars. In advance."

He laid two carefully crumpled bills on the table between them, and she drew a deck of playing cards from some concealed drawer. "May I sit down?"

"Of course." She riffled through the deck and quickly dealt out five cards, face down. "Comfort for our customers at all times. First card, the nine of clubs, a last warning."

"Sounds ominous."

"It's meant to. Second card—the five of hearts—is an unexpected meeting. Third card—king of spades—a strange man. Fourth card—seven of diamonds—a journey. And last—six of spades—warns you to beware of malicious gossip."

"What happens if you put them all together?"

She smiled thinly. "That should be obvious. This is your last warning that you will unexpectedly meet a strange man and take a journey with him. The bit about malicious gossip seems to mean . . ."

Darlan ground out the cigarette. "It means if I believe the gossip I get taken for a ride by one of your boy friends. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"The cards tell you not me."

"Cut the act, Miss Fain."

Her eyes shot up. "So you are a detective!"

Darlan showed her his badge. "Private."

"What do you want?"

"I've been hired to get you out of town."

She swept the deck of cards into the drawer. "By whom?"

"The Magger Museum, in case you couldn't guess. They're worried about you."

"That place is guarded like a fort."

"They're still worried about you. And the police have a nice little report from Interpol on your European activities."

She lowered her lids until her eyes were tiny slits. "They tend to exaggerate."

"I'll stop playing games," Darlan told her. "Wilmer Browse out at the museum wants you to stay away. He's hired me to see that you do. I think you'd be more welcome back in Europe."

"Sure I would! Look, I didn't come here to steal that old fool's collection. I came here to make a new start of my life. You can believe that or not!"

"I choose not." He got up from the chair. "I'll be watching you, Miss Fain. I can make life pretty unpleasant for you in this town."

"Thanks."

"Goodbye."

He went out the door without looking back, hearing only the slam of it behind him. Outside, one or two heads turned in his direction, but he paid no attention. He got in his car and drove once around the block. The second time he parked a few doors down and waited. Nothing happened. An hour later there was still nothing, and he gave it up for the time being.

Night came suddenly that evening, helped by a darkening layer of potential rain cloud that descended from the west just at dusk. Darlan watched it from his window, watched the city that was his, and wondered what Laura Fain would be doing. In his younger days he could have kept up the stake-out day and night, breaking only for an

occasional sandwich or a cup of coffee. Now he needed his sleep, and if he hadn't succeeded in scaring off Laura Fain, well, there would be another day for that.

Outside, the drizzle was starting as he headed home—home to the apartment that had been his only home for fifteen years, since his sole try at marriage had ended in quick and painful failure. Home! He had to smile a bit at the word.

"Darlan!" a voice whispered close to his ear in the dark drizzle. A voice he felt he knew.

"Who is it?"

"Me. Sam Cadan!" He stepped out of the shadows by Darlan's car, big and lumpy as ever. The poor man's Sam Spade. Only not any more.

"How are you, Sam? I heard you'd left town."

"I might as well. They've done their best to drive me out."

"What happened, Sam? I was in the hospital. I didn't hear."

"Can we sit in your car? I don't want to be seen."

"Sure," Darlan replied. "Let me buy you a drink."

"No," Sam Cadan said with a little shiver. "I just want to talk." He went around to the far side of the car and slipped into the front seat.

"Have a cigarette, anyway."

"Thanks. God, what I've been through!"

Darlan cleared his throat. Sam Cadan had been little more than a professional acquaintance until

now. Certainly Darlan had never considered him a friend. And yet, here they were, sharing the front seat of the car, speaking together with an air of suddenly acquired intimacy. "Did you do it, Sam?" he asked. "Did you do what they accused you of?"

He sighed and leaned back in the seat. "I suppose so, if you put it like that. I suppose I made a mistake, but isn't every man entitled to one? Doesn't it say so in the Bible or someplace?"

"I doubt it. What do you want from me, Sam?"

"Do you have anything I could help you on, any way I could earn a few bucks? Just enough to get me out of this stinking town and back to New York."

New York—the mecca of them all. "You've lost your license, haven't you, Sam?"

"Sure—but there's always some little job that needs a legman. You know that as well as I do. I'm not asking for charity, Darlan."

"Sorry. I'm quitting the business myself, Sam."

"Quitting?"

"The doc says one more attack might finish me. He says I have to get more of a regular job, maybe like a clerk or something."

"You're not working on anything now?"

Darlan started to say no, then changed his mind. Why lie about it? "I'm finishing up one case, Sam. One that should have come to you,

I guess. The Magger Museum. After that I'm all finished."

"I need the money, Darlan."

"Would five bucks help you any?"

He smiled without showing his teeth. "That would be just enough to buy me a bottle, but it wouldn't go far toward New York."

"I've had New York. It's nothing."

Sam Cadan snorted. "Life is nothing, but we keep living it anyway." He opened the door and started to slide out. "Keep me in mind, shamus. Maybe I can do something for you." Then he was gone.

"Yeah, Sam," Darlan said to the closed door. "I'll keep you in mind. . . ."

In the morning he drove over to the shabby store front once more. He watched it from across the street for thirty minutes, not really caring whether she saw him or not. Then, suddenly, surprisingly, the tall broad-shouldered figure of Laura Fain appeared, walking quickly away from him. Caught off guard, he sat for a moment only watching her blonde hair bobbing rhythmically as her spike heels hit the pavement. Then he started up the car and followed slowly along, wondering if gypsy fortune tellers always wore high heels. Her own car was parked a block away, in a gravelled lot that seemed squeezed between two more decaying buildings. It was a little English model,

and he imagined that she'd had it shipped over with her. English license plates still dangled from the rear, and he noted that the steering wheel was on the right, though she seemed to have no difficulty driving as he followed her in and out of the scattered morning traffic.

After three blocks he knew where she was headed.

She was going straight to the Magger Museum, and if she knew he was following her, it wasn't bothering her in the least. The museum, he knew, was open to the public only one day a week, and this was the day. She'd planned her visit to be there when the gates opened, planned it almost to the second.

He parked right behind her, and followed her at a distance no greater than twenty paces. They entered the carefully sculptured grounds through wrought iron gates eight feet high, carefully monogrammed with the double M that seemed to be everywhere. It was only a short walk to the building itself, a box-like structure which had once been the home of the Maggers. Darlan guessed from the trimmings that the mansion might date from the days when popularity for French Renaissance styling had swept the country's millionaires. But certainly in the case of Magger the money had gone as much into the contents as into the structure itself.

The rooms now were almost devoid of furnishings, with only oc-

casional benches for the rarely—admitted public. But the walls were covered—almost every inch—with a fabulous collection of paintings that staggered even Darlan's inexperienced eye. The place was a treasure-house—but a carefully guarded one. In every room a uniformed man stood ready, his eyes constantly on the visitors, just as theirs were on the paintings. Seeing this, Darlan wondered briefly why it had been necessary to hire him at all. Certainly this girl, or anybody else, was going to have the devil's own job getting so much as a postage stamp out of the place.

Laura Fain passed through a doorway marked *French Moderns*, and here at once was the heart of the collection. The paintings here had a vibrant life about them which seemed to pale the rooms through which they'd just passed. She went at once to the corner where the Renoirs and Cezannes hung in mixed company, and even at a distance Darlan knew her eyes were devouring them hungrily.

She stood like that, deep in thought or admiration, for some five minutes. Then she turned suddenly and started for the door. Darlan caught her on the steps outside. "Good morning, Miss Fain."

"Oh! The detective!"

"That's right. I told you I'd be watching."

"Do you want to search me?"

"Not this time."

They walked on to their cars in

silence. Then, suddenly, Laura Fain said, "Is he paying you well for this?"

"What does it matter?"

"It might matter a great deal. You'll be watching me a long time before I ever get around to stealing any of those pictures from your client."

"Not your type?"

"No."

"Fussy, huh?"

"Call it that. Those pictures—the *French Moderns*, at least—are nothing but fakes. Very careful copies of the originals. Your client is a bigger crook than I am. . . ."

Darlan would not have guessed that morning the odd twists which fate had in store for him. He would not have guessed that by noon he would be sitting across a table from this strange woman, drinking coffee and listening to what she had to say.

"Life hasn't been good to me. But maybe you can see that in my face. Maybe I don't have to tell you."

"I've no complaints about your face."

"I was only a girl, barely in my teens, when they were bombing London. It's the sort of thing you don't ever forget, ever in your whole life."

"That doesn't excuse what you've done."

"Maybe not. But I like to think it explains it a little."

"You came here to rob the Magger Museum. You can't deny that."

"I never deny anything. But the pictures are fakes, Mr. Darlan."

He lit a forbidden cigarette. "That's no concern of mine."

"It should be. It means that your Mr. Wilmer Browse has been looting his trust, gradually stealing those paintings and substituting copies. Now he sees a perfect opportunity to fake a robbery and blame the whole thing onto me."

"I doubt that."

"I don't doubt it, not for a minute."

"Did you see all this in the cards?" he asked her with a smile.

"I've been framed for things all my life. I don't intend to take the rap for this one."

"All right, all right," he said. "But if you're telling the truth and the pictures are fakes, why should he hire me to help guard them? It would seem that the more people he has in on the thing, the greater his chances of being found out."

She looked at him through half closed eyes. "Do I have to tell you why? You may be a detective, Mr. Darlan, but to a man like Wilmer Browse you must have appeared quite harmless."

"Yes," he said slowly, "I suppose harmless is the right word for me. I haven't been well."

"I'd advise you to watch Browse, not me."

He felt suddenly very tired. Had he really been used? Was he only

a pawn in some fantastic plot dreamed up by Browze? "All right," he said finally. "I'll find somebody to verify what you say about those paintings—an art expert."

"Go ahead. Get the best one you can find. He'll tell you I'm not lying."

Darlan finished his coffee and got suddenly to his feet. "All right, Miss Fain. I'll check it. If you are lying, you'll see me again."

He left her sitting there and drove to his office. The place was a jumble of interrupted packing that he wanted to forget, but he waded through it and came up with a New York phone book he kept for such emergencies. There was one man in New York who might possibly be able to help on such a thing, and he called his office. The man was out of town for the rest of the week.

Darlan hung up, discouraged, and began flipping through the thick phone book at random. He'd given it up and was studying the picture of the new Lincoln Center Philharmonic Hall on the cover when he heard the outer office door open again. He hoped it wasn't another would-be client searching out the only private investigator left in town.

It wasn't. It was Sam Cadan, still in search of the only thing Darlan couldn't give him. "Hello, Sam."

"I . . . I thought I'd drop in and see you again, you know, in case you had a little work."

"Sure. But like I told you, there's just nothing now." His eyes dropped to the phone book. "Unless you know something about art, Sam."

"Art?"

"Paintings. The paintings out at the Magger Museum."

Sam Cadan's face seemed to come alive all at once. "God, Al, I used to work in a gallery in Chicago. What do you need to know?"

"Really, Sam? You're not kidding me?"

"No! It was about ten years back. I worked with another fellow authenticating paintings. I can give you his name if you want to check."

"I'll take your word for it. Look, Sam, could you tell a fake if you saw one? Fake French Modern?"

"I think so. I could give it a try."

"Swell. Look, Sam, I'll pay you twenty-five bucks to go out right now to the Magger Museum and look at some paintings."

"Today?"

"They're only open to the public one day a week. It has to be today." Darlan took 5 five-dollar-bills from his pocket and handed them over. Then he went quickly over the facts as he knew them. "That's it, Sam. I want to know if Laura Fain's right about those paintings being faked. And I want to know right away. If I knew anything about art I could probably tell myself, but I'm in the dark."

Sam Cadan nodded. "I'll go out now. You can count on me, Al."

Darlan sat quietly for a time after the man had departed, wondering if he'd done the right thing. Cadan was a crook basically, in the eyes of the law. He'd lost his license, and who was Darlan to dispute the findings of the state? Still—the man needed help, or at least understanding. Understanding was something Darlan was good at. He'd had lots of practice, during his brief marriage and two bouts with a worsening heart condition. Hell, Cadan would come back with the information and that would be the end of it, one way or another.

He spent the rest of the afternoon finishing up the packing, getting ready, pausing only to glance occasionally at his watch, counting off the hours until he decided he could stand another cup of coffee downstairs. Then he went back up and sat by the telephone with a growing sense of uneasiness, wondering. Four o'clock turned into five, hastily, and he found himself calculating the time it must have taken Cadan to drive out to the Magger Museum and back. An hour, two hours?

At ten minutes to seven the telephone rang at last. But it wasn't who he expected. It was Sergeant Nellis.

"That you, Darlan?"

"Who else? What's on your mind?"

"We got a messy one. Thought you might be interested."

"Messy? What kind of messy?"

"Sam Cadan. You knew him, didn't you?"

Darlan's blood turned cold. "You know I knew him. Why the past tense?"

"He was killed, less than an hour ago. Shot down in the street over near the Magger Museum."

"My God!" Darlan said.

"Can I come over?"

"I guess you'd better. . . ."

Nellis was smoking a cigar nervously, betraying a tension he rarely felt. He sat across the desk from Darlan, hunched near the edge of his chair. "The hell of it is, there was all this trouble with the police force. The papers are sure to connect the killing to the scandal, and every cop in town will be a suspect."

"Didn't anybody see it?"

"Nobody. There is a woman, though, who heard a car stop and a door open and close just before the shot. He got it in the back, and he might have gotten out of a car."

"You think he was taken for a ride?"

"In daylight? In a fairly populated area?"

"What, then?"

"I thought you might be able to tell me, Al."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He'd made some notations in his notebook. *Magger Museum, Wilmer Browse, Laura Fain, and Darlan—\$25.* Was he doing some work for you, Al?"

"A little," Darlan admitted.
"Here and there."

"On the Magger thing?"

"Yes."

"Any chance that got him killed?"

Was there? Darlan hadn't wanted to face the possibility that he'd sent the man to his death. "I don't see how. But I'll check a few angles for you."

"How about telling me what he was after?"

Darlan sighed. "All right. This woman Laura Fain claims the French Moderns in the Magger Museum are all fakes. She claims that Browse has been looting the place and substituting copies. Sam Cadan claimed to know something about art, so I sent him to check on it."

Nellis took the cigar from his lips. "Then there is a chance he was killed because of this business!"

"You're just trying to get the police and the politicians off the hook."

"Maybe. Maybe I'm just trying to find a murderer. Look, doesn't it hold up—if Cadan verified that the pictures were fakes, Browse might have killed him to keep the secret."

"How long can you keep a secret like that?"

"Not long," Nellis agreed. "He might try to fake a robbery tonight. I'd better get moving."

"Keep in touch."

"I will."

After he'd gone, Darlan sat at the

desk for a long time. Once he opened the bottom drawer and took out the pistol he hadn't yet packed. He held it in his hand, feeling the cool weight of the metal, and then returned it to the drawer. He was too old for that sort of thing—too old or too wise. He locked up the office and drove across town to Laura Fain's little store.

She was sitting at the table with cards spread out before her when he entered. "Telling your own fortune?" he asked.

She looked up and smiled. "No, only playing solitaire. But don't let my customers know."

"How's business been?"

"Terrible. I may give it up and try some larger city. Or go back to England, even."

"I see."

"Have you been able to verify the fact that the paintings are copies?"

He took out a cigarette. "I suppose I have verification of a sort."

"Oh?"

"Look, Miss Fain, there's a possibility Browse might try something tonight. I want to be sure you're nowhere near the Magger Museum. I want you to stay right here, with witnesses if possible."

"I can arrange that. The woman next door would like a free reading."

"Good. With luck we can wrap this up tonight, and keep Browse from framing you."

"Thanks for your interest."

"It's something personal now. A friend of mine's been killed." Suddenly, in that instant, Sam Cadan had become a friend.

"Killed? By Browse?"

"I think so. Keep up the cards and stay here, whatever you do."

"Thanks again, Mr. Darlan."

He left her and drove back across town, heading toward the Magger Museum. The lights of his car picked out the shapes of night, the hundred-odd things that would have passed unnoticed in the daytime, and the sight depressed him. Even the young man and his girl, caught briefly in a curbside embrace, depressed him. He wondered if it was only old age creeping up unnoticed on little cat's feet. Did the old always feel this resentment toward youth and romance? He wasn't old, the doctor had told him, not old at all. He had another twenty years of life in his body, maybe more. But since the second attack he'd stopped believing doctors, stopped believing almost everything. He'd been foolish to take Wilmer Browse's supposed case, but then maybe he'd been foolish all his life.

He was still a half-mile from the gallery when he heard the first sirens, low and growling and growing in the night like some dark cancer. He could tell by their pitch that they weren't police. They were fire sirens. . . .

The Magger Museum was almost

invisible in the smoke, swallowed up in a fog of acrid fumes that poured from the windows. Fire engines stood everywhere, with more arriving by the minute, tangling their hose lines in an undecipherable maze. Darlan pulled up on the edge of a hasty police line and looked around for Nellis.

"Over here, Darlan," a voice called out, and he saw the detective standing with the fire chief.

"God, what happened?"

"All hell's broken loose, that's what. I was watching the place when it happened. The thing just flared up in a half-dozen places at once. Time bombs of some sort."

"Where's Browse?"

"Over by the gate, yelling for them to save his pictures."

"Sure." Darlan left the detective and ran across the hose lines toward his client, feeling the thumping madness of the heart within his chest. He passed firemen by the score, with gas masks in place against the smoke which already was tearing at Darlan's lungs.

"There you are!" Wilmer Browse screamed. "I hired you to guard my pictures and now she's burning them up!"

"Keep quiet," Darlan said, shoving past him. The smoke was stinging his eyes, choking his throat. He went on, found a fireman with his mask pushed up for a moment's adjustment. "How bad is it in there?"

The fireman shielded his eyes

against the smoke. "Funny thing. We can't find any fire. But this smoke is murder."

"Give me your mask."

"What? You get back behind the lines, buddy."

Darlan pushed on, without the mask, while the fireman yelled something behind him. Others had already shattered a window and broken open the front door, and a dozen hoses were playing upon the roof and windows and walls. He slipped by another fireman and plunged through the door, where the smoke was dense as a London fog. There was nothing to be seen, nothing but swirling blackness.

And a light. Moving.

A powerful fireman's torch, cutting through the smoke.

Darlan tied a handkerchief across his nose and mouth and made for the light. The blinding clouds dissolved for a moment and he was face to face with a masked fireman carrying a half-dozen framed pictures under one arm.

They stood frozen for an instant, only an instant, until Darlan could be sure. Broad shoulders, but not quite broad enough for a fireman. Gas mask, but a different type than the ones the others had. "You made a fast trip," he managed to gasp out. "I must have had you sweating that I wouldn't leave on time."

The fireman didn't speak, and he reached out to rip away the gas mask. Laura Fain dropped her burden of pictures and staggered back,

her face dissolving in the smoke. "They told me you'd just walk in and walk out with the paintings, but I didn't believe it."

"Damn you!" she shouted, and her free hand dropped to her pocket. "Damn you for a two-bit old man!"

"Give me that gun," he said, lunging forward, but the smoke and the thumping of his heart and the years had slowed him. She fired once, and he felt his stomach explode. . . .

Nellis was bending over him, trying to stop the blood that stained his fingers. "Don't try to move, boy," he was saying. "The ambulance is on the way."

The smoke had almost cleared, and Darlan could see other shapes standing near. But his vision blurred and he couldn't make them out. ". . . Fain?"

"We caught her outside. I tumbled to it when I saw you dash in there. Browse wouldn't just be using smoke bombs. He needed the pictures destroyed. It was a cover for somebody to steal them—Laura Fain, disguised as one of the firemen. Nobody'd even question her walking out with them under her arm. In fact, Browse himself was helping her when I made the arrest."

Darlan moved a weak hand toward his shattered stomach. The pain was coming over him in waves now, like an angry ocean tide.

"Cadan bullet . . .," he managed to gasp.

"We'll check, compare them. I'm sure they're from the same gun. Poor Sam Cadan died because the pictures *weren't* fakes. They were the real thing and he tried to confront her with the fact. He probably went to her store. She lured him back to this place and killed him, then probably went inside and planted the smoke bombs when the guards weren't looking. We should have known from the beginning that her story of the fake pictures couldn't be true. This place is only open to the public one day a week, but the rest of the time it's used by critics and scholars. If Laura Fain could spot a copy after a moment's

examination, they certainly would have discovered it long ago. No, her story was just a smoke screen to confuse you, throw you off the track."

". . . She did . . ."

"But we've got her. This time it's murder. This time she won't get out of it."

Darlan, his energy spent, rolled over on his side. "Two murders . . . maybe . . ."

"Hang on, boy," Nellis said, and his hand came away for an instant, covered with blood. "We're going to pull you through." Outside, the ambulance was arriving. "Hell, Darlan—we've *got* to pull you through. You're the only eye in town. . . ."



His wife had committed suicide. Tucker took it rather badly.

GUILT COMPLEX

BY CARROLL MAYERS

THE GUN was a cheap nickel-plated revolver; outside the bedroom window the rays of a street lamp glinted off the barrel, shafted across the thin planes of Howard Tucker's set features. The room was dark and Tucker had pulled a chair close to the window, where he could look down on the street while his lean hands cradled the gun, hefting it, palming the butt.

The reflected light showed little expression on Tucker's face; a mask-like rigidity etched mouth and chin, and his gaze was dull, almost vacuous.

Presently, the building superintendent appeared on the sidewalk. He was a pudgy little man in shirt sleeves and suspenders, and he nervously smoothed an incipient

bald spot as he darted quick glances up and down the street, then craned his neck to peer up at Tucker's apartment.

A woman tenant toting a bag of groceries started to go into the building and the super spoke to her, gesturing anxiously overhead. The woman's mouth gaped; she too looked up.

Then a siren keened a block away. The super and the woman faced toward the sound, tense with expectancy. A police radio car rounded the corner, braked before the apartment building with a short shriek of rubber. As two uniformed officers climbed from the car, the super confronted them, speaking rapidly, short arms gesticulating. Hanging back momentarily, the woman soon joined in.

Passers-by stopped. Neighborhood residents, other tenants appeared. A small crowd began to gather. Briefly, the two policemen continued to listen. Then they directed sharp upward glances of their own, moved into the building.

Howard Tucker slowly turned his head from the window as the officers disappeared from view, stared across the darkened bedroom to the closed door. He still fondled the revolver . . .

Kneeling beside the girl's body in the apartment's tiny bath, Sergeant Petry's ruddy face was grim, stolid. The girl was young, twenty-two or three, wore a simple print dress. She had soft yellow hair, piquant features, but those features were distorted, sickeningly mottled from a rope of nylon hose which circled her neck, digging deeply into the soft flesh.

The free end of the rope was jagged, severed. Knotted about the overhead rail of the shower curtain was the cut, matching fragment.

"She's dead, ain't she?" The upper hallway had quickly filled; some of the more venturesome had sidled into the apartment in the officers' wake.

Petry nodded soberly, distaste flickering in his gaze at the crass morbidity. He motioned for his partner to clear the premises with the exception of the super, added, "Better call in right now. Tucker may give us trouble."

"Don't try anything physical till I get back?"

"All right."

As the second sergeant ushered the intruders outside, went down to the radio car, Petry turned to the superintendent. "Tucker took a gun?"

"That's what Mrs. Cavelli said."

The man's heavy jowls were shaking. "Like I told you, I didn't see him myself—"

"There's been no shot?"

"No. You think he might . . . kill himself?"

"A man in shock, with a gun . . ." Petry let the inference hang, crossed to the closed bedroom door, standing slightly to one side, out of a possible line of fire. He raised his voice. "Mr. Tucker."

"Go away. Leave me alone." The reply was flat, dead, stripped of emotion.

Petry tried the knob; the door was locked. "This is the police, Mr. Tucker. Come out of there."

"I said, leave me alone."

The sergeant frowned, studying the door, solidly set in its frame. "Your wife's asking for you," he said.

"My wife is dead. I knew that when I cut her down."

Petry's voice was still level, reasoning. "You're not solving anything this way. Unlock the door and come out."

When no prompt response came, a trace of firmness laced the policeman's tone. "Mr. Tucker—either

you unlock this door or we'll have to break it down."

The ultimatum brought an immediate rejoinder, sharp, pregnant with purpose. "I've got a gun. I'll shoot the first man who breaks in here!"

The sergeant hesitated, swung back to the super. "Mrs. Cavelli's outside?"

"I think so."

Petry opened the hall door. "Mrs. Cavelli?"

A slight, gray haired woman with snapping black eyes pushed forward. Petry motioned for her to step into the apartment.

"You saw Mr. Tucker when he first returned, ma'am?"

"Yes." The woman's lips quirked nervously. "My apartment's right next door; I was coming back from the hall incinerator."

"Did he appear agitated? Had he been drinking?"

Mrs. Cavelli nodded. "He could have been drinking; he sort of stumbled a little. But he certainly was still upset, I could see that."

"Still, ma'am?"

"Yes. They'd had another argument, yelling at each other, and he'd slammed out. Next door, I can't help overhear—" She broke off apologetically, gaze shifting to the super.

The man cleared his throat. "They hadn't been getting along, officer; the whole building knew about it. Damned shame."

Petry looked at the woman

shrewdly. "What you heard, Mrs. Cavelli; could you be more explicit?"

Spots of color tinged her olive cheeks. "What I couldn't *help* hearing," she corrected. "It was the same thing they'd been fighting about for weeks. His not loving her enough and someone who did be-
ing interested in her."

"Did she ever mention who that someone might be?"

"Not that I ever heard," Mrs. Cavelli said. "I think she kept it that way deliberately. She just claimed there was somebody, talked about him all the time."

The superintendent's balding head bobbed. "Mrs. Tucker was a highly emotional girl, officer. She had a nervous breakdown three months ago, right after they moved here. Tucker had to get psychiatric help for her then."

The sergeant had his notebook out, made several squibs. "Now—about tonight, ma'am. You followed Tucker in here?"

She signified assent. "I wasn't sure what to do," she said slowly. "They'd had that quarrel and when he returned, stumbled going in, not bothering to close the door—and still appeared so upset—I just looked in after him—"

Mrs. Cavelli broke off, shuddering. "It was . . . horrible. He went into the bathroom and he found Mrs. Tucker . . . hanging there. There was a piece of paper—a note, I guess—pinned to her dress and he

read it, his face twitching and jumping. Then he stuffed the note into his pocket and cut Mrs. Tucker down."

The woman tongued her lips. "I know he saw me. But he just didn't seem to care. He came out of the bathroom and got a revolver out of that desk." She pointed. "His eyes had a terrible expression. Then he went into the bedroom and I heard the lock click." She faced the super. "That was when I called you . . ."

Petry made additions to his notes. As he wrote, his partner returned. "They're sending a detail." He shot a tight look at the bedroom door. "What's with Tucker?"

Petry snapped shut his book. "I don't know," he said somberly. He crossed the living room again. "Tucker."

"I told you. *Leave me alone!*"

"What are you going to do with the gun, Tucker?"

"What I do with it is my business. I have nothing to live for."

"Killing yourself won't bring back your wife."

Again there was no immediate answer. Petry glanced at Mrs. Cavelli and the super. "Would either of you know his clergyman?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't think he attended any church regularly. His wife, either."

Petry made a gesture of frustration. "There must be someone—" He stopped, snapped his fingers. "That psychiatrist. The one who

treated his wife. Would you know who he'd be?"

The query brought a spate of relief to the super's harried expression. "Sure. Dr. Wharton. In the professional building, on the corner. Maybe he could talk him out of it!"

Petry addressed his fellow officer. "I don't know what the chief will say, but Tucker knows that doctor, might listen to him. See if you can get him here. I'll try to keep Tucker talking." He moved back to the locked door. "Tucker . . ."

In the darkened bedroom, Howard Tucker got out of his chair as the new voice sounded from the room beyond. "Mr. Tucker—this is Dr. Wharton . . ."

Tucker's reply was curt. "Don't trouble yourself, doctor. I know what I'm doing."

"I don't believe you do. You mustn't allow your wife's unfortunate step to claim your own life."

"I don't need a speech, doctor."

"I'm not making one. I'm not even pleading with you. I'm only saying you're not thinking clearly. As an emotionally mature man you owe your wife the dignity of a rational grief."

Tucker stepped to the door. "What does that mean?"

"I hardly can explain fully with this barrier between us."

Tucker drew a deep breath. Abruptly, he unlocked, pulled open

the door in one motion, stood spread-legged on the threshold, gun hand limp at his side, eyes blinking at the light.

"You can save the explanation, doctor," Tucker said. "I would have come out whatever you'd said. I only wanted to hear what hypocritical pap you'd preach."

The doctor's sandy brows arced above boyish, clean-cut features. "Eh?"

"My wife," Tucker said. "You killed her, Wharton. You and your lies and your fake charm. Just as if you'd knotted those stockings around her neck."

"This is ridiculous!"

"Just as surely." Tucker's voice dropped. "She put it all in the note after you phoned, called off your tryst for tonight, told her you were through. She named you, how you'd tired of your little conquest. She was . . . ashamed. And she cracked again."

"You *are* insane!"

Tucker shook his head slowly. "I was counting on them bringing you here," he whispered. "Good-bye—murderer."

Then, an awesome light suddenly blazing in his eyes, Howard Tucker snapped up the revolver before either policeman could move, shot Wharton through the head.

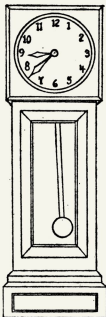


TWO SECONDS LATE

THE Chief paced the floor like a man with three aching teeth, but paused when Officer Doolittle at the switchboard removed his earphones and swung around.

Doolittle held up one finger. "Another one," he said. "That makes it seventeen."

Chief Swanson dropped himself into a chair breathing heavily. He loosened his tie, and Doolittle, looking alarmed, brought him a paper cup of water from the cooler. The Chief took the water in one gulp and tossed the cup



in the wastebasket.

"Seventeen traffic accidents, all the way from fender benders to critical hospital cases, all in less than half an hour on a normally quiet street. Does that make sense?" he demanded fiercely of Doolittle. The Chief answered his own question. "No," he said. "There's something very, very screwy going on."

The Chief glanced up as a uniformed officer passed the open door. "Damn," he said. "I told Eggleston to send every available traffic man down to Butternut.

BY
HAROLD
ROLSETH

Seventeen traffic accidents on Butternut Street in a half hour! There was indeed something very screwy going on.

What's Kearney loafing around here for?"

"He came back after more accident report forms," said Doolittle hurriedly. "He's on his way back now."

The Chief looked up at the wall clock. "What in blazes is keeping Harland? Should have been here ten minutes ago."

"Ought to be here any second, Chief," said Doolittle placatingly. Then as footsteps sounded in the hall, he added, "Bet that's him now."

A tall, rangy young man entered the room. He wore an aggrieved air as though a grave injustice had been done him, and his clothing gave the impression that he had dressed in one minute flat, although actually he had dressed in two.

"Harland," said the Chief. "You didn't break any speed law getting here." Then as Harland was about to speak, he went on hurriedly, "All right, all right. Don't look as though I had murdered your last grandmother. So it is your day off. Something big has come off, and I need you."

"Yeah," said Harland, his injured look vanishing. "I heard some of it on the way over. What's gone wrong on Butternut Street?"

"That's your assignment, Harland," said the Chief, stabbing the air with his finger. "Find out why seventeen accidents occur in a few minutes on a street where we don't have one in weeks on end. Here's

the dope I've got so far. Butternut is a nice, quiet residential street. Good citizens there, never in trouble. All the Butternut victims are high class factory workers, technicians and so on, heading for plants on the west end of town. They all smashed in to southbound office workers and early shoppers crossing Butternut for the downtown area. All but one, that is; the first one rams into a northbound train crossing Butternut at Central."

"Who was he?" asked Harland.

The Chief rummaged through some notes on his desk. "A Henry Martin," he said. "He's a production engineer at the Hinckley-Benson plant. He does time study work there . . . figures out ways for doing each job faster. The plant manager says he's tops, that time study is a religion with him."

"What did he mean by that?" asked Harland.

The Chief shrugged. "Search me," he said. "Now get over to Butternut and find out what it's all about. Half the traffic department is over there, and they ought to have a lot of dope. Check with the victims. Most of them were just shaken up so you ought to be able to get to them. Martin you won't be able to see, at least for a few days. He's on critical although the hospital says he'll pull through."

As Harland left the room the Chief called after him, "Use all the men you need, Harland. And report directly to me as soon as you

can. I'm damn curious about this thing."

The chief spent most of the day pacing the floor while making frequent unreasonable comments dealing largely with Harland's leisurely methods of investigation.

"Probably sitting in some tavern right now," he muttered after glancing at the clock and finding it was close to five-thirty.

"Naw, Chief," Doolittle protested. "Not Harland. That boy's on his toes every minute. He'll have something for you when he comes in. You'll see."

"I guess you're right, Doolittle," the Chief said, "but this waiting sure gets me down."

The door opened and Harland came in looking tired but still eager and alert.

"You got it, boy?" the Chief asked eagerly, pushing a chair to the side of his desk for Harland.

"Some of it," said Harland, sinking into the chair and pulling out a cigarette. He shook his head in disbelief. "Craziest thing I ever heard of."

"Well, let's have it, man," the Chief yelled. "What caused that screwy mess?"

"Henry Martin," said Harland, drawing deeply on his cigarette.

"The guy that hit the train? Why he was the first one to smash up. How could he be responsible for the rest of them?"

"Here it is, Chief," said Harland leaning forward. "Now sit real

tight. This Henry Martin is the original oddball. I know now what that plant manager meant when he said that time study was a religion with him. I checked on Henry with a few of his neighbors."

"Didn't you see his wife?" asked the Chief sharply.

"No," said Harland, "but I'll explain that later." He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. The neighbors all claim that Henry has every second of the twenty-four hours all plotted out."

"What do you mean, plotted out?" the Chief demanded.

"Like this," said Harland. "The neighbors swear that Henry allows so many seconds or minutes for every single thing he does during the day. Twenty-eight seconds, I think it was, to put on his shoes. Three minutes and four seconds to shave. Twenty-six seconds to tie his necktie. That's Henry all day long. Everything, big or small, on a split second timetable."

"Now wait a minute," Doolittle put in. "What if he breaks a shoestring or something like that. Is his day shot, or won't he wear shoes, or what?"

"In a case like that he double times it on something else. Like gulping his coffee or swallowing his toast whole. Anything to get back on schedule. But in most cases, the neighbors say, he's prepared for common emergencies, and he doesn't get caught with bum shoelaces and stuff like that."

"And does his wife go along with all this?" the Chief asked incredulously.

"The neighbors say she fought it at first, but gradually Henry broke her down. Now he runs her on a schedule too. The most terrible thing to Mrs. Sandstrom, their next door neighbor, was the fact that Henry allowed Mrs. Martin only forty-nine seconds to put on lipstick. Mrs. Sandstrom says it can't be done decently in anything less than . . ."

"All right, all right," the Chief interrupted. "So the guy is cracked on this time schedule business. What's it got to do with all those accidents?"

"Here is how," said Harland. "Every morning Henry backs out of his drive at 7:23 on the button. And right next door Mrs. Sandstrom stands at the window and calls to her husband, 'There goes Henry.' Then Mr. Sandstrom grabs his coat and backs out of his drive. And that's how it is for about three blocks."

Harland eyed the Chief speculatively. "The last guy using Henry for a starter is a man named Ackerman, and, believe it or not, his name is Henry too. And the men beyond use him to go by, because he's a stickler for time too, although, of course, not so bad as Henry Martin. And then beyond him is . . ."

The Chief rolled his eyes and moaned. "I get it. Another guy named Henry."

"No," said Harland, "George . . . George Corcoran."

"Aw, shucks," said Doolittle. "That sort of spoils it."

"Now this morning," Harland went on, "Henry Martin is about five minutes late. So everybody who uses him for a timepiece is late too. They are all used to a clear thoroughfare at their usual time with practically no cross traffic. Then, too, the traffic lights on Butternut Street don't switch on until 7:30. So all these drivers who are used to a clear open street find themselves in the middle of heavy cross traffic and stop lights. They can't figure it out, and before they know what it's all about they've rammed into someone."

"But cripes," objected Doolittle, "don't they have clocks in that end of town?"

"Sure," said Harland, "but for fifteen years Henry has been right on the dot. They can't imagine him being late. Whereas with clocks . . . power failures, forgetting to wind, anything can throw clocks off."

The Chief drew a deep sigh and dropped his hands to the desk. "Well, I guess you've wrapped it up, Harland. But it sure is one for the books. Write up the report in the morning." The Chief rose and turned to the coatrack.

"Hold it, Chief," said Harland. "We've still got a few answers to dig up."

The Chief sat down again, his

mind probing Harland's statement.

"Hm," he said stroking his jaw. "Yeah, he was leading the parade, wasn't he? He couldn't have made the same blunder the rest did."

He gave his jaw another reflective massage. "But his clock could have been off. He had to use some source of time to start out on."

Harland looked a trifle sheepish. "I kind of hate to mention this, Chief," he said, "but I sneaked a peak in the Martin house when I was checking on the neighbors. I thought Mrs. Martin would be home, but when I rang the doorbell and no one answered, I tried the door and found it open and stepped in.

"Well?" said the Chief.

"I found only one thing unusual. Every clock in the place was exactly four minutes and fifty-seven seconds behind time . . . two electric clocks, a coo-coo that wound by pulling a chain, and a fancy chronometer like they have in science laboratories."

"Well, I'll be damned," the Chief said softly.

"So," Harland went on, "Henry didn't know he was late. He thought he was on his regular schedule, and that's why he crashed into that train."

"That Mrs. Martin," breathed the Chief. "What a sweet job she almost pulled."

"What kind of rap can you hang on her for a stunt like this, Chief?" asked Harland.

"We've got to pick her up first," the Chief said. "I wonder if she knows her husband didn't get what she planned for him."

"Hard to say," Harland said. "The boys ought to be in with her any minute now."

The Chief looked up quickly. "Come on, let's have it."

"I didn't get around to telling you this, Chief, but Mrs. Martin has been spending her day shopping . . . for a black dress, black hat, black gloves, black purse. She hadn't found any black shoes yet when I checked with the boys, but she ought to have them by now. We would have picked her up any time, but I thought it better to let her finish her shopping first."

The Chief nodded. "Good thinking. That just about ties it up. But I just can't decide on what charge to book her."

"Chief," said Doolittle seriously, "I'd say it was justifiable attempted homicide. Cripes, eating your breakfast without chewing if you break a shoestring."

For the first time that day the Chief grinned.

Then footsteps sounded in the hall and Doolittle opened the door to admit a plainsclothesman and a tall poised woman dressed completely in black. She was approaching middle age, but her walk and movements indicated a youthful vigor. Her dark clothing gave a marble whiteness to her skin. This in turn made her lips stand out

vividly and gave a brightness to her blue eyes that made her strikingly handsome.

"Please sit down, Mrs. Martin," the Chief said and proceeded to make the introductions.

"Mrs. Martin," the Chief began, "there are some questions we would like to ask regarding your husband's accident. It will be several days before he is able to talk . . ."

A startled look came over Mrs. Martin's face. "You mean he isn't . . . he wasn't . . ." She caught herself quickly and her white teeth bit hard into her lower lip.

"No, Mrs. Martin," Harland said leaning toward her. "Henry isn't dead. He'll be up and around in about three or four months. Now we know his crashing into the side of that train was no . . ."

"Henry crashed into the train?" said Mrs. Martin shrilly, "Why that's ridiculous. He couldn't possibly have."

"But he did," corrected Harland.

"We estimate his speed at about thirty miles per hour. The train was doing about fifty."

"Yes, yes, I know that," said Mrs. Martin. "But I don't see how . . ."

"Henry hit the third car behind the locomotive. Two seconds earlier and he would have been right square on the railroad track and the locomotive would have hit him full on."

"Two seconds earlier," murmured Mrs. Martin. She closed her eyes and her lips moved in response to some rapid mental calculations. Then her eyes opened wide and her features contorted in bitter exasperation as she hurled her new black purse to the floor.

"Oh, damn," she wailed. "Now I know where I went wrong."

"Where did you go wrong, Mrs. Martin," inquired Harland gently.

Mrs. Martin wept hopelessly. "I forgot," she said, "I forgot those two seconds Henry loses when he blows his nose at Mason Street and Butternut."



TED LAZRON's right hand flipped the ignition key, while his left punched the hard rubber knob covering the starter button. Behind him the big outboard coughed twice, then caught with a deep roar. A grin spread across Ted's face as he eased back the throttle and slipped the gear shift into reverse. The motor throbbed with

live oaks, remained dark. Ted inched the boat forward, feeling his way through the familiar channel.

The water was calm; no breeze stirred its placid surface. Only the faint wake trailing behind the boat sent a slight ripple over the dark waters. This, however, was enough to disturb an early-rising snowy egret. Flapping itself into flight,

Ted and Jack Lazron looked alike. But there the resemblance ended. Ted had nothing, Jack had everything . . . including Ted's girl.

fratricide

BY JOHN HANFORD

quiet power; the propellor dug into the placid waters of the inlet, pulling the boat backwards out toward the channel. After the short dock had been cleared, Ted deftly spun the wheel and shoved the shift lever into forward; the boat edged slowly out into the stream.

Off to the east the first rays of the sun probed over a dark mass of clouds on the horizon, giving the sky a grayish hue. But the stream, hemmed in by a tangled mass of cypress, palmetto and moss-hung

the large, white bird rose from the swamp, glided gracefully across the stream and disappeared into the darkness beyond. Only man and boat remained to disturb the serenity of the early morning.

At first the unexpected flutter of the egret's wings startled Ted and for the first time he nearly gave way to a momentary panic. He soon regained some of his composure, but the incident made him realize just how jumpy he was and that thought seemed to unnerve

him even more. He could feel rather than see the tremble in his hands as they gripped the cold metal handles of the wheel. The firmness of this grip helped steady him, but now he knew this business was going to be rougher than he had once thought.

Ahead the channel widened and Ted could make out two or three white cottages lining the bank. He cursed himself for not having worked faster. This would be his first big test and with his present nervousness he now wished he had met it earlier, that he had passed the cottages in the dull grayness just after dawn. Full daylight was rapidly approaching; the next part of the trip promised to be tricky.

Ted's whole scheme depended upon the superficial resemblance between him and his older brother, Jack; on convincing anyone who might happen to see him that it was Jack, not Ted, taking the boat out. Both Lazron brothers were of medium height with heavy muscular builds. Years of living under the hot Florida sun had given each a deep, semipermanent tan. With his brother's white yachting cap covering his short, black hair and wearing Jack's bright pink sport shirt and white slacks, Ted had counted on deceiving a stranger or a chance acquaintance—at least from a distance.

None of the cottages' regular occupants—mainly elderly, retired couples—knew the Lazrons very

well; Ted had been confident that he could fool them. He expected their testimony to bolster his deception; to give it the final convincing touch. Now, after the scheme had moved from plan to reality, now, as the moment of trial neared, doubts arose in his mind; he yearned for the cold anonymity of dawn.

As the cottages approached, Ted cut the throttle until the boat was hardly moving and the motor softened to a bare whisper. His hand clutched the throttle tightly; beads of perspiration broke out on his fist and trickled down over his knuckles and between his fingers. Inside him tension grew, again threatening to become panic; a battering insistence rose up, demanding that he jam the throttle forward, that he force the powerful outboard into a full-throated roar, that he command its surging power to propel him beyond the reach of the cottagers' curious, prying eyes.

Ted fought the impulse, fought it with the fury of desperation, knowing that to race the motor, to speed past the cottages, would only attract attention. Jack would never highball the boat through there, particularly when he was only going out for a little early morning fishing. Ted could do nothing—must do nothing—to break the pattern.

But the impulse remained, subdued, but alive. In Ted's imagina-

tion it seemed that his disguise would cover nothing; that any spectator could penetrate the yachting cap, could see that Jack's blond, wavy hair had been replaced by a dark crewcut. Fearing recognition, he instinctively pulled the visored cap down tighter over his forehead, realizing as he did so that it was a futile gesture.

As he began passing the cottages, Ted cautiously scanned them looking for any sign of life. None appeared; everything ashore remained silent with the peculiar stillness of households which had not yet awakened, whose members still slumbered in the deep last hour of sleep. This surprised Ted. He had expected the oldsters to be up and around, puttering in their gardens, perhaps fishing from the docks. One by one the dozing cottages glided by, their occupants apparently ignorant of his presence. His confidence mounted.

He had nearly reached the end—ahead he could clearly see the point; once he rounded that a protective screen of tangled forest would again hide him—when he noticed a flicker of movement off to the side. Slowly turning his head, he saw one of the cottagers waving to him. The elderly man was standing beside his house, having an after-breakfast smoke and inspecting his flower beds. Absorbed in this thoughts, Ted had temporarily relaxed his vigilance; he had almost missed the greeting.

Momentarily he was startled. A few minutes earlier the incident would have terrified him, but his newly acquired confidence—although somewhat shaken now—did not desert him. It bolstered Ted long enough for him to calmly, deliberately, raise his arm in an answering gesture. His salute returned, the oldster, puffing contentedly on his pipe, returned to the thoughtful contemplation of his plants; he had noticed nothing wrong.

Standing stiffly at the wheel—he did not dare betray his relief—Ted considered the incident. Now that the danger was passed, his confidence rose to new heights; he survived a crucial test. Smiling inwardly, he even rationalized that his failure to recognize the old man at first might benefit his scheme. If the oldster testified that Jack was absorbed in some secret thoughts of his own, the "accident" would appear far more believable.

This reassuring thought occupied him until the last cottage had been passed and the boat entered the quiet, empty channel beyond the sheltering point. Here he could visibly relax, could exhale his tightly held breath in an audible sigh. He longed for a cigarette, but had none with him—Jack smoked only cigars. Reluctantly he reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigar and thrust it into his mouth. It would have to do. A flick of the thumb sparked his brother's lighter into

flame and, grimacing, he puffed on the strong smoke.

For the first time he looked down at the huddled mass barely visible through the cabin door. Before, his eyes had carefully avoided it; now he savored the sight of a single, white yachting shoe and part of a bronzed ankle protruding from the blanket. Detachedly, he reflected that he had been a bit careless there. But even this thought could not dispel his triumphant mood. There was little room in the boat and it had been pitch dark when he loaded the body aboard. And if anyone got close enough to see Jack's foot, the game would be over. The thick blanket did little to conceal the giveaway outlines of a corpse.

Yes, Jack was dead, a still, cold form made anonymous by a heavy, gray blanket. And Ted had killed him, deliberately, cold-bloodedly and—he could admit it now—skillfully. Ted—clumsy, fumbling Ted, always overshadowed by his brilliant brother—had now committed a perfect murder. The thought overwhelmed him: not many people commit perfect murders, my dear brother, but I have and I'll get away with it. At last I've beaten you. Contemptuously, he kicked the lifeless foot below him.

Memories surged through his brain; old, chilling memories that now seemed strangely pleasant: memories of a solemn day, two

years before when the Lazron brothers stood rigidly by a double grave watching their parents' coffins being lowered; the scene in the lawyer's office afterwards; the dry legal terms giving Jack the bulk of the estate, leaving Ted only a small settlement and such amounts as Jack, "in his discretion," might feel Ted could handle; the unfair wills climaxing two lifetimes of parental preference for one son as against the other; that preference carefully nurtured by Jack to his brother's detriment.

Other memories flooded back, more immediate memories: the wild fling in New York that quickly dissipated Ted's cash legacy—a time of grayness, of smoke-filled nightclubs and dingy Village coffee houses, of haunting dreams and throbbing hangovers, of Worcester-shire-filled tomato juice and foul-tasting coffee; the whole pell mell plunge to poverty; and then the climax, his return to Florida, his discovery of just how Jack intended to use his "discretion". Ted's frantic plea for help had been answered by a one-way ticket south; a scathing lecture from Jack; a stuffy room over the garage; a year's labor in the broiling sun as yardman, house-boy and general do-it-all around his brother's house; cigarette money for pay. A lifetime of degradation had been wrapped up in a year of slavery. But it was all over now.

Despite all of the hatred piled up over the years, despite the last year

of humiliation, Ted could never have been driven to murder if it hadn't been for Laurie. Laurie with her bright, copper-colored hair and lilting laugh represented the most crushing of Jack's triumphs over him, represented Ted's bitterest defeat. For nearly a year, while he wandered in his self-created alcoholic hell, Ted had blamed Laurie for this defeat. With a malignant hatred, mixed with massive self-pity, he had cursed her as a deceitful, money-hungry witch, no better than a prostitute. A few days after the reading of the will—so soon that he had immediately, unthinkingly, rejected coincidence—Laurie had broken their engagement; six months later she had married Jack. Only after his return to Florida did Ted learn the true facts; only then did his bitterness toward Jack reach its zenith.

Ted thought back to that first night after his arrival when she had come to his darkened room over the garage. Amid his angry abusive torrent of words, she had somehow managed to tell the whole sordid story: Jack's visit to her a day or two after the funeral; his lies about Ted and other women, particularly a poor pregnant girl in town that Ted would have to marry; Laurie's shame and humiliation; and then her marriage to Jack, a marriage of brutality and sadism that ended in fact when Jack drunkenly boasted to her of

how he had tricked her and defeated his brother. She had come to Ted many times after that night, slipping across the dark lawn through the hovering shadows of the Australian pines to the garage, and there, in his hot stuffy room with the moonlight slanting through the only window, they had plotted Jack's death.

Rounding the last, reed-covered point, Ted swung the boat out into the Intracoastal Waterway, gradually increasing speed until the craft was planing smoothly over the low swells of the channel. The sun had cleared the heavy cloud bank to the east and was now bathing the water in a radiant brilliance. On mud flats lining the right bank a group of wild pigs plodded along rooting for their breakfast; ahead two porpoises played, their knifelike fins arching above the water's surface. It was a beautifully serene morning. No other boats were in sight.

Ted donned his brother's heavy, curved sunglasses, completing his disguise. Before, while the sun was still obscured, the glasses would have appeared ludicrous—an odd fact to be noted, to be remembered later, to arouse suspicion—now they seemed completely logical, a sheltering accessory providing the anonymity of a mask. Ted grinned confidently.

He and Laurie had planned well, had taken months going over

every detail, preparing for every contingency, waiting for the proper moment. It had paid off; so far their scheme had gone perfectly. Step by step, Ted's thoughts traced back over the events of the long night, glorying in them, blotting out the memory of the tense fear—the near terror—which had dogged his every move.

The murder itself had been easy; the preliminaries somewhat more difficult, although Jack had helped with these by getting drunk before dinner. Across the table Ted and Laurie had exchanged glances and without speaking had decided this would be the night. Afterwards in the living room, Ted had mixed drinks adding some of his brother's sleeping pills to Jack's highball. Within a few minutes the mixture of alcohol and barbiturates took effect; Jack fell into a deep sleep, completely helpless, incapable of resistance. Ted then carried him into the bedroom, undressed his brother and put Jack into bed as he had many times before. They had planned for everything: a bed that had obviously been slept in; a pair of rumpled pajamas; yesterday's used clothing; an empty glass still containing a few drops of water and a spilled vial of sleeping pills.

At one time they had considered a death from an overdose of sleeping pills for Jack, but later discarded this idea because it would bring the investigation too close to home. Instead they planned a boat-

ing accident made possible by the fuzziness of a drug and alcohol hangover. Boating accidents were quite common—they might get by with only a cursory investigation; perhaps there wouldn't even be an autopsy.

After Jack had been put to bed, the most difficult part began: the waiting, the interminable waiting. At first Ted and Laurie had sat silently alone in the living room, their unspoken thoughts crossing, uniting with each other, while they waited for the last fatal step. They didn't dare strike too soon; there was going to be a dangerously long gap between the actual time of death and the scheduled time for the accident as it was. If there was enough left of the body for an autopsy, if the police were sufficiently suspicious to order an autopsy, they could be in trouble. Ted would have to take care of that.

Finally Laurie had gone into her bedroom; it was important for her bed to appear slept in also. Ted, living above the garage, could claim that he had made his when he first got up—if anybody went that far—and since the Lazron's maid didn't bother with Ted's room, this would appear logical. Turning out the lights—there were no nearby houses, but why take chances?—Ted settled down in the darkness for the long wait.

As dawn approached he got up and went into Jack's room. His brother still snored, encased in his

drunken slumber. Slowly, cautiously—he was uncertain just how deep that slumber was—Ted pulled back the covers and helped Jack into a sitting position. His brother made no protest as Ted stripped off the pajamas and carried his limp body into the bathroom, where a previously filled tub waited. Draping Jack over the tub's side, Ted pushed the naked shoulders firmly and rapidly, but gently, to the bottom. The first inrush of water aroused a latent, animal desire for survival; it was a frantic, futile effort which merely increased the water intake, which merely hastened matters.

Dragging Jack's dead body from the tub, Ted had glanced up and saw Laurrie standing in the doorway. Silently she handed him a towel and he began carefully drying the corpse. This completed, he laboriously put clean underwear on the body and laced up the neat yachting shoes. After donning his brother's outer clothing, Ted lifted the body over his shoulders. Laurrie was left behind to clean up the bathroom and take care of any remaining details, while Ted started on his boat trip.

A feeling of satisfaction drifted over him as he reflected on the skillful way the whole thing had been handled. Ted was so occupied by this thought that he became only half aware of another boat approaching on the opposite side of

the channel. At first, when the newcomer's approach forced itself fully into his consciousness, he welcomed it; another witness could testify to Jack's early morning cruise. Then an icy finger of fear probed its way along his spine; panic, stronger, more irresistible than before, gripped him, as large, black numbers painted on the other craft's bow became visible.

Coast Guard!

Were they looking for him? Had the old man at the cottages reported him? Had someone seen the murder? In a matter of seconds, he dismissed these fears; the cottager had no reason to suspect him—not yet anyway—and there were no witnesses to the murder, except Laurrie, and Laurrie was on his side; he was her lover—and she was his accomplice.

But these first, vague, irrational fears were replaced immediately by a new, more terrifying thought—more terrifying because of its logic. The Coast Guardsmen were on a normal, routine patrol—a duty that would cause them to board him, inspect his boat, count life preservers and check his fire extinguisher.

And also discover Jack's body!

Instinctively he eased back the throttle, his body reacting normally, while his mind flung itself off on this terror-stricken tangent. As the boat lost momentum, its stern settling lower in the water, Ted's thoughts became a maelstrom. Despite the oncoming presence of the

Coast Guardsmen, a panic-ridden impulse to drag Jack's body from the cabin and fling it over the side became almost overwhelming. In the end it was only defeated by an equally irrational desire to dive over the side himself. The two insane ideas struggled with each other, nullified each other, bound him with the chains of indecision.

Ted stood immobile, his hands frozen to the wheel, as the cutter drew steadily nearer. He could see the helmsman now; he thought he could see the helmsman's piercing eyes penetrating the cabin's interior, examining its grisly cargo. In his terror Ted endowed the sailor with all-seeing omnipotence. Then, suddenly, unbelievably, the Coast Guardsman raised his hand in a friendly gesture and slowly turned the wheel. The cutter passed, clearing Ted by at least fifty feet. The crisis was over.

Numb from relief and the exhaustion of fear, Ted nearly collapsed. His legs weakened as if the bones had been removed leaving only flacid, quivering muscles to support him. Only his grip on the wheel kept him on his feet as a cold chill ran over him and a throbbing pain pounded through his head. Then slowly the numbness passed, leaving Ted with a resurging confidence, a confidence that approached exultation.

Distracted by this feeling, Ted nearly missed the mouth of the creek. One of his brother's favorite

fishing spots, it was an ideal site for the accident, remote and isolated. Thick forests lined both banks and patches of reeds obscured the entrance. Few fishermen knew of its existence—Jack had discovered it by accident—fewer still would risk their boats in its shallow, tortuous channel.

A backward glance revealed that the Coast Guard boat was already out of sight and Ted swung slowly into the channel carefully picking his way through the reeds. Once his propellor hit a small sandbar, throwing the big motor forward in a violent tilt and bringing it back against the stern with a jarring crash. Ted cursed, then let out a sigh of relief as it bit into clear water once more. No damage, but he would have to be more careful.

Beyond the reeds he swerved into the dimly lit cavern formed by the long limbs of live oak trees meeting in an arch over the stream. Wispy fingers of Spanish moss brushed his face as the boat crawled slowly forward. Finally he reached an open lagoon, hidden in every direction by dense foliage.

Cutting the motor, he pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves and threw the anchor over the side. His brother's fishing rod, all rigged and ready to go, protruded over the stern. Before leaving the house, Ted had taken care of all these details, even to neatly twining a dead shrimp on the hook and pressing his dead brother's fingerprints on

every part of the gear—he wasn't sure how much of the equipment would survive or what police technicians could do with the debris, but it was better to take no chances. Expertly he cast out the line, dropping the bait into a likely hole and returned the rod to its resting place.

Now came the difficult part. Pulling Jack's body out of the cabin, he dropped it carelessly on the deck where he would have more room to work. He was glad that he had already put the underwear and shoes on the corpse; it would save time now. Ted rapidly stripped the gaudy shirt and white slacks from himself, leaving on only a pair of bathing trunks. Pulling the pants on over Jack's shoes gave him some trouble—the shirt went on fairly easy—but the entire job was soon finished and the body was dressed much as it would have been in life.

Ted lifted his lifeless brother erect and draped him over the wheel, while he pressed the dead fingers carefully over all of the controls. Then he again flopped the body on the deck. He didn't worry about his own fingerprints being found on the boat—that would be only natural since he often used it—but he didn't want his prints over Jack's on any of the vital parts.

Unscrewing the top of the fuel tank—now half empty—he tilted the nozzled, spare gasoline can into the opening, sloshing some of the gas into the well. Reflecting for

a moment, he decided to spill even more gas around. In moving his brother's body, Ted had noticed the start of rigor mortis; he would have to depend on the explosion, fire and a thorough soaking in the water to leave little more than a skeleton for the coroner. Too much gasoline might arouse suspicion, but he would have to take that chance.

It would probably have been better, safer, to have taken the boat straight out to sea and arranged the "accident" there, but that would have ruined any opportunity for an alibi. And insurance companies were reluctant to pay off without a body; wives couldn't remarry until it was certain that they were widows.

Widows! That brought his thoughts back to Laurie, but he didn't waste time on sentiment. Now that he had reached this stage of the game, he was acting—and thinking—with cool, deadly precision. Laurie was now a rich widow and she belonged to him, but of more immediate importance was her use as an alibi, a vital part of the scheme's last stages.

Ted had carefully scouted the area around the creek and had discovered an empty cabin about a quarter of a mile away through the brush. An old logging road connected the cabin with the main highway about five miles south of the Lazron house. Laurie was to

have left the house some time before and should already be waiting for him at the cabin. After he had completed his job and joined Laurie there, Ted would clean up, bury his bathing suit and other incriminating evidence, and put on clean, dry clothes she would bring. Then they would drive to town in the station wagon; their announced purpose would be to buy shrubbery for the yard, something they had done several times before.

Although not so airtight as to arouse suspicion, it would be a good, plausible alibi. By driving rapidly from the cabin to town and stopping there for coffee at a small restaurant where they were known, they could create an impression that they had left the house while Jack was still cruising down the Intracoastal Waterway and had passed the place where the logging road entered the highway shortly before the "accident". It was too loose to appear contrived, yet tight enough to make any connection between them and Jack's death seem very unlikely. There was only one danger: that someone might have seen Laurie driving alone before she reached the cabin. But at this hour of the morning there was little chance of this. By using caution, they could enter and leave the logging road unseen.

After propping the reserve gas can in position, Ted dragged his brother's body to the stern and

flopped it over the fuel compartment and motor, carefully placing one of Jack's hands on the can's handle. Moving forward, well beyond the acrid gasoline fumes, Ted lit one of his brother's cigars and puffed on it rapidly until it was half smoked. Then he slowly slid over the bow into waist deep water and sloshed around to the side still clenching the cigar in his teeth.

Ted puffed until the cigar's end became a bright, glowing ember and, gripping the side of the boat, he flipped the butt. The cigar descended in a perfect arc—Ted had spent hours secretly practicing this technique to eliminate the need for telltale fuzes or homemade bombs. Still alight, the butt dropped into the gasoline filled stern well. He didn't wait to see it land, but moved backward into a position where the boat cabin provided a protective shield between him and the expected explosion.

For a fraction of a second he was terrified: suppose he had missed or the cigar had gone out or the gasoline fumes had evaporated too rapidly. A jarring explosion almost threw him face downward into the water. He had barely recovered his balance when a second blast ripped the air and showered the stream with charred bits of wood and slivers of gasoline can metal. Ted slid under the sheltering bows in case there was a third explosion—even one burn on him now would be impossible to explain.

After several seconds he decided that it was safe, it would have to be safe; bright flames and billowing smoke, now rising from the stern, would be certain to attract attention and bring help. He would have to get out. Moving as rapidly as he could through the bottom mud, Ted splashed through the reed filled swamp. Although it was tough going, Ted didn't dare leave the water so close to the accident—there must be no giveaway tracks so near.

Before moving out of sight, Ted turned for a last look at the boat. Flames engulfed the stern, completely obscuring his brother's body. Again Ted had been lucky: the open well had carried the whole force of the blast upward, directly into Jack's face, instead of blowing out the bottom or stern. Most of the boat's after portion—including the corpse—would be consumed before the craft sank.

Onshore, some distance from the boat, Ted donned a pair of coveralls he had concealed the day before. These would protect him during his short run through the brush—too many scratches and cuts might be as hard to explain as burns. Like the bathing trunks, the coveralls would soon be buried under a pile of trash.

Exultantly, Ted started through

the woods, pushing aside palm fronds and small bushes. His ordeal was over. He looked forward with anticipation to Laurrie waiting for him at the cabin, to the new life of freedom and wealth that lay ahead for both of them.

In the spacious living room of the Lazron house, Laurrie sat on a sofa gingerly rubbing an ugly bruise on her cheek. Her nightgown was torn and her hair hung down over her face in straggling wisps. Two vivid, red rope burns encircled her wrists and a butcher knife lay at her feet beside several lengths of recently severed cord. She managed a knowing smile as she watched the tall, thin young man speaking into the telephone.

"That's right, officer. He must be insane. Drowned his brother in the bathtub and took off in the boat with the body. . . . Yes, he raved something about blowing it up or burning it. . . . I don't know; out on the Inland Waterway, I guess. . . . That's right. . . . I'm a neighbor; just happened over this way. . . . He left Mrs. Lazron tied up here—beat her brutally, first. . . . He's a savage. . . . I just found her. Probably he plans to come back and kill her. . . . For God's sake, man. Quit talking and do something. He's dangerous.





OMERTA!

A Novelette

BY DON LOWRY

BENNY JACK deemed himself a "new-style killer", a perfectionist. He was sophisticated, suave and handsome in a cold, brute sort of way. And he was deadly. Stark fear of him throughout the underworld testified to his efficiency. Among Mafia Dons, he was deemed a professional among professional killers.

Just a few years ago he had been a juvenile mugger, a product of city streets in a city from which he fled—at the age of 16—to avoid prosecution for murder.

"I'll make your hit for you," he told Anthony Strell in a lounge of a plush Washington, D.C. hotel—"in my way, at my price and at my time. And there'll be no corny stage-setting with a body left to be found in a car trunk, trussed up with wire and worked-over to say 'it can happen to you' for the foolish but ambitious. I've word from the Dons to cut out these Chicago vaudeville acts and the Murder Incorporated days are out. Word is out that the opposition can disappear. That's all. They're not going

to be found murdered. And whether they wind up in the Hackensack River or six feet under a flower bed on the city hall lawn is nobody's business but the hit man's. You finger the boy for the white roses and he gets hit. You lay your cash on the line and you get satisfaction. But you don't write the script, Tony. Get my message?"

"Anything the bosses say is alright with me. Here's your two grand, Benny. Just get that welching squealer out of circulation—permanently. Maybe the obvious fact that he isn't around any more will teach a few other smart guys as much a lesson if we do the routine—like letting him be found dead, after a strong-arm job."

Anthony Strell looked up from his drink at the antiqued paneled walls.

"I'd sort of like to get a piece of a place like this, Benny. It's class. Why'd you bring me all the way down here to talk business?"

"When you fix a basketball game do you make your payoff on the center court. Tony? You import me

for a hit. Why? So the hit won't be tied to you in New York through your own boys. I'm from the Midwest. You're from Manhattan. Think anyone in this Pennsylvania Avenue hotel will make us? I've never been seen with you. I've never telephoned you. So everybody in the West Forties knows you want Mike Wexer taken care of. When he disappears they can't come up with ideas—or answers. And if Wexer sees me coming he isn't wise. Even the boss in Syracuse who set up this meet hasn't any guilty knowledge. It's cool—all the way."

Anthony Strell inconspicuously handed Benny Jack two thousand in hundreds under the lounge table and smiled, "I'll be looking for results, Benny."

He left the lounge and, as he crossed the hotel lobby Strell looked as respectable as a resident senator in the Washington hotel—quiet-mannered, soft-spoken and well-dressed. Benny Jack remained, toying nonchalantly with one drink and ordering another. Even the discerning waiter could be forgiven for perceiving him as a "bright young man" of the government rather than a cool young believer in the *omerta*.

When an Upstate brewer received a telephoned message three days previously, "Call Strell in New York and tell him to be in the Sherman lounge at two in the afternoon of the fifth," he knew only one thing. It was an order to be

obeyed. Someone—Benny Jack didn't know. Tony Strell didn't know.—had decided Mike Wexer was in the way. As an obstacle, to that "someone" as well as to Anthony Strell, Wexer could and would be removed, efficiently and permanently. Neither Strell nor Jack knew exactly where or when the decision had been made. They were brought together as cogs in a wheel and were matched to make the machine, of which the wheel was just another part, operate smoothly.

Benny Jack looked at his watch and ordered another drink. He had time to spare before leaving for the airport and the Sherman lounge was a safer and less conspicuous place to wait than the airport. He gave only a passing thought to the technical aspects of the hit. He knew Wexer's address in the Queens and that of his favorite West Forty-eight Street bistro. It would be a routine hit. A day, maybe two, setting it up. A brief second in carrying it out.

He thought back to earlier days and recalled his early apprenticeship that had prepared him for his hit man role.

"Look at the paper, Jackie," another sixteen-year-old West Detroit delinquent quipped. "The law says kids kill for kicks. You kill for kicks, Jackie? You kill?"

"Keep yapping, punk, and I'll kill you. That's a promise. Gimme that paper."

He read with casual amusement

a vitriolic editorial attacking teenage, callous criminals who had swept the city with crimes of violence, including murders of taxi drivers for a few dollars, an elderly female landlord for her modest rent collections, a motel desk clerk for his night's receipts and a candy store proprietor for the contents of his cash register—twelve dollars. He threw the paper in a trash can and turned to his fellow teenage, junior league thug.

"Ever been to Chicago?"

"No."

"Want to?"

"Why not?"

"Find a heap and wire it up. We're getting out."

"It was," Benny Jack recalled, "that simple. You blow your home town and graduate from the role of a teenage mugger to that of a career muscle and gun."

In the stolen car, Benny Jack and his fellow delinquent drove to Chicago, leaving home, jumping a probation term and moving from neighborhood crime—the only ones for which he had been caught—to the more jungle-like crimes at the outskirts of organized crime in a city where it was practiced as a profession rather than as simply antisocial behavior.

Abandoning the hot car in South Chicago, Benny Jack and his "partner" swaggered from delinquent muggings to out-and-out adult crime in 24 hours. After a tour of the Loop, they drifted, like water

seeking its own level, to an area south of Harrison. A tour of bawdy peep shows, cheap bars and side street haunts of pimps and pushers left the pair broke at midnight. Three mugged and rolled drunks later, they told a cruising cab driver, "Rush Street," knowing only that it was a club and bistro center with bright lights away from the scene of their three crimes and bodies left lying in men's rooms and alleys of the South Side. They counted their loot in the cab—one hundred and ten dollars from the three victims. Neither stopped to wonder if the three were dead or alive. They left the cab in front of the *Singapore* on Rush Street and glanced only briefly up at the blaze of neon.

One hour later after three stops on Chicago's nightclub row and a sampling of jazz bands and whiskey, they compared notes. They were broke.

"What now?"

"How'd we get here?" youthful Benny Jack posed a question in reply to his partner's query.

"Cab."

"We leave that way."

"But . . ."

"Shut up and come on."

They woke up the following morning and walked from the cheap North Clark Street hotel to a corner restaurant. Benny Jack picked up a paper on his way into the restaurant and scanned the headline, "CABBIE KILLED". He

didn't open the paper again until he and his fellow Detroiters had returned to their hotel room.

"We killed him."

"So?"

"I'm getting out."

"Why?" Benny Jack asked with an academic rather than a personal interest. "Who made us? That cabbie can't talk. Why you want out?"

"We don't know what happened to those three drunks on the South Side. Maybe they're dead too, Jackie?"

"So?"

"So," his partner repeated, "I'm getting out. I'm going back to Detroit."

"Goodbye," Benny Jack said dispassionately. "Just remember one thing. Keep your gawdamn mouth shut. Or you'll talk your way into an electric chair. This isn't Michigan. They fry you here. Hit it."

Benny Jack, sixteen years of age, away from home, in a dingy hotel room, alone now, neither cried nor laughed. He counted his money—seventy dollars. He read the paper, seeking some clue that might tie him in to the cabbie's slaying. He found none and left the hotel and sought a haberdashery where he could buy clothes to replace those he had worn the night before, "just in case," he thought, "someone recalled two youths wearing sport shirts and slacks who had left Glitter Gulch in the slain taxidriver's cab." In his mid-teens he learned the tricks of his "trade."

The Sherman lounge waiter interrupted Benny Jack's reminiscing by replacing a littered ashtray with a clean one but his solicitation brought only a polite request for the check. As Benny Jack sauntered from the lounge, the veteran Washington waiter observed to his captain,

"Something about those young State Department fellows—you can always spot them. It's not an attache case or their dress. I guess it's just the way they carry themselves. Every time I see one of them I get a feeling that our country's in good hands. Their deportment instills confidence."

Slim, neat in his Ivy League suit, Benny Jack moved through the Washington hotel lobby as if he actually were a bright young man of the government. But his attache case contained tools of death rather than papers of state.

Unknown to Benny Jack and the lounge waiter, another bright young man, who actually was a government employe, casually left his table in the lounge and made his way through the lobby, passing Benny Jack as if he had no concern with him. The "really bright young man" was Bert Dort, an agent of the Justice Department's organized-crime section. He resembled just an ordinary, inconspicuous hotel guest rather than a stereotyped, "stand-out" brilliant young govern-

ment career man. Dort had followed Anthony Strell from his suburban motel in Maryland to the Sherman, after a New York agent of the OCS tipped off his Washington office of Strell's movement. The organized-crime section had long been interested in Strell's activities and had literally "put him to bed and got him up" since the Apalachin "convention". His meeting with Benny Jack was observed by Bert Dort and another agent. When Strell left the Sherman, he was followed by the second OCS agent. Dort remained with Benny Jack and tailed him to the Washington National airport. Word of his New York flight, his description and meet with Strell in the Washington hotel was teletyped to the Manhattan OCS office.

On the New York-bound plane, Benny Jack resumed his reminiscing of earlier days when he had learned the art of the hit-man and of survival in a jungle of crime, violence and death.

He changed clothes in a fitting room of a Loop men's wear store; walked to the nearest trash can where he dumped his former clothing; and idled on a State Street corner, fingering the eight dollars left in his pocket. He solved his financial problem by snatching a purse from a bank-bound office girl. By noon he had moved to the South Wells neighborhood, rented another hotel room, and purchased new clothing once more to thwart iden-

tification by the bank messenger who had glimpsed him momentarily as he grabbed her purse and knocked her to the sidewalk. The bank deposit in the girl's purse totalled \$844, the largest haul the "little league thug" had made in his juvenile larceny career.

Hustled by a B-girl at an under-the-El bar that afternoon, Benny Jack brushed her off with language she understood and to which the bartender—who was interested in his sale of whisky-looking tea to the hustler—violently objected. Benny took the softball bat away from the bartender and was moving behind the bar to take the would-be bouncer-bartender—and the till—when he was stopped short by the voice of another customer.

"Drop the bat, kid, or get dropped."

A momentary glance told Benny Jack the automatic held by the speaker spoke with authority. He tossed the bat towards the far end of the bar and turned to his challenger.

"No point in arguing with that piece, Mister. Whaddaya want with me. You run this joint?"

Returning the automatic to its shoulder holster, Frank Cast laughed as he answered both questions. "You interest me, kid. And if I did own this spot, I'd let you work the bartender over just to wise him up."

He turned to the embarrassed bartender. "Set us up a couple, Bill

—on the house. You owe this kid a drink for letting him pull that bat from your hands.”

B girls moved to the far end of the bar soliciting customers who had entered after the fracas. Frank Cast rated either respect or fear from the bartender and B girls and the drinks, from a different bottle on the shelf, were set up.

“No hard feelings, kid,” the bartender said with a sickly smile. “Guess I’m getting a little slow, Mister Cast.”

An hour and three bars later, Benny Jack was working for Frank Cast. He had become another of the “young bloods” working for a Chicago crime syndicate. His “job” was, in the words of his tutor, “doing what he was told to do when he was told.” It could be slapping around a stripper who got ideas of her own in the bump and grind racket in any of the night spots huddled under the elevated; tossing a bomb into a cigar store or restaurant whose owners carelessly forgot the need of adhering to a 50-50 split with the syndicate in return for permission to make book on the premises; or beating sense into heads of numbers racket operators who dreamed of operating outside the syndicate.

A year passed before Benny Jack knew who his real bosses were. He soon learned Frank Cast was no more than a lieutenant in lower echelon ranks of the syndicate hierarchy. It had been a busy year, dur-

ing which time Benny Jack had learned not to ask questions; not to operate outside syndicate ranks; and, to carry out orders to the letter of violence, time and place. A pistol whipping taught him not to “break the law” other than while carrying out syndicate orders. He spotted a flush drunk with a roll and mugged him in one of the syndicate’s bars. The drunk later returned with two detectives who, failing to realize Benny Jack was “one of the boys,” took him to the precinct station. The syndicate attorneys sprung him on a writ in a matter of hours and the visiting fireman was assured it was a case of mistaken identity. Benny kicked back the victim’s roll to the two detectives who, paradoxically, apologized. But Frank Cast met Benny as he walked from the station and hustled him into a car. During his two-week stay in the hospital he realized the error of his ways.

Benny Jack was moved around, under the syndicate policy that, “regular faces in the same spots bring heat” and “worked” from the Loop to the Calumet Strip, wherever the syndicate’s business-like operations found a need for his services. By the time he was 18, Benny Jack had worked up to the role of a contract gunman. When the combined heat of federal and state probes temporarily forced his bosses to vacation at southern watering spots and U.S. Penitentiaries, Benny took his first vacation.

"There's going to be a rainstorm of subpoenas, Benny," one of the syndicate co-leaders explained. "Here's a bonus. Get out of town for a while. You're one boy we want to be far away when the feds start asking questions. We're not worried about you singing. But we want to have you on tap when the heat dies down. Keep in touch. Take your girl and lay low in Florida or any other spot out-of-state. And Benny—don't stall—get out tonight. I wouldn't want to ship you out."

Benny Jack heeded the advice. A current "contract" with the syndicate had resulted in a local union leader ending his career in the trunk of his own car—violently. When his body was discovered, it was deemed too frightful for a page one spread in the Chicago dailies. The exodus from the Windy City included the big and near-big of its crime syndicate. Benny was among them—with Florette, a syndicate spot dancer who had agreed to perform exclusively for Benny Jack. He was still far from the top bosses, but he was sufficiently close to merit removing Florette from the Blue Moon floor show to his own private life, which Florette agreed to share when she was told by another syndicate show girl, "you damn well better shack up with him—*that's* Benny Jack."

For two years, since the morning on North Clark Street when his Detroit co-murderer had chick-

ened-out, Benny Jack had worried intermittently about the one witness that could testify against him in a capital case if he decided to sing. He reasoned, if his former delinquent partner was sufficiently gutless to run out, the Detroit youth would also be sufficiently weak enough to have a conscience. He concluded that he would have to do something about his former teenage partner.

In the suburban Detroit motel he explained to Florette, "I may be away on business for a day or two. Have fun but stay here 'til I get back." He located his former partner-in-juvenile-murder and tailed him back and forth from his home to a factory—just long enough to find a way to pick him up away from the neighborhood in which a chance recognition might place him there. On the second day, he picked up the factory worker as he waited for a River Rouge bus.

"Want a lift?"

Failing to recognize Benny Jack, the doomed former partner stepped into the convertible and drove to his death in a swamp near Rockwood where the Detroit River flows into the lake. Only when Benny pulled on to the freeway, did the victim question the non-speaking Jack.

"Hey, mac, I don't go this way."

"I think you do, buddy," Benny Jack snarled as he removed his sun glasses, "all the way."

"Whaddaya want with me, Ben-

ny? You and I were done two years ago. I'm going straight now. I'm married. I'm working. Pull off at the next exit and let me out of this heap."

"Shut up and sit still," Benny Jack shot back at his victim as he speeded up to prevent him from jumping. "All I want is to have a talk yith you. Quiet and confidential."

The "talk" was confidential and quiet. "Confidential" because no one noticed the convertible pull down to the river's edge and "quiet" because Benny Jack used a silencer. Benny pulled the body to the opening of a sewer and dropped it into the shallow water. His sole thought as he drove away was that no one could now point to him as a murderer—for any murder. He drove to the motel and joined Florette at the poolside.

"Get your business finished, honey?"

"Uh huh. We'll pull out as soon as I have a swim, baby. Fun, frolic and Florida now."

When his plane landed at Idlewilde, Benny Jack moved with other disembarking passengers through the crowded terminal to the cab stand. Only foresight of federal agents succeeded in putting a tail on him. They were watching all exits and all departure points, including the stand from which Benny Jack left.

"Uptown Manhattan," he directed the driver.

But he made three stops and changed cabs three times before he reached his destination—a small hotel in Jamaica to which he doubled back in the third cab. Agents of the Organized Crime Section successfully tailed him from stop to stop and from cab to cab. For the first time in his young career, Benny Jack's evasion tactics failed. While he slept, federal agents checked into rooms on each side of him in the Jamaica hotel while the New York and Washington offices of the agency teletyped back and forth in efforts to identify him. The preliminary conclusion was expressed from Washington where the chief flatly stated, "The fact that he made a meet here with Anthony Strell has some significance. Stay with him until we can pin him down."

Chapter 3

Benny Jack tossed and turned until he gave up efforts to sleep. He lit a cigarette and thought of Florette and Florida. His month "lay-off" and vacation on Southern sands led to a change in his *modus operandi*. He wasn't the only fugitive from grand juries on the Beach and the winter resort grapevine promptly reported his presence. He met elder statesmen of the loosely-knit mobster empire who had knowledge of his skill and ability to carry out orders secretly and efficiently. Benny had never been cas-

ual in his methods and, rather than miss, had been trained by Chicago's Frank Cast to stalk a victim for weeks if necessary before the hit. Benny's reputation of never having left a clue in his gruesome trade welcomed him among some winter resort guests who, from time to time, had need of an expert hit man.

His hotel bill was never presented to him. Benny and Florette were wined and dined at parties and yachting trips by the elder Dons who played the role of salesmen entertaining a future buyer. On one cruise off Miami Beach, at a safe distance from electronic listening microphones Benny listened to words of wisdom from his host.

"Things are changing, Benny. If you want to last, you'd better change with the times. The rackets are big business today—and so is Uncle Whiskers' anti-rackets effort. Only a couple years ago, it was just a matter of being up against maybe one agency alone, the FBI, Secret Service, Internal Revenue, Bureau of Narcotics or maybe the Customs. We could fix local boys but we couldn't get near the feds. But the different agencies were all stars in their own pictures. Today, they're working on a team—a bunch of punk mouthpieces in Washington, in some unit called the Organized Crime Section of the Justice Department. It gets co-operation from all the fed agencies and if we get mixed up with any

one, they're all on our backs through this new unit. So what do we do now? We get so damned legitimate they can't touch us. I turn my take from the rackets into laundries, restaurants and wholesale outfits. If they make money, fine. If they don't, I can still account for my income. What I'm getting at is I can account for my take.

"I'm respectable. I stay away from my other operations like they were smallpox. I get trouble, I call on a specialist like you—indirectly. I don't even go near you. I send someone like Frankie Cast. Somebody gets out of line? They got to go. That goes for me too. If I get out of line, if I go back to the old days of wide open operation, somebody's going to send me some white roses. We just can't afford anyone operating that will bring heat on us. Too many of the boys failed to learn these lessons. Look what happened to guys like Frankie Carbo, Mike Coppola, Vince Mauro, Al Agueci and Jack Battaglia. And look what we have to do with wise guys like Chuck Cavalaro and Tony Strollo. Sometimes we have to step in and remove these boys who won't learn. If they get too big or too careless or too bold, they got to go. If they don't, we all fall with them. That can't happen any more, Benny."

Benny Jack listened carefully and respectfully, watching tropical waters swish by from the flying bridge of the cruiser.

"And there's a lesson in this picture for you, Benny," the elder Mafia Don continued. "Get a cover. Get respectable. Get a business of some kind to which you can point for any grand jury or Senate committee when they ask how come you drive a six grand car and spend a grand a week."

"Don't you think I'm a little small to be noticed by Uncle Whiskers?" Benny Jack asked. "As you say, I'm a specialist. I keep out of sight. I don't step on any toes. I stick to my specialty. I don't try to muscle in on any of the rackets. I move in and out fast. And I don't leave any clues. And I don't operate in my own neighborhood. I move into, say, St. Louis or L.A., make my hit and get out. Nobody there knows me. I've never been there before and I don't hang around. I'm not the sort that draws attention."

"Don't kid yourself, Benny. I'll lay you any odds you want that you've been pegged down here. You're seen with us. The feds will want to know who you are. These OCS boys spend all their time digging, probing, listening, directing and correlating. They're a bunch of educated punks with law degrees but they cause a helluva lot of trouble. They use the FBI, the IRS and all the other bureaus and agencies that have the least bit of information or can find answers for questions the OCS wants answered. The only way to get by

this new outfit is to assume it's on your back all the time. Try to out-guess it and you're done."

Benny Jack heeded the advice and, when he learned he was not among those sought by federal or state investigators in Chicago, he told Florette, "We're going to buy a place in the suburbs, baby, and make like we're respectable. We'll play it cool and quiet. I just bought a restaurant from Big Eddie and, for any nosy neighbors, your husband is a restaurant proprietor."

"You mean we're going to get married, Benny?"

"I'm being careful, baby—not crazy."

"Whatever you say, Benny."

"Anyway, baby, being married wouldn't add anything to what you have right now."

"All I want is you, Benny. A marriage certificate wouldn't make any difference."

In the Chicago suburb, Benny Jack and Florette had lived quietly and respectably—so much so that fellow service club members of Benny Jack and golf club friends of Florette described them as an "ideal couple". Benny's frequent trips out of town—on business—and his plush highway drive-in restaurant aroused neither suspicion nor curiosity among his suburban neighbors. His instructions to his drive-in manager were clear and explicit, "Keep it clean and respectable. Cultivate a family trade and let me know if any punks or hood-

lums try to move in or make it a hangout. That we won't have. When other restaurants were plagued with union troubles, Benny Jack's spot experienced no difficulty. When other highway spots were "urged" to instal slot machines and music boxes, Benny Jack's place went unsolicited. When numbers operators moved into other spots, not one attempted to canvas Benny Jack's restaurant. It was the only restaurant in the area at which not even the action of a dice girl was offered. Among patrons, word circulated, it's the most decent restaurant outside the city—and the food's good. Among another group, word went out, "Lay off. It belongs to Benny Jack." The people who utilized Benny's other professional services passed word down—lay off. And every operator laid off.

Benny Jack butted his cigarette and sighed as he pulled himself from the bed of his Jamaica, N.Y. hotel room. His rise had been fast, violent and cautious. "But," he thought, "I've still got to deliver." The strange pull of the hit had become an obsession with him.

His use of a credit card in renting a car led the federal agents to his identity. Checking the car rental agency's records and fingerprints in the room he had left, the agents acquired the following information from their Chicago office:

"Benjamin Jack, white, 22, 84848

Elm Grove Crescent, Wheaton, restaurant proprietor. Arrested as a juvenile at Detroit, Michigan, 1957, suspicion of assault with a deadly weapon—nol-pros; assault, 1958, probation; Chicago, Ill., 1958, larceny from a person—nol-pros. Associate of known underworld figures in Chicago area since June, 1958; suspected of being syndicate hit man."

His hotel room was clean when agents searched it and Benny Jack drove confidently towards Uptown Manhattan, followed by cars of federal agents now very much interested in his New York City trip.

"Chicago hit men just don't lay up in borough side street hotels, alone, registered under assumed names, if they're in town for pleasure. This bird is here for business—his own dirty, homicidal business. Let the local people know he's in town," a special agent said in the bureau's New York office.

"Have him picked up?" another agent asked. "Sullivan Act violator?"

"Not yet," the senior agent concluded. "Let's find out for whom he's looking—or gunning."

Chapter 4

In the theater crowds of the West Forties, Benny Jack momentarily lost his trackers—long enough to check his attache case at the check room of a club on West 48th Street. His trail was picked up an hour

later when an alert precinct detective spotted him leaving a sidewalk bar. He remained in the area, in which he had been told Mike Wexer frequented, seeking quietly for his victim. Federal agents kept Benny Jack under observation in an equally quiet manner.

From the bar at *Ciro's*, he spotted Wexer, talking to a captain of the waiters in the foyer. Benny smiled at his thought, "Funny thing about these characters—they might as well wear a uniform, the way they stand out." Mike Wexer was powerfully built, short, stout, dressed in a tailored Italian silk suit, with a white-on-white shirt as a background for a black silk tie. He stood with an expressionless look on his face as he listened to the club captain. He moved to the bar where the barman set up a drink without anything more than a nod from Wexer. Benny toyed with his drink, eying Wexer through bushy eyebrows and glancing his way inconspicuously. Mike Wexer ignored his drink and puffed on a cigar at intervals only sufficient to keep it lit.

But Benny Jack did look up with surprise when Tony Strell entered the bar and made his way to Wexer. They smiled and spoke quietly for a few minutes and left together for the club restaurant. Strell's appearance was not in the script and Benny Jack frowned at his drink. He knew something was radically wrong. For all Strell knew, Wexer

might be hit at any time and he was supposed to be far from wherever Mike Wexer might be—for as long as he lived in the immediate future—and where he would have an airtight alibi. With the patience of a jungle stalker, whose prey could be pounced on at any moment, Benny waited. At the end of an hour he watched, with continuing surprise, as Strell and Wexer left the club together and entered a Cadillac. Benny shrugged and walked up the street. He knew definitely that some change in someone's plans had been made. He picked up his rented car from the lot and drove back to his Jamaica hotel.

"That was an odd move," a federal agent commented to another as they observed Wexer and Strell leave *Ciro's*. "According to all reports, they've been feuding."

"Could be a truce. Or a meet to work out a peace?"

"Strell meets this Chicago hit man in Washington. Strell makes a meet with Wexer in New York and the hit man's on hand to see the meet. More than likely," the agent said, "Strell is putting the finger on Wexer."

"I don't think so. Strell would never take that chance if Wexer is the target."

"Well, right now our target is Benny Jack."

The two agents tailed Jack back to his Jamaica hotel and turned over their surveillance detail to the agents at the hotel. Benny paced

back and forth in his room, wondering what had made Strell show up. Strell had seen him at the club, that much Benny Jack was sure. If he had wanted the hit to go on, he would not have shown at all and he certainly would not have dined with Wexer and then left the club with the victim in his car.

The following afternoon, Benny returned to the West Forties and sauntered from one off-sidewalk bar to another, idling rather than drinking. He stopped to drop a ten dollar bill with the check room attendant, making sure his attache case was cared for and unopened. He knew, sooner or later, a courier would bring word from Strell. He was right. In the lounge of the President Hotel, he was approached by a tall blonde whose stole and trim suit negated any idea that she was a hustler on the make. She acted with assurance as if the meeting was a date.

"Mind if I join you, Mr. Jack?" she smiled.

The "Mister Jack" was sufficient and Benny rose as a waiter held her chair.

While the waiter left to fill Benny's order, she spoke quietly, with a smile to cover any hint of conspiracy, "Tony says for you to go back to Chicago. There's a tail on you."

That was the entire message and the extent of the blonde's conversation. She finished her cocktail and left with the same smile with which

she had greeted Benny Jack.

No one had to paint Benny Jack a picture and a word of warning was enough. He ignored the attache case across the street, preferring to have it picked up later rather than to run the risk of an arrest in New York State with its contents. He checked out of the Jamaica hotel, stopping at the airport only long enough to telephone the club from an airport telephone booth, leaving instructions for the case to be held until its receipt was received in the mail with instructions for its mailing. He slept all the way to Chicago, waking only to wonder about the reported tail and who it could be. He hadn't spotted it at any time. And he didn't spot the tail put on him when he landed at O'Hare field out in Chicago.

"Good trip, darling?" Florette asked when he returned to his suburban home.

"Quiet," was his only noncommittal reply.

"Anything going on here?"

"Just a 'phone call for you—this morning. Call Frankie Cast at this number."

Benny knew there was some connection between the request to contact Frank Cast and his surprise departure from New York. Cast had not known of his return flight and he had been told Benny would be away for another ten days. Cast had become Benny's connection between his contract

employers and was told only that Benny was leaving and when he would return on any occasion when Benny's *business* took him away from the city.

From a highway public telephone booth, Benny called Frank Cast.

"Want me, Frankie?"

"Who doesn't, Benny? I've had more calls for you in the last twelve hours than a call girl gets on the Strip in the middle of a convention. What the hell did you stir up in the East?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Some big people, Benny. You know that hunting lodge up North—where we went fishing last summer?"

"Yeah."

"Drive up there. The guy that owns it wants to see you. Fast."

Benny Jack realized something was very wrong. The hunting lodge was owned by the same elder statesman of the crime empire who had passed on the wise counsel to Benny during his Florida vacation. The invitation was a summons. As Benny drove north along Lake Michigan's shore, he wondered what had gone wrong. No one was summoned to the lodge without serious reason. He couldn't have committed a careless act. If he had, there would be no reason for the summons, Benny Jack thought. And few people were summoned to the hunting lodge, maintained solely for *business* pur-

poses in its isolated setting. No one could be followed there unobserved. Setting on an island whose shores were observed day and night, it was an ideal spot for private conferences—isolated and safe, yet not so far away from Chicago that an overnight drive or a few hours' plane trip allowed communication with the city. As Benny thought of reasons why he should be summoned, he drove north, followed by a pickup truck equipped with a supercharged motor, police radio and driven by a federal agent. When traffic on the northbound highway thinned out the cautious agent dropped back—after contacting police farther north to keep an eye on Benny Jack in his northward drive.

Benny waited at the water's edge for a boat from the island, knowing his arrival would have been spotted and that his trip from the highway, on a private road leading to the lake was observed. If he had been followed, no boat would put out from the island. State police, who received the federal agent's request, were aware of this practice.

"OK, then," the agent said. "Let him turn off the road and go to the island. We do not want him wised up to our observations."

Benny watched as the speed boat dropped from its plane and pulled into the lakeside dock. Without speaking, its operator helped him into the boat and gunned the en-

gine as the speed boat headed for the island. Neither spoke.

Chapter 5

Seen through lenses of powerful binoculars from the distant lake-shore by a federal agent Edward "Big Eddie" Terene casually walked from the rustic hunting and fishing lodge towards the dock. He greeted Benny Jack quietly and friendly and the young and old—the big and little of the crime syndicate—men walked up to the rambling, varnished log building. Terene had his arm on Benny Jack's shoulder as they entered the lodge.

Seated in leather chesterfield chairs around a large stone fireplace, were Rainoni, Tano and Maconi whom Benny Jack knew through newspaper columns with reports of Senate investigations and through rarely whispered comments in the continent's underworld. Dressed in conservative sports clothes, they appeared more like successful business-men on a fishing trip rather than like powerful Dons of the Mafia who met in council rarely and only when decisions of importance—or death—were to be reached.

Terene wasted little time with introductions or courteous formalities and was still pouring a drink for Benny Jack while he questioned him.

"Tell us what happened in

Washington and New York Benny—everything, step by step, and don't omit a move."

Without questioning how Terene possessed knowledge of his trip East, Benny Jack recalled meticulously every move he had made in the two cities and the conversations he had with Anthony Strell.

At different times he was interrupted by each of the four men with questions loaded with knowledge indicating they already knew of the proposed hit and Strell's commissioning Benny Jack.

"When you arrived in New York City, Benny, you brought more federal heat with you than Uptown Manhattan has had since the last visit of the President. Federal agents moved into the West Forties like old time prohibition agents moving in on a speak. Strell was tipped off by one of New York's finest who owed him a big favor. Otherwise neither he nor you would have known the feds were in the neighborhood. The only way he could prevent you from moving in on Wexer was for him to get next to Wexer and stay with him. We're not concerned with problems of getting Wexer out of the way. We are concerned with how Uncle Whiskers' agents suddenly became so interested in you. Rainoni here feels it has been a matter of association—with Strell."

"Certainly I do, Ed," the elderly Rainoni interrupted. "The feds have had him taped since that fias-

co at Apalachin and its following investigation. I said then, and I still say, Strell should get a single white rose—and a blanket of them for his coffin.”

“And I still say Strell is too powerful in the East to be hit. Keep one thing in mind, Rainoni, as long as federal heat is concentrated on the people who were at Apalachin in ’57, we have room to breathe. That stereotyped ‘summit conference’ has done more than anything since the St. Valentine’s Day massacre in ’29 to permit our behind-the-scene operations. And those little, ambitious people have been so shook about federal activity that they’ve been afraid to sit in at the same poker game. And keep this in mind—at no time has Strell defied the *omerta*.”

“I don’t recall anyone ever having suggested that Tony has violated the *omerta*,” Maconi put in. “But I agree with Rainoni he has become ambitious, in spite of his services as a red herring for us.”

“He’s too powerful for the white rose,” Terene repeated. “If he goes, every ambitious Cadillac Charlie in the East will attempt to grab new territory. There’ll be no order. It would have to be 1929 all over again. Want that?”

“I think you’re wrong, Ed,” Dominic Tano spoke up from the portable bar where he was mixing a drink. “And I think you’re outvoted here. I concur with Rainoni and Maconi. Strell goes. From

what this Mister Jack says and from what we’ve learned from the East, Tony Strell is too hot. And the heat on him spreads. What if the federal tail on this man,” he pointed to Benny Jack, “has followed him here. Then the feds have a tie-up all the way from New York to Chicago and, if they want to follow me back to L.A., all the way across the continent.”

“You flew in here in your own seaplane,” Big Ed Terene reminded the West Coast Mafia Don. “You fly out the same way. No one knows you’re here. If Benny Jack has been tailed here, which he has not, the only heat comes on me. That, I can handle.”

Terene was outvoted by his fellow elder statesmen of the syndicate. Once the four men ended their unemotional discussion of whether or not Anthony Strell lived to reign in Eastern crime circles or died, Terene dropped all efforts to pursue his argument. They reached a decision. When they did, all four threw their weight behind it.

The four man murder council agreed on the verdict for Strell from which there would be no reprieve. Its members set aside any further planning as Terene turned to Benny Jack.

“This time you’ll have help and you’ll have a double hit—without any last minute interference. Both Wexer and Strell. Tano’s plane is on the lake side of the island. His

pilot will fly you to Detroit and you can take a commercial plane from there. Get on a Newark flight—not Idlewilde or LaGuardia. You'll be picked up there and the people who pick you up will do exactly what you ask them to do. Wexer and Strell are going to disappear within the next 48 hours—quietly, without any dramatic gangland extermination tactics, Benny, but permanently. How you accomplish their disappearance is entirely up to you. I think you're sufficiently talented to see that the pair will not be around two days from now—and that they won't be found. Write your own ticket for the job, Benny—after it's done."

Terene spoke quietly over an intercom and a tall, youngish man came into the room through doors which were unlocked by Terene.

"Take him to the plane mooring, Angelo," Terene said dispassionately as if he were sending a servant out for cigars."

Angelo drove Benny Jack through the woods of the Lake Michigan island in a jeep to a red and white seaplane moored close to the shore. The pilot had apparently received his instructions. A little over an hour later he landed on Lake St. Clair at a private dock near Grosse Pointe. A car was waiting for Benney Jack.

"We have your seat on the Newark plane," the unidentified greeter told Benny as he told his driver to take them to Willow Run.

The same service was provided in Newark and before Benny Jack had moved towards the airport terminal exit, he was approached by a Sicilian who seemed to know exactly for whom he was looking.

"The man on the island told us to meet you, Mister Jack," were his only words of greeting or introduction.

"You one of Aguellitti's boys?" Benny asked.

"I'm his driver," the Sicilian replied.

"Let's go see him."

Antonio Aguellitti was a Newark restaurant and club owner and not among the less discriminating participants in the ill-fated 1957 Apalachin conference. Like Terene, Rainoni, Tano and Maconi, he was of the elder generation, possessed of rank and good judgment making unnecessary attendance at conferences scheduled for younger, more enterprising and ambitious members of the crime congress. Like members of the four-man Chicago conference, he had attained his status, rank and fortune. In a private dining room of a swank Newark club, Benny Jack was ushered across an ankle-deep carpet between rows of tables covered with sparkling white cloths and gleaming silver. In a corner of the room sat a white-haired, elderly man, dining alone and attended by a discrete waiter who immediately held out a chair for Benny at a nod from Antonio Aguellitti.

"Will you join me, Mister Jack? Some wine? Have you dined?" the solitary diner asked solicitously as if he were asking a guest to join him at dinner in a private social club.

Benny Jack respectfully accepted the invitation and listened attentively and quietly to the *saue* diner who discussed planned violent death with the same detached unconcern as he ordered dinner for Benny.

"We have a private entrance at the rear of this building, Mister Jack. I felt we could invite both Wexer and Strell to a private party late this evening. If they're shadowed by police when they arrive, their shadows will have difficulty keeping track of them once they enter here. No one crosses that street door without a reservation—or a warrant—at any time. We are discriminating in our clientele and we know our diners as well as our patrons in the game rooms upstairs. I'll know if there are any warrants. And I can assure you any law detailed to shadow either Wexer or Strell will have no reservations. While they're waiting on the street for our Manhattan friends to come out, you can escort them out the back. My boys will be on hand if you need any assistance. I understand from my friends in Chicago you seldom require any form of assistance. Is there some small favor I can do for you now. A room? Clothing?"

"I'd like an attache case I checked at *Ciro's* on West 48th Street picked up and brought here," Benny said as he handed the check to Aguellitti who, instead of accepting it, motioned to the waiter who remained the room's width away.

"See that this check gets to *Ciro's*. Have the attache case brought to this gentleman. He'll be in fourteen upstairs," Aguellitti murmured as if he were asking for another bottle of wine.

"I'd like to get a couple hours' sleep," Benny smiled.

"You'll find everything you need upstairs, Mister Jack," the elderly Don smiled. "Since you arrived unprepared for our setting, I'll see that dinner clothes are prepared and sent up for you. I hope you won't mind. You'd be rather conspicuous here this evening wearing anything other than a dinner jacket. I'll get a tailor up to you right away. Ask for anything you need. I'll call you at eleven. Strell and Wexer will be here at midnight.

"Any chance of their failing to show?" Benny asked.

"Don't be naive," Antonio Aguellitti smiled as he rose and escorted Benny to a panel in the private dining room wall which opened to reveal a passenger-operated elevator. "Just press it for four, Mister Jack. Until later."

Benny Jack looked around the private guest room which was furnished as elaborately as any Uptown Manhattan hotel room. An

attendant brought him ice and a bottle of Ballentine's at his request. After two drinks, a shower and a tailor's fitting of a semi-tailored dinner jacket, his attache case was brought to him by the same attendant whose manner and service exceeded that of a professional hotel worker. Benny examined the automatic, silencer and shoulder holster, wondering if the tailor would have the same foresight of his own Chicago tailor to allow for the non-sartorial bulge. He returned the tools of his trade to their case and slept. He was awakened at eleven by a voice on a bedside intercom which said, "eleven o'clock, Mister Jack." Benny flipped the switch and replied, "thank you" as if he were awakened at home in Wheaton for an early-morning round of golf with Florette.

Chapter 6

"He left for an island offshore," the federal agent from Chicago advised his office. "Local officials say the island is owned by Edward Terene. A plane took off from the lake side of the island an hour-and-a-half after Jack landed. He could have been in it. But his car was driven away from here an hour later by someone from the island. I'm going to ask the local police to stake out the island and let us have a report on any activity. I'm coming in. I think we've missed our bird."

The OCS office in Chicago

thanked the agent and asked him to file a report through his bureau. They were familiar with Big Ed Terene's operations, in spite of his and his attorneys' successful evasion of grand jury and Senate committee investigations.

A later report the same evening revealed the same seaplane returned to the island and took off again shortly after. Shortly after Benny Jack dressed and walked to the private elevator on the fourth floor of Antonio Aguellitti's Newark supper club, the four-man council from Chicago had broken up. Each member was on his way to socially acceptable surroundings where witnesses were present who could testify of their whereabouts if anything went wrong in Newark or New York.

The Sicilian who had met Benny when he landed at the Newark airport earlier, met him as the door opened from the elevator to the private dining room. Benny noticed a group of small tables had been removed to make way for a larger banquet-size table. The room was deserted but sounds of dinner music came from the adjoining dining room.

"Mister A asked me to show you around. Let's take a look at the back." At the exit of a tunnel, Benny looked out on a paved parking lot. "Those three sedans close to the building belong to the club. The drivers will do what you ask," the Sicilian explained. "Joe, Andy, Al,"

he said to the drivers. "This is Mister Jack—friend of the boss. If he needs a car, or cars, do like he says."

The drivers acknowledged the introduction and returned to their cars. Benny and the Sicilian walked back into the club and into a staff dining room off its kitchen.

"Coffee?" the Sicilian asked.

"Yes."

The two men sat at a corner table, drinking black coffee, their conversation remaining impersonal.

"Know the area?"

"No. Do your drivers?"

"Like their own faces."

"Far to the river?" Benny asked.

"Couple miles. Fast trip if necessary."

"Dock area?"

"Yeah. Deserted this time of the night. Anything you need?"

"Get me some scrap iron. Old motor. Anything. Heavy. More than fifty pounds. In a car trunk. And don't lock the trunk. Have that car ready for me. You drive. If you're Mister A's driver, I know you're alright. Your other boys may be good. I like the best. When I come out with Wexer and Strell, don't ask any questions. Just drive us to the most deserted dock area you know. I'll do the rest."

"Anything else?"

"Get me a seat on a Chicago plane. I think there's a flight west between now and morning."

"Mister A would like to see you in his office, sir," a waiter quietly told Benny Jack.

"See you later," Benny left the Sicilian with a smile.

"Ah," the white-haired Don greeted Benny, "you're a credit to my establishment. You look like one of my guests."

"You have a good tailor."

"Even on short notice," Aguellitti smiled. "Our friends are in the bar. I've planned a small private dinner. Do you have any *private* plans, Mister Jack?"

"Get Tony Strell in here now. I'll show you how we line things up the easy way in Chicago, Mister A."

"No rough stuff here in the club, Mister Jack."

"Have no fear."

Anthony Strell walked into the office, greeting Antonio Aguellitti like an old friend and turning with genuine surprise when he saw Benny Jack over the elderly man's shoulder.

"You turn up in strange places, Benny."

"Like a bad penny," Jack laughed. "I've a job I want to get out of the way—tonight, or," looking at the desk clock, Benny smiled, "this morning. You can help me, Tony."

"Wexer?"

"Right."

"How can I help."

"I'm taking him to the river. You join me. This, I want you to see."

"If I wanted to see a hit, Benny," Strell snarled, "I'd do it myself. When Wexer gets hit, I want to be in Antonio's upstairs rooms going

up against his tables with the local politicians and gambling fraternity. For this one I'll need an alibi. Who takes over Uptown if Wexer gets hit? I do. I'm not your boy, Benny. I don't go along for the ride. I hired you. Remember?"

"You're right, Tony," Benny said softly. "But little whispers tell us that friend Wexer won't move from here without you. Word has got to him that you might just like to see him in the river—or hell. We dine and we leave together—you, Wexer and me. He thinks he's on his way back to Manhattan—rather than on his way to hell. Mr. A here can assure you of an alibi. You'll be back in the club before Wexer is missed."

"So let it wait. Hit him another time when you can figure out a better plan—which excludes me."

"That's not the way the shot's called, Tony."

"Not called by whom?"

"By the same people who told you to contact me in Washington and look after Wexer. Still want to argue?"

"I'll go along for the ride," Strell replied with a suddenly subdued tone. His face had turned greyish.

At the dining table, Benny was seated next to the tall blonde who had delivered the message to him at the President. Instead of the chic suit and stole, she was wearing a revealing dress that explained her ability to wear mink stoles and play the role of a messenger girl for Tony Strell. Benny made a momen-

tary comparison with what Florette had to offer and realized New York *did* have enticing qualities that could compete with the Midwest.

"You get around, Mister Jack," she laughed.

"I do travel," he smiled. "It's broadening."

"Guest of Mr. A?" she asked.

"Just passing through. You with Tony?"

"Permanently," she quipped. "Private stock, Mister Jack."

Benny Jack toyed with the different courses and quipped back and forth with the blonde while keeping an eye on the three senior members of the party, two who were to be *guests* at a *party* he would stage later. Aguellitti, Strell and Wexer seemed to be engrossed in a private conversation of their own and other members of the party carried on their conversations in subdued tones as if in respect for the three men at the head of the table. Half joking and half serious, Benny Jack learned the blonde's name, Delores, and her Uptown Manhattan telephone number, "just in case," Benny laughed. Delores lightly stroking finger tips under the table told Benny Jack she thoroughly and delightedly understood "just in case".

Finger bowls were brought to each diner in delicately carved glass bowls. Floating in that of Mike Wexer was a single white rose, its opened white petals cradled on dark green leaves. Wexer paled as

he stared at the Mafia sign of death. Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead as he stared, as if hypnotized, at the floating flower. If other guests noticed, they refrained from comment. Aguellitti and Strell looked at Wexer, expressionless and unsmiling. Aguellitti ceremoniously removed cellophane from a cigar while Strell toyed with a wine glass.

"Last supper," Wexer observed, licking his suddenly dry lips.

"It would seem that way," Aguellitti quipped.

"You are my host, Antonio."

"I assure you, I am. And while you are my guest, no harm shall come from me or my people to you."

"This," Wexer pointed to the floating rose, "is from the council."

"It is your conjecture," Aguellitti replied.

"Or is it from you, my greedy friend," Wexer growled, turning to Tony Strell.

"I am not of the council, Mike," was Strell's only comment.

"Help me, Mike,—Antonio. We are old friends. We were children together in Sicily. You, Antonio, are my cousin. Help me."

Neither Aguellitti nor Strell spoke or changed expressions as they looked at Mike Wexer.

"Let's make a deal, Tony. You can take over Uptown. Antonio,—my fortune will be your own. Give me shelter. Get me out. Help me," Wexer repeated.

"It is not for Strell to say who will take over Uptown, Mike," Aguellitti quietly observed. Your fortune is not so large that it could enduce me to share your death. Shelter? There can be none. Not anywhere. Get you out? There is no out. Help you? There is no help."

"Come on," Tony Strell said. "I'll drive you back to Manhattan. At least, with me, in the same car you'll have safe passage to your home."

As the three men rose, others at the table left, as if on a pre-arranged signal.

"See you later, Delores," Benny smiled softly as he joined Strell and Wexer.

"You'd better see Tony first, Mister Jack. He might not approve."

"I'll ask him," Benny laughed.

"Who is this man?" Wexer asked as Benny Jack joined him and Strell. Antonio Aguellitti moved away to his own affairs in the club.

"He is my friend," Strell explained. "He will accompany us."

Under blue ceiling lights of the tunnel leading to the club's private parking lot at the rear of the building, Wexer looked pale. He walked with a stoop. His hands shook. The driver stood holding the rear door of the sedan open for the three men. As he sank into the leather cushioned seat of the limousine, Anthony Strell failed to notice the flower vase of the door post on his side contained a single white rose.

The driver eased the big car quietly from the parking lot, on a private road whose exit led into an alley a half-block away. Only when he reached the alley mouth did he turn on the car's headlights. He did not turn to look if he heard two muffled shots from the rear seat.

Mike Wexer slumped lower in the rear seat and the car's slight bumping movement as it moved from the alley to the street caused Mike Wexer's body to partially slip from the seat on to the floor. Benny Jack callously used his foot to help the body on its downward move. He half-turned in the seat, as if to return his weapon to its shoulder holster. Instead, he pressed it softly against Anthony Strell's side, almost non-violently as if to casually draw Strell's attention.

"Turn on the roof light, Tony."

"We need no light."

"Turn it on," Benny repeated, emphasizing his command with pressure from the weapon under Strell's ribs.

As Strell flipped the switch he saw the single white rose in the vase.

"Now turn it off, Tony."

Three muffled shots prevented Strell's clutching hand from turning off the dome light and Benny Jack reached across the sagging body of Anthony Strell to extinguish the light. He removed the rose from its vase and put it in his own pocket. As the Sicilian braked

for a corner, Strell's body joined that of Wexer on the floor. Benny Jack pulled a silk handkerchief from Strell's breast pocket and carefully wiped the automatic and silencer. Using the handkerchief to wrap both the weapon and its silencer, he put the bundle in Strell's coat pocket. He unsnapped his shoulder holster, pulled it from within his coat and tucked it in the coat pocket of Wexer's body. Benny Jack leaned back and lit a cigarette.

"How deep is that water?" Benny asked the Sicilian as he peered down at the darkened waters off the dock.

"Deep enough. Ocean freighters dock here."

"At ebb tide?"

"Still deep."

"Current?"

"Fast."

Benny Jack, with the Sicilian's help, used steel wire, attaching metal castings to each body, swiftly securing the two corpses to their anchors. On the darkened dockside, no one moved. The only sound was Benny's low voice and the Sicilian's reply. Benny Jack tossed the white rose on black waters as they lapped against dock piling.

"Let's go," he said, getting into the front seat. "You sure there are no bloodstains in that back seat?"

"Not any that I can see. I'll check it over when I get back to the club."

"Your clothes?"

"Clean."

The Sicilian switched on the car's headlights and drove slowly between box cars off the deserted dock.

Chapter 7

Benny Jack walked into the tunnel entrance toward the Newark Club, leaving the Sicilian to inspect the sedan. He tapped lightly on Aguellitti's office door and entered as it opened.

"Any trouble?" the white-haired Aguellitti asked, looking up from his desk.

"No trouble. I asked your driver about a plane to Chicago. Got it?"

"There," the elderly club proprietor pushed an airline envelope across the polished desk top with a carved paper knife. For six."

Benny picked up the envelope and put it in his pocket. "Strell's girl still in the club?"

"In the bar."

Benny winked at Aguellitti and turned to the office door.

"Make sure you're on that plane, Mister Jack," the Newark Don murmured.

"I've got three hours," Benny Jack smiled. "I intend to enjoy them—with Delores. I'll change and be right down. Nice meeting you, Mister Aguellitti. You're a good host. Night."

"Drink?" Benny asked the tall blonde as he sat down beside her in

the bar which was patronized only by two or three remaining guests.

"Where's Tony?" Delores asked.

"Don't you remember?" Benny asked. "You said for me to get his permission. I got it."

"You're kidding, Mister Jack."

"I never kid, honey. I'm deadly serious," he smiled as he asked the barman for champagne cocktails. "In my love and in my work."

The blonde moved closer to Benny Jack and once more lightly ran her finger tips up and down Benny's thigh in the darkened bar. "Where did Tony go?"

"He left with Wexer, honey."

"No message?"

"Not a word. Can I take you home?"

"If you're zany enough to, I'm crazy enough. Let's go."

"Back way," Benny said, taking Delores' arm after she returned with her half length mink. "We'll use one of Mr. A's cars."

"For just one of the boys, you carry a lot of weight around here, Mister Jack."

"The name's Benny."

"It's *Mister* when you throw your weight around here, darling, and command Antonio's private car to pick up Tony Strell's girl. But you're probably just the brute that can do it Benny."

"One question, Delores. Is that apartment on West Fifty-third also Tony Strell's address?"

"Only when I say so, Benny. Tonight I say no."

"But *yes* to me?"

"Your slightest wish is a command, Benny."

"What I wish, you'll like, honey,"

Benny Jack murmured to the murdered Strell's mistress as she cuddled low in his arms after the Aguellitti driver pulled out of the club's rear private parking lot.

"At five? What are you, darling? A night owl?" Delores asked when Benny explained he had to leave at the early pre-dawn hour.

"I'll be back, Delores. Got to make an out-of-town trip. If I'd been Strell, I'd never have used you as a courier. I'd never let you out of bed," Benny whispered into the blonde's ear as she lay on silk sheets of the over-sized bed.

"Come back soon, darling," she whispered, neglecting to notice that Benny Jack used the past tense when mentioning Strell. "Tony would be mad if he caught us."

"I'll be back—soon, honey. So soon that you'll forget all about Tony. What you have is for me—and for me alone."

"Work it out with Tony, Benny. Goodnight," she yawned, turning a bare back to Tony's murderer of only a few hours ago. "Call me."

Benny Jack slept all the way to Chicago, relaxed and drained by the dual emotion of murder and love. But a young man named Bert Dort did not sleep that night in Washington. He spent the night with a team of federal attorneys in an endeavor to organize reports

from New York, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, East St. Louis and Los Angeles.

"Something is moving and it's not clear. We lost that Chicago hit man. Tano flies to Terene's Lake Michigan island from Los Angeles. Rainoni shows up there the next day from Detroit. That night Maconi joins them from St. Louis. Benny Jack drives to the lakeshore; leaves his car; and goes to the island. His car is driven back to his Wheaton home by one of Terene's men. Tano's plane makes a fast trip away from the island—probably with Jack aboard. That same night the same four Mafia Dons leave the island. They turn up in their usual haunts of conservative respectability. Is Jack buried on the island? Was his body dumped in some distant lake? Or is he on his way right now to make a hit for that four-man council of the *omerta*?

"This teletype from New York says Strell was last seen last night entering a Newark Club. It's thought he left by another exit," one of the Organized Crime Section attorneys observed. "And Wexer accompanied him. That pair moving together makes no sense at all. They're fighting for control of the Manhattan numbers racket."

"It could, however, make for murder," another attorney said.

"Not at Antonio Aguellitti's club. The old man is an elder Don. He remains in the background, as

a sort of a counsel for the Mafia's young and eager."

"He still is only a functional part of the chain of command. He'll do what the council says—when it puts out a command."

"All we're doing is conjecturing," Bert Dort interrupted. "We thought we had something when we tied in Benny Jack with Strell and then back to the Chicago people. I'd like to have a tape recording of that island meeting."

"Who's conjecturing now?" one of the attorneys laughed as Bert Dort shrugged and began to return files to filing cabinets faced with security combination dials. "Any plan, Bert?"

"I'd like to get some sleep and fly out to Chicago. I'll see what the chief says this afternoon. Right now I'm for some sack-time."

While the OCS men were patiently but unsuccessfully endeavoring to patch together the widespread syndicate activities at different parts of the country, other men, who were the subject of the OCS activity, were sending and receiving telephone messages understandable only to themselves. Telephone lines were used that had no personal connection to the Dons.

"Your man works well. He's on his way back," was Antonio Aguellitti's brief message to Terene in Chicago.

"Work things out Uptown—so they'll stay quiet from now on," Edward Terene replied. "There

will be no more bickering and feuding over territory—no more, Antonio."

"You're wise, Ettore," Aguellitti replied reverting to his native tongue. "We'll settle this promptly and then, I think, I'll take vacation. I want to spend a few months down at Acapulco. There'll be some questions asked here when Strell and Wexer are missed. And that will be immediately. They've both been shadowed around the clock by Uncle Whiskers."

"I may be down to Acapulco soon myself," Terene said. "I'll look for you, Antonio."

Aguellitti's message was relayed to Rainoni, Tano and Maconi and an informal, indefinite agreement was made among the five Dons that each "might be" at the Mexican resort center in the near future.

Ed Terene made another telephone call, from a different public telephone booth, this time to a building contractor on the South Side.

"Draw five thousand in cash from the payroll account. Frankie Cast will pick it up at noon."

In his third call to Cast, Big Ed was similarly brief, "Pick up an envelope from the contractor. It holds five grand—for Benny. See that he gets it right away."

That morning Edward Terene had an appointment with a state committee working on day camps for underprivileged children. He attended the meeting and was pic-

tured in the evening papers as the committee's new chairman.

Chapter 8

"I missed you, Benny," Florette greeted her lover when he left the cab in his Wheaton driveway. "You look tired."

"I am, baby. What I need right now is a hot tub and a bed."

"And some love," Florette whispered as she clung to him.

"Just some sleep, baby. Too tired."

"You're getting old, Benny," Florette laughed. "This is the first time you came home from a trip that you don't want to get right in bed—with me. Something about your trips and making love always seem to go together."

Benny Jack was too physically and mentally drained to discuss psychological aspects of murder and sex. He fell into bed exhausted and slept.

While he slept, Bert Dort of the OCS investigation staff, on loan to it from the FBI, flew west to Chicago. Driving from O'Hare field with the Chicago special agent who had tailed Benny Jack to the Terene hunting camp, he posed the same problems that he and the OCS attorneys had faced the night before.

"We're at a point where we're finding string ends that should tie together but they keep slipping away from us. We thought we had

a definite connection between Strell in New York and Terene here in Chicago through your travelling hit man. It fell apart when Jack disappeared. Any sign of him?"

"Not yet," the Chicago agent replied. "But have you seen anything of Strell. We got a signal from New York just an hour ago that Strell has dropped out of sight. Wexler too."

"Terene in town?"

"Big as life. Attending committee meetings and sitting in on director's meetings of a dozen different companies. One of his construction firms broke ground this morning for a new motel on the strip. What motels he doesn't own on Mannheim Road, he has built and sold to operators. They buy from Terene. They get *his* permission to operate. *Then* they get a municipal permit."

"What happened to Jack?"

"I tailed him to the private road leading to Terene's property. The state police report he left for the island in a speedboat and never returned. They think he left by a plane that we know belongs to Tano from Los Angeles. The plane returned and took off again—probably set Terene and his guests down in Chicago. A Terene man returned Jack's car to his Wheaton home."

"Observing the Jack home? His restaurant?"

"Both. If he shows up we'll know as soon as we get to the office."

Frank Cast made the federal stake out of Benny Jack's home shortly after the watching agents notified their Chicago office that Jack had returned and was back from wherever he had been. Instead of delivering the envelope, he continued to drive up the suburban street and telephoned from a pharmacy in an adjacent shopping center.

"Florette?"

"Yes."

"Frankie, I need to see Benny. Right away."

"He's asleep. Can I take a message. I don't want to wake him. Unless it's important."

"It is. I'll be at the drive-in."

Benny Jack rubbed his eyes and scowled, "It better be damned important. Make me some coffee while I dress." He drove to his drive-in and noticed Frank Cast in a booth. He ignored him while he checked with his manager and cashier.

"Any messages?"

"No, Mister Jack," the manager replied. "Everything's quiet. Trade's good."

At the cashier's desk, he did find a message.

"That man over there left this envelope for you, Mr. Jack," the girl explained as she handed the brown manila envelope to Benny Jack.

He riffled the bills and handed them back to his cashier.

"Desposit this over a ten day pe-

riod. It's from a real estate deal. Show it as normal receipts." He walked to the booth in which Frank Cast was sitting and asked a waitress to bring more coffee.

"You didn't have to get me up for that, Frankie."

"I didn't."

"Why, then?"

"The feds have your house staked out. I recognized one of their boys in a car parked down the street."

"You sure?"

"I saw the guy testify in a federal court just last week. I'm sure."

Benny Jack sipped his coffee and mentally retraced his steps. He couldn't find a mis-step.

"So, they've got a tail on me. What they see won't do any harm. I'm clean. The house is clean. And so is this place. But you better let Big Ed know. I'll take a rest for a while and make like I'm looking after business here at the restaurant. I've been working too hard lately anyway. I need a rest. Maybe a vacation."

While Frank Cast drove back to the city, Bert Dort and the Chicago special agent reviewed activities of Chicago's gangland.

"These unsolved slayings are the work of underworld hit men like Benny Jack. They're so adept at their execution trade, they seldom make a police blotter. In Benny's case, I can follow his career back in hoodlum circles since he arrived in town from Detroit a few years

back. How he contacted the mobs here, we don't know. He arrived in town and came to our attention shortly after as a strong-arm man around the joints under the Elevated. We know he has been involved in gangland killings. We know he soon rose from the role of a strong-arm thug to that of an enforcer for the Mafia. He has a tougher than usual reputation among the mobsters. But we can't take him in court on the strength of his reputation."

"It's a general picture," Bert Dort agreed with the Chicago agent, "and we run into it all over the country. The only way we can wage war, for the time being, is to worry these people and keep worrying them. Constant observation is paying off. Don't worry if they become aware you're tailing them around the clock. But don't make it any more obvious than possible. It's working with the Apalachin crowd. It may work with these characters who were too high up in the Mafia hierarchy to answer the Apalachin rollcall. We may just be able to panic them into the open—or into open warfare among themselves. Sooner or later, we'll turn up a witness who will flee to us in panic or for protection. Until that break comes, about all we can do is stay with them and try to piece known operations together and find a whole that we can bring into court. We know those we want. Now we want the proof for what

we know. Stay with Benny Jack. I'll talk to the chief and, if he agrees, we'll give some personal attention to Big Ed Terene."

When Frank Cast got word to Terene that Federal agents were keeping Benny Jack under continuous surveillance, he reacted coolly but firmly.

"Tell him to get out of town. Tell him to take a vacation. He's not to contact anyone, anywhere, for any reason. And get word along the line that Benny Jack is out until he cools off."

"I was thinking the same thing myself," Benny laughed when Frank Cast got word of the suggested vacation to him. "I've some unfinished business I want to look after in New York . . ."

"But not with the mobs, Benny."

"Feminine business, Frankie," Benny Jack laughed. "Of a kind the mobs would like to have if they could get to it. But it's for me—just for me."

"You taking Florette with you?"

"Don't be simple."

"You know what you're doing, Benny. Just remember what Big Ed wants. Play it that way."

"I'll be away for a while, baby. Look after the restaurant and keep house," was the only explanation offered by Benny Jack as he sought a more exciting change in his sex life while complying with the syndicate leader's orders to get out of the Chicago area. Florette knew better than to protest.

"Remember me?" Benny Jack laughed as he heard the trill of Delores' voice on the 'phone.

"Don't tell me my men are coming home," the blonde laughed. "I was beginning to feel I'd been entirely deserted. I haven't seen Tony since the night in Newark. Nor you. First man back, Benny. You get the prize. Come on up, darling."

Once more messages were exchanged between Chicago and New York—and between New York and Chicago. On the federal teletype, Benny Jack's departure and his flight were reported to New York agents.

"This Benny Jack is becoming a real commuter," Bert Dort observed when he got the signal.

Benny was met at Idlewild and never out of sight of federal agents after that time during any move he made from Delores' apartment in the West Fifties. At the end of the first week—after the raptures of marathon love-making had become slightly less rapturous—and Benny began to make the club and bistro circuit with the blonde, another message went from New York to Chicago: "Jack is shacking up with Strell's blonde. He has a constant federal tail."

Four worried Dons met once more at another council—in a duck blind at Lake St. Clair's Mitchell Bay where they knew they were at a safe distance from snooping federal listening agents. Little time

was devoted to the irritation caused by Benny Jack and the decision was unanimous. The verdict erupted violently in Uptown Manhattan two nights later.

"You're so good for me, Benny, darling," Delores purred. "Tony was so old. Making love, for him, was a dream and a forsaken ambition. With you, my brute, it's a new life itself. Never leave me—Benny."

"Let's get dressed and take in the new show at the *Upstairs*, Delores," Benny Jack suggested from the silk sheets. "We can just make it for the last show."

"Let's make love again instead, darling."

The door buzzer decided for the lovers.

"Yes," Delores answered in the intercom.

"Florist, ma'm," a messenger announced.

"You're so thoughtful, Benny. Will you get them for me."

Benny Jack walked to the apartment door in a silk dressing gown, thinking, perhaps the florist had repeated his last night's order for orchids. He tipped the messenger and walked back to Delores bedroom, opening the box as he entered the room. He stopped abruptly as he dropped the box lid. He saw two dozen white roses. On a card attached to the long stems was scrawled, "For Delores and Benny".

He flung the roses violently out the open French window and

watched them flutter over the iron railing and downward to the street 23 stories below.

"Get dressed. We're getting out of here."

"Why? What's the matter, Benny?"

"We're marked with the roses."

"You think Tony found out about us, Benny? Is that why?" the frightened blonde asked as she pulled on a slip.

"Hell no. He can't complain. He's had his rose. Come on, Delores. Hurry," Benny Jack shot at her as he pulled on clothes and discarded a shoulder holster in favor of keeping the blue automatic in his hand.

"Can I pack a bag?"

"Pack nothing. Come on!"

"My furs, Benny!"

"You'll need no furs in hell," Benny shouted at the hysterical blonde. He threw a mink at her and pulled her by the arm. They ran down the hall to a service elevator, leaving the apartment door open.

"Where'll we go, Benny?"

"Your car in the basement?"

"Yes."

"We'll start driving south and keep driving—so damn far that it will cost the Mafia a dollar to send us a five cent card by mail. If I do get it, the hit will be on the run. And I'll hit back. They're thorough but not so damn thorough that this boy will take his standing still."

In the well illuminated basement garage of the apartment building, Benny noticed a building attendant and three or four chauffeurs of other tenants. He slowed to a walk, feeling reassured that this was not the time for the hit. He held the door of the white convertible open for Delores; closed it; walked around to the driver's side; got in behind the wheel and sat down. He took his hand off the automatic in his coat pocket and pulled out a package of cigarettes, offering one to Delores. She held her lighter for him while Benny Jack pushed the starter button on the convertible's dash.

At the post mortem, one of the chauffeurs explained what happened, "When the man pushed the starter button the whole front end of the convertible exploded, blowing him and the lady to bits. The force of whatever caused the explosion was so powerful that it blew out part of the basement ceiling above the car. Piping and concrete came crashing down leaving that corner of the basement a mass of rubble, tangled pipes, pieces of torn metal and remnants of flesh and bones."

Bert Dort read the report and tossed it back into his desk basket. "I suppose I should be pleased to write off one more of the murdering crowd and a high-priced camp follower," he observed to his bureau chief. "But it really isn't what we want, is it?"

"No, Bert, at least not in that manner. But we're up against a code of *silence or death*—the *omerta*. Someplace in that mob there's a weak member. Someday, he or she will talk—from a witness stand. Today they thwart us with their implacable vengeance and quick

death. Our only tools are patience and a continuing, incessant wearing down of the top men through a policy of search and observation. They panic when they're under the glaring spotlight of investigation. Keep it turned on them—with all the candle-power you can generate."



self-preservation

BY RUSSELL W. LAKE

WHEN it was all over, the car lay upside down in the ditch with its wheels turning slowly in sluggish freedom. There had been the dizzy, screeching, exploding moment when the car hurtled across the pavement and plowed into the soft shoulder and plunged over the edge into the ditch beyond. Nobody could know what happened then, what the boulders and ditch banks did to it before it shuddered to rest on its back like a helpless turtle. Now there was silence, a silence like the silence that follows an earthquake which heaves and groans for a minute and destroys a town, and leaves a great quiet.

Tony hung from his seat belt and realized that he was alive. Tentatively he lifted one arm and then the other and moved his legs and twisted his body to try out his back and turned his head from side to side. He released the belt and flopped down on the ceiling of the



All his senses urged him, his every nerve screamed at him ... RUN!

car. He reached out and turned off the ignition switch. The other man, the driver, was suspended loosely behind the wheel. The gash above his eye oozed red, a red that was purple against the whiteness of his face, and blood dripped slowly from his mouth and splattered on the upside down ceiling with ominous finality. But he was breathing.

Tony crawled out the open window and scrambled up the ditch bank to the shoulder of the road. He stood there, the muscles of his legs twitching and writhing. The other car was nowhere in sight. The drunken bastard probably never knew he had caused an accident but was weaving on down the road in both lanes, no doubt slobbering an off-key tune in alcoholic insensibility. The white line twisted away and disappeared around curves in both directions. On both sides of the road there was thick woods and Tony looked into the green depths in sudden appreciation.

He glanced back down at the car with its underside showing naked in the late sun. The wheels had stopped going around and looked clumsy and dead. He couldn't see the man but he knew he was still hanging there dripping blood. He didn't like this man, he didn't like anything about him, he didn't like his uniform, or what he stood for, or his heavy, dull, stubborn, inflexible mind. The man was an aspostle of conformity, a dictator

of dreariness, a stolid manufacturer of heavy-footed platitudes. Tony went across the road and down into the ditch and up the other side into the woods beyond. Hidden from the road he paused there and looked back. Somebody would come along soon and see the car and do the necessary. But of course they wouldn't see it, it was almost out of sight in the deep ditch and if they did see it they wouldn't stop. People were afraid of getting involved in anything outside their own ordered existence and would comfort their conscience with the rationalization that the next driver who came along wouldn't be going anywhere in particular and could stop and take care of it. The car would likely be there a while, more than long enough. It might be a couple of days before someone came looking for them.

The air in the woods was sweet. It was sweeter than it had ever been anywhere. It was sweet because of the way he felt. The sense of smell is like sight or the sense of touch or the reactions of your mind, it varies with differing states of being, whether you're free or slave, healthy or sick, glad or sad, loving or hating, quick or stupid. The air was very sweet today, like the friendly look in a good woman's eyes.

No matter how you looked at it, this was the luckiest of breaks. A professor at college—old Moses who pattered around with ideas as

some men do with stamps or model airplanes—claimed there is no such thing as luck or chance. Everything is cause and effect, every effect has a demonstrable cause, and you can predict the effects by knowing the causes. The old fellow had crazy ideas. Of course he was right part of the time but he took in too much territory. You might say the college degree itself was the effect of four years of hard causes, of deprivation, of absorption in a goal, of desperate, perhaps savage, determination to prove something or other although it seemed now that whatever it was Tony was trying to prove was hardly worth the effort. You prove something in one way and then go ahead and disprove it in others.

The sound of cars approaching on the highway made him draw back a little into the woods and stand behind a tree. Three cars approached swiftly. That's the way it is with traffic, it always comes bunched up. The cars hurtled past with a succession of chopped-off guttural roars like racing cars whizzing by on a track. He turned away and walked rapidly into the woods. The air was warm and sweet and the sky was blue and the trees closed in like a protective platoon, their friendly arms reaching over him.

Cause and effect. Moses, the crazy old coot with flying gray hair and burning eyes, had claimed that a strong desire was a powerful

cause which, if maintained, would manifest itself in the desired effect. Moses had some cockeyed explanation of this, something about the creative power of thought. Moses always brought God into it, insisting that the ability for reasoned desire which sets man above the animals, contains a spiritual force which makes man co-creator with God. Tony didn't go along with all that rot, and said so, and got a passing grade anyway. If you expressed yourself thoughtfully, either for or against a concept that Moses was teaching, you got a passing grade. The old fellow said that about all a college could do for you anyway was to teach you to think.

But all that was five years ago. Tony hadn't thought about it since until now. The thing that brought it back was the seemingly impossible fact that he was out of the car and free in the woods after having desired just this so strongly. It was about time that he should get lucky for once.

In this still air you could hear a car engine quite a way. He heard more cars going by on the highway behind him. The man back there in the ditch had no right to say that Tony was in any way to blame. Tony hadn't even been driving, just a passenger, and an unwilling one at that. Old Moses would have declared that Tony's release from the car was an effect brought on by the desire, although he probably wouldn't have approved. The little

professor whose quick movements reminded you of a perky bird, talked a lot about ethics and such things. The ethics propounded by old professors were purely academic and didn't have much to do with the facts of life. In this life you take what you can get.

He wondered whether the man back in the ditch had died yet. Too bad the fellow had to get himself killed. Stupid and brutal though he was, he was a man. Maybe he had a family someplace although no doubt his wife would be better off without him. He was the kind of guy who would slap a woman around. Like Tony's old man used to do to Mom. Sometimes when she got real mad, Mom would fight back. One time she clobbered Pa with a shovel and knocked him clean off the back porch, but usually Pa got the best of it. Mom used to smear flour on her face to hide the bruises. That was a heluva family for a kid to grow up in, especially a kid who read books and sometimes used to go over to the other side of the tracks and see how decent people lived.

You grow up somehow, dodging the old man's brogans and always wishing he'd get drunk enough to pass out and stop bothering you. You hold up your pants with safety pins and consider two-bits in your pocket a fortune—that is, if you had a pocket that would hold two-bits. But you get through the eighth grade and the old man starts

grumbling that it's time for kids to get out and get a job and begin contributing. But you go on to high school and there's four more years of the same. Then the old man hollers that you'd better get yourself a job in the mill like the other kids, you lazy punk. But you're stubborn and you continue to pursue the goal of becoming educated like the people you read about in books who had other men working for them and drove big cars and married fine women and didn't live in a shack that leaked when it rained. So you go up to the university and you take the patronizing and the insults and the ostracism and you work your head off and after four years of it, one fine day they hand you a degree. So what? When it's all over, what have you got? A degree, not a guarantee. You're educated but you're still the ear of a sow, still the roughneck from Balcher Street. Maybe it doesn't show on the outside and you can fool people but down inside you're still Tony Lambreth, son of a stupid lush who was night watchman at the mill on nights then he wasn't drunk.

Your head is full of ideas and ideals but you haven't got the guts to face the world. You're all scared inside because you are positive that even among strangers in the city everybody knows where you came from. You've got a big desire to be successful and wealthy, and you

feel like a big fat fish out of water. But you can't get rid of the desire.

There had been a few high points along the way, just a few, and the highest point was Professor Amos Moses. He was a queer duck but the kind of man who fills your head full of ideas and lifts your spirits with ideals. He made you feel that to meet the challenge of living was the highest aspiration of man. Man, he said, was individual, a spiritual being even, and had an obligation to himself to live in accordance with his own highest thoughts—an obligation to nobody else, just himself. There are men and there are half-men, and most of them are half-men.

Moses wouldn't have walked away from the car. That's the kind of thing that Pa would do. No, Moses would have stayed and pulled the man out of the wreck and done what he could to save his life, not just because Moses would have thought the man's life was worth saving but because doing so would save his own life from the degradation of failure to fulfill the purpose of living. That's the difference between people like Pa and people like Moses. You make your choice.

Tony leaned against a tree and breathed deeply of the sweet, sweet air. But the air had lost some of its fresh sweetness and had become dull and strangely heavy. Tony took hold of a small branch and clung tightly, staring at the ground.

He swung away and walked rapidly back through the woods to the road and slid down into the ditch. He loosened the seat belt and dragged the man out and lay him against the bank. The man was groaning softly. Tony looked down at the broad, simple face, now white and smeared with blood. "I'm hurt," the man said, his voice thick and weak. "Get a doctor, kid." His eyes were pleading, like a dog's or a scared child's.

Tony climbed the bank and walked fast down the road. He walked a mile and came to a gas station. A lanky attendant was cleaning up around a gas pump. "Where is your telephone?" Tony said.

"Ain't got a public phone. Down to the roadhouse, two miles."

"You have a telephone somewhere. Call an ambulance. There's been a wreck up the road a mile. A man's hurt bad. Hurry up!"

"Yeah?" the attendant said, showing interest. "Okay, buddy." Tony followed him into the office and listened while he made the call.

"How'd it happen?" the man said afterward.

"A drunk forced us off the road."

Tony looked out the cluttered window at the shadows which swept way out from the twin gas pumps. It would be dark pretty soon, and darkness was for hiding. "Call the police, too. Tell them Tony Lambreth is here."

"Why?"

"They'll want to know."

The attendant looked at him suspiciously and a little fearfully.

"Why the police?"

"Never mind. Call!" Tony went outside and stood watching the clean, fresh sunset. "Cause and ef-

fect," he marvelled. "Moses the cause, and now look at the crazy effect."

The attendant came out and stood beside him. "The man who was hurt in the wreck is a cop," Tony said. "We were on our way to the penitentiary."



STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION

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MIGUEL SUAREZ was standing on the corner of Neptuno and Industria street when he saw the car with the familiar blue and white markings of Habana's Policia Nacional approaching. Placed on instant alert he quickly made a mental search of his person and sighed with relief when he remembered that he had sold his last marijuana cigarette to Corralia, the little old lady with the wooden leg who sold flowers to tourists on Virtudes street, before entering the Rialto theatre to catch the midnight movie.

He was carrying no contraband,

though he usually carried a **forty** five automatic, several packs of loco weed, and various tubes of cocaine for distribution to different customers. Relieved by the knowledge that he was "clean," he calmly leaned against the lamp-post and lit a cigarette.

The *perseguidora* (squad car) came to a slow stop at the curb and three pairs of eyes studied him from the dark interior of the vehicle. Two policemen sat in the front and one in the back. The latter had a sub-machine gun resting on his lap.

"Oye tu, veng aca," the one in the

THE LITTLE BLACK BOOK

BY
XAVIER SAN LUIS REY

"El Tigre" was an officer of the Havana police force. He kept a little black book in which were the names of disreputable citizens. He called it the "obituary." It was a great convenience.

front seat said, and Miguel, recognizing the swarthy, sinister features of El Tigre, the hated Captain's deputy of the third precinct, quickly stepped up to the car. "Buenas tardes, señor vigilante," Miguel said, trying to act as condescending as he could. "Miguel Suarez, at your service."

"What are you doing on this street corner when all decent people are in bed?" asked El Tigre, his eyes squinting and surveying Miguel from head to toe distastefully.

"Oh, nothing harmful, I assure you, señor vigilante," Miguel said. "I am waiting for a bus." He smiled pleasantly. "I think they are a little behind schedule this night. I have been waiting for the longest time." He smiled again. "If I may say so, the sargento is looking very well this evening."

The sargento smacked his lips and looked straight ahead. "Where do you live?" he said. His demeanor was cold.

"In Marianao. I have a furnished room there."

"Are you a productive citizen or a worthless one?"

Miguel looked confused. Finally he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't really know. I don't think I understand?"

The policeman in the rear of the vehicle edged over to the window. "The sargento wants to know if you are honestly employed, stupid," he said harshly. "Please speak up."

Miguel shrugged his shoulders

again. "Well, I am not honestly employed at the moment. I mean I am not employed at all. You see, I was discharged from my last job when I suffered an accident. I fell from a scaffold. I was a painter. I am still slightly crippled. I have not been able to find other work since."

"Then you are a vagrant, is this not so?"

"No sir. I am simply an honest man without work."

The sargento passed his thumb and index finger over his mustache to smooth down the hairs. "I doubt that you are honest," he said, "as much as I doubt that you are a man." He sighed. "You are a cubano, are you not?"

"Si, señor."

"Do you by any chance have any money in your pocket?"

"Si, señor."

"How much money?"

Instinctively Miguel thought to lie, but he thought better of it. He knew the police were going to search him anyway. "Seventy pesos," he answered.

"That's quite a lot of money for an honest man to have in his pocket who is not employed at honest work," the sargento said. "May I ask where you got it?"

"I won it at the crap table in the casino at the Plaza hotel."

"Amazing."

"Si señor."

"Do you visit the casino often?"

"When I have a few pesos I feel I can risk, yes."

"And of course you always win?"

"Not all the time, no."

"But most of the times?"

"Yes."

"I see. In addition to being honest you are also lucky?"

"Being a poor man life seems to have blessed me with that compensation." Miguel put out his hand. "But I hope the sargento will not judge me wrong because of it."

"I notice you are wearing what appears to be an expensive wrist watch," the sargento said. "May I ask the time? You see, I have no such luxury, unfortunately."

Miguel glanced at his wrist. "It is four seventeen, senor."

"What kind of watch is it?"

"An ultra self winding."

"With twenty one jewels, of course."

"Si senor."

"I see. But did you buy it or steal it?"

"A woman gave it to me."

"A woman? You mean a puta, do you not?"

Miguel was annoyed by the remark, but he controlled his mounting anger. If he said or did anything that the police could interpret as hostile, or even rebellious, they would climb out of their car and beat him senseless on the spot. "She is a very dear friend," he said, and fidgeted on his feet and stared down at his toes.

Miguel was a tall muchacho, muscular, and had the reputation

of being a guapo (pugnacious). He knew that man to man he could easily best El Tigre in a fight, but under the circumstances he had to forget his pride, no matter how much it hurt. It was either that or get his brains knocked out.

"Do you live with this puta you call a woman?"

"Yes. I live with her," Miguel said. He did not look up from his toes. "She is my sweetheart, mi novia."

The sargento nodded. "Yes, that is the way of honest men like you these days. They call putas their novias and they live with them and say they are married." He looked at Miguel. "Does she support you?"

"She is my novia."

"Yes, I know. But this puta, does she support you?"

"We share living expenses," Miguel said.

"Did you hear that, Osvaldo?" the sargento asked the policeman in the rear of the squad car. "This honest man says he shares living expenses with a puta."

"What does your puta do for a living?" Osvaldo asked Miguel.

"She is a waitress in a bar called Joe & Jim's."

"I do not believe this," Osvaldo said. "If there are no bartenders in a dairy there can be no waitresses in a brothel. Why do you lie, muchacho? Tell the sargento the truth. Why do you not admit your woman earns her living as a puta?"

To arrest a man for some crime,

and this should have applied even in such a wicked place as Havana, the police must have evidence that a crime was committed and they must also have testimonial or circumstantial evidence, along with irrefutable facts, to prove the detained party was directly involved in the crime in some specific way. Miguel was, beyond a doubt, an underworld character, but he had broken no law and knew the police couldn't possibly have any charges to place against him, yet he suddenly felt nervous and afraid. He knew he was in trouble. Serious trouble. "Mi novia is a waitress," he said again.

The sargento looked at Miguel, a cynical smile expressed on his lips. "So you do not have a job," he said, "and yet you have money in your pocket, wear nice clothes, expensive jewelry, and live with a puta who supports you." He began to watch a group of fellows arguing across the street and passed his thumb and forefinger over his mustache. "Because I am a fair man I ask myself if your ways are the ways of an honest man, and I reason that you are not an honest man. An honest man does not live with a puta. Only a chulo does that. And so I do not think you are so much an honest man as you are an immoral one." He paused. "Yes, that is what you are, immoral. No, mi amigo. You do not fool me." He shook his head. "You are definitely not an honest man." He motioned to the police-

man in the rear of the persecuidora. "Search this maricon who dares call himself an honest man," he said, and produced a .38 revolver and turned and rested the barrel on the sill of the window, the muzzle pointing straight at Miguel. "Do not make the slightest move, amigo. Do not even flutter an eyelash. If you do, I will blow your decadent soul from your body."

Miguel's inner anger, along with his rebellious spirit, was subdued by the sight of the gun. "No, senor," he blurted, his eyes blinking, "I will not move." He fell back, raising his arms protectively, when the policeman climbed out of the car. Grabbing him roughly, the policeman spun Miguel about and started to frisk his clothing. He searched his pockets, ran his hands under his arm-pits and down his legs. When he finished he said, "He has nothing, mi sargento. Neither drugs or weapons."

"Very well. Get him in the car," the sargento said, and the policeman shoved Miguel towards the car. "Move punk," he said.

"Where are you taking me?" Miguel protested, his voice filled with alarm. "I swear to you, sargento. I have done nothing. Why am I being arrested?"

The policeman behind him raised his knee and brought it up forcibly against Miguel's buttocks, sending him sprawling head first to the floor inside the vehicle. "Do not ask so many questions, amigo."

Miguel rose quickly from the floor, his face grimacing pain, and threw himself in a far corner of the seat. The policeman climbed in beside him. "I have done nothing," Miguel said again, almost whimpering. "You are making a terrible mistake. I am innocent of any crime. I have done nothing. I swear it."

"Shut up," the policeman beside him said, and he hit Miguel with his elbow in the face.

Miguel hollered with pain and his hands flew to his face. Blood trickled from his nostrils. "I beg you," he sobbed. "In the name of my mother, do not do this, please."

The sargento swung his arm over the back of the seat and patted Miguel on the knee. "Do not make so much noise, amigo. Be quiet. Relax. Try to enjoy the ride we are about to give you. Imagine you are a turista indulging a sight-seeing tour. We plan to visit all the points of interest in our fair city, including the Barrio Colon. Throughout the trip, I should add, please feel free to ask for anything you want. If the request is reasonable, we will be only too happy to oblige it. Am I understood?"

Miguel was quieter now. "You plan to kill me, don't you?" he said, dabbing at his nose with a handkerchief. Tiny beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"No, I do not plan to kill you, amigo. I am going to kill you. To me you are like a caballo with a

broken leg, or a dog who has gone mad. I must kill you." He shook his head hopelessly. "I have no other alternative."

Miguel's hands came out supplicatingly. "But why? What have I done?"

"You honestly do not know?" The sargento was surprised.

"No. I have committed no crime."

"Oh, but you have. You have committed many crimes. What you should say is that you have committed many crimes but were never caught." He motioned to the driver and the car began to move. "If you are an honest man as you say, why do you pursue dishonest activities? For example, why do you sell drugs?" He paused, lit a cigarette, and offered the pack to Miguel, who refused them, shaking his head. "You did not think I knew this, eh?" the sargento said, leaning sideways to replace the package of cigarettes in his pocket. He blew a stream of smoke in the air. "Well, do not be surprised. It is my business to know everything that goes on in this neighborhood. I have known about your despicable activities for the longest time. You have a prominent place on my delinquent's list. Not only are you a pusher of marijuana, but a pusher of a powder called cocaine. Is this not true?"

Miguel said nothing. He sank deeper into the cushions of the seat and stared at his hands, a worried look on his face. "You are a chulo,

too," the sargento continued. "I have written intelligence that you beat your whore often and treat her most abominably. Last month, and I quote from a report, you chased your puta, or novia, from the Lido Hotel with a razor, slashing at her behind as she ran. I believe she is still in the hospital." The sargento paused, shaking his head sadly as he looked straight ahead. "No, I'm afraid Diogenes would never have accepted your qualifications to call yourself an honest man. But you will make the perfect subject for what I have in mind. Your qualifications in this respect are more than satisfactory. Your background history is adequate, too. You have no family and no living relatives. Basically you are a worthless scoundrel who will never be missed by anyone." The sargento inhaled his cigarette and blew a stream of smoke in the air. Then he turned abruptly to look at Miguel. "Ah, so you look sad," he said, pointing a finger in his face. He shrugged. "Well, you may cry sin pena if you wish. I will not gloat your embarrassment." He turned away. "I have had tougher maricones than you in the same predicament and not one of them disproved themselves a coward in the end. Some wet their pants when they learned they were going to die. One party, I remember, actually moved his bowels when I placed my revolver to his head. Is this not true, Raul?" he asked the driver.

"Si, mi sargento," the driver said. "He moved them most profusely. He was a very frightened man."

"You see?" said the sargento. "I do not lie. But please believe me, Miguel, when I say I do not have anything against you personally. I don't really care that you are an abominable criminal. Perhaps I might even have permitted you to continue your career unmolested had circumstances not interfered and compelled me to act. You see, I have a little black book with a long list of names written in it. I call it the obituary. In this list of names, as I said before, your name is included. The list is made up of wrongdoers like yourself, men and women of no real consequence involved in every sort of nefarious activity whom I never apprehend because I feel they do not deserve the luxury of being sent to prison. But when the appropriate time arrives and I need a victim I merely consult my list and select a name from it. The nominated person, of course, is always shot. When his cadaver is turned over to the morgue we always fill out the usual report: suspected terrorist and revolutionary halted for questioning, resisted arrest, killed in the resulting exchange of fire. To make matters still more convincing, we always produce a few sticks of dynamite or a bomb or two and a weapon found on the victim's person." The sargento passed his thumb and index finger over his mustache

again. "I must admit that my method of dealing out justice is rather harsh, perhaps inhuman and cruel; no doubt it is quite illegal. But I have a badge and no one can dispute the fact that my method is ingeniously practical as ridding society (a means) of many subversive elements without causing the city any expense at all. Ironically enough, Miguel, your name was not chosen this night. The lot had fallen to a fellow much worse than yourself. However, since we have not been able to locate him, you will have to take his place. His name is Rifi. He is a friend of yours, is he not?"

"I know many people," Miguel said, frowning, "but no one named Rifi."

"No more sacred purpose in life serves a man who gives his life for a friend," the sargento said. "How thoughtful of you to wait on the corner for us to come along. Still, were you a truly honest man I would never have placed you on my delinquents list, and of course it stands to reason that you would not be in the uncomfortable predicament you find yourself in now. But from whatever point of view the problem is studied the fact remains that you are a worthless person who has continuously laughed at the law, but tonight, at my hands, you shall make restitution." He motioned to the driver. "Head for Marianao, Raul. I want to search this maricon's room. I be-

lieve we will find a heavy quantity of marijuana there. It is also possible we will find a revolver. The maricon has a reputation for being guapo. After that we will visit the Barrio Colon. Do we have any hand grenades?"

"Si, mi sargento," the policeman in the back of the car said. "We also have several sticks of dynamite and a large quantity of rebel literature."

"Excellent," the sargento said. He turned and faced Miguel. "If you will lower your hand you will discover an expensive fifth of cognac gallego on the floor. You have my permission to drink all you want of it. I give you my word as a gentleman not to reprimand you should you get drunk. I do not want you to feel nervous. Nor do I want you to feel unhappy. Since you are first and last a Cubano I would appreciate seeing you die like a man, courageous and defiant to the end. Am I understood?"

Miguel remained silent, his eyes closed and his lips trembling. The policeman beside him nudged him with his elbow. "Oye, tu. Donot look so sad," he said. "Show some spirit, muchacho. You do not have reason to look so sad. Go ahead, take the bottle. Get drunk. Do as the sargento says. He is most generous with his offer. He does not grant these priveleges to everyone, and when we arrive in the Barrio Colon do not be ashamed to select a girl. The treat will be on the de-

partamento de policia. The experience will make a pleasant memory to take with you when you die."

Miguel did not say anything until the squad car was on the return trip from Marianao and turned the corner of Animas street, heading for the Barrio Colon. Two pounds of marijuana weed, seventeen tubes of cocaine, and a forty five automatic pistol had been found in his room. Leaning forward, he lowered his hand, found the bottle, unscrewed the cap, and raised the bottle to his lips. He swallowed several mouthfuls before he pulled the bottle away from his mouth and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Bravo, muchacho!" the policeman beside him cried. "Drink. Now you show some spirit."

"Sure, I will drink," said Miguel. "I am going to get drunk, too. I am going to get raging drunk." He raised the bottle in the air. "Gentlemen, a toast. May I toast?"

"Indeed you may," the policeman beside him said. "Make all the toasts you want."

"I wish to drink a toast to the Presidente," Miguel said. "I wish to drink to his health. May it always be foul and plagued by the most painful of diseases."

"Bravo!" the policeman beside him cried, clapping his hands. "Drink, muchacho, drink. Enjoy yourself. Make another toast."

"To the sargento," Miguel said, pulling the bottle away from his mouth again. "While it is true that he is a monster and barbarian and everything vile the people say he is he is also a gentleman and a splendid host, for I am witness that he does not serve inferior liquor or poor entertainment to his guests."

The policemen, including El Tigre, suddenly bellowed with laughter. "Caramba but he's a funny one," the sargento said. "Caramba."



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