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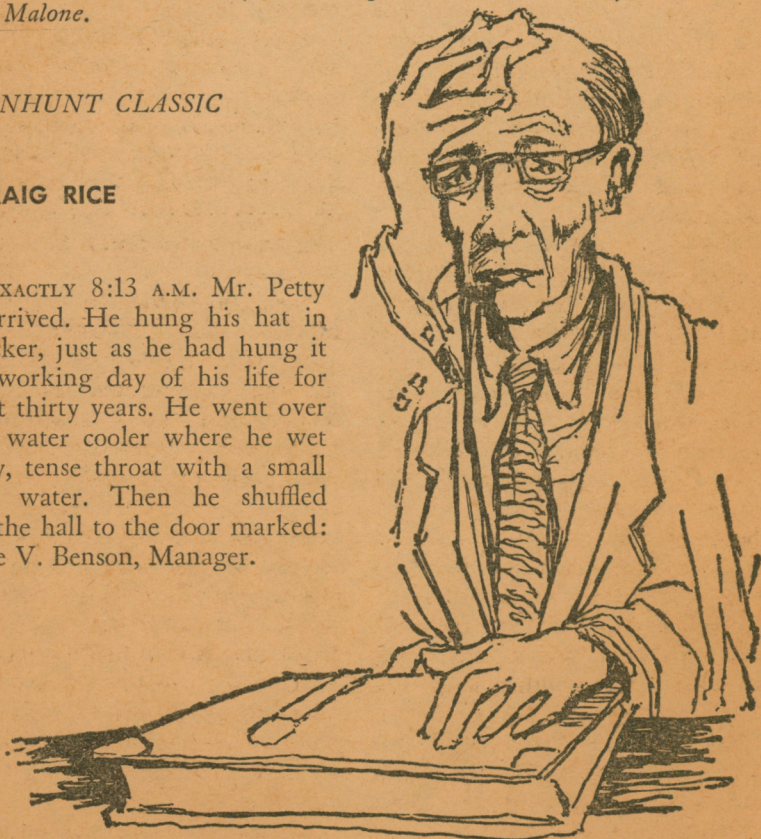
A Weakness ... for Women

Being an embezzler, Mr. Petty needed legal advice. So, naturally, he came to John J. Malone.

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY CRAIG RICE

AT EXACTLY 8:13 A.M. Mr. Petty arrived. He hung his hat in the locker, just as he had hung it every working day of his life for the last thirty years. He went over to the water cooler where he wet his dry, tense throat with a small sip of water. Then he shuffled down the hall to the door marked: George V. Benson, Manager.



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Mr. Petty waited till his wrist watch showed precisely 8:15. Then he opened the door walked in, closing it carefully behind him.

Mr. Benson looked up at the little bookkeeper.

"Always prompt, aren't you, Petty?"

Mr. Petty gulped. "Yes, sir. You said 8:15, sir."

"So, here you are. At exactly 8:15. Now, if you weren't the fool you are, Petty, you would have come at 7:15. You would have gone straight to the safe and opened it—and you would have helped yourself, not to a measly three thousand dollars, but to *two hundred thousand* dollars."

The little bookkeeper's eyes opened wide in innocent astonishment. "I couldn't have done a thing like that," he stammered. "Why—that would be stealing."

"That's right," Mr. Benson said. "That would have been stealing. So what do you do instead? You pilfer the petty cash, you make false entries on your books, you kite checks, a few measly bucks at a time—for how many months? And when you're three thousand dollars in the hole and you know the auditors are due in Monday morning, you come to me with a hard luck story. What was it, horses?"

"No, sir," Mr. Petty said. "That would be gambling!" He paused and looked down at the floor. "Women," he said meekly.

"Women!"

"Yes sir," Mr. Petty said. "Women. It's in my horoscope. I'm a Taurus."

"That figures," Benson said. "Now tell me one thing more, Petty. How do you expect to pay this money back?"

Mr. Petty looked puzzled. He squirmed uneasily in his chair. "That's what I was expecting you to tell me. You promised to help me, Mr. Benson."

Benson said, "Of course, I'll help you. Everybody knows George Benson has never failed to help a faithful employee out of a jam." He sat back in his chair and folded his arms silently for a minute while Mr. Petty fidgeted with his hands, as if he had just found he had one too many.

"Tell you what I'll do, Petty," Benson said. "Nobody knows about this, nobody except you—and me. I'll lend you the money, that's what I'll do. Just sign this—" he handed a typewritten sheet of paper across the desk—"and you can pay me back ten dollars every week out of your paycheck." He handed his pen across to the little bookkeeper. "Just a brief statement of the facts. Sort of a confession, you know, just to make it legal."

Mr. Petty took the pen. His hand shook as he started to write, and paused. "The money," he said falteringly. "Shouldn't I—get the money first?"

Mr. Benson's face took on an expression of injured dignity. "I'm

surprised at you, Petty," he said. "Do you expect me to go around every day with thousands of dollars in my wallet?" He looked at his watch. "The bank closes at one today. And Monday is a bank holiday. Before I take the plane to Pittsburgh this afternoon I'll leave three thousand dollars in an envelope for you. You'll find it in the safe, in the petty cash box."

"But I've got things to do first," Mr. Petty said. "I've got to go back over the books. There are things to straighten out before the auditors get here."

"I've thought of that too," Benson replied. "You've got keys to the plant. Tomorrow is Sunday. Come down and let yourself in. Emil, the night watchman, knows you. Tell him you're working overtime on the books. Get the entries straightened out, put the money back and when the auditors arrive on Monday everything'll be okay. I'll take that paper now."

Mr. Petty scrawled his name on the dotted line and handed the paper back to Benson. "Thank you," he said, rising to go. "I'll never forget what you've done for me." He swallowed hard. "You've saved my life. How can I ever repay you?"

"You will," Benson assured the little bookkeeper. "Don't worry, you will."

2.

On warm Saturday afternoons it

was John J. Malone's custom to take his ease, with suitable refreshments, at Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, but on this torrid Saturday afternoon he was still in the office, attending to some urgent business. Maggie, his secretary, was assisting with the technical details.

"I distinctly remember replenishing the Emergency file," Malone was saying. "Right there in back of Bills Payable."

"I looked," Maggie said firmly. "I looked, and it isn't there. Are you sure you didn't drink it up one night this week when you were alone in the office? And speaking of bills payable—"

The door opened in the outer office and Maggie went to attend to it.

"If it's the building agent after the rent tell him the police are dragging the Drainage Canal for my remains," Malone called.

A minute later Maggie was back. "It's a Mr. Algernon Petty," she reported. "He says it's important."

"Didn't you tell him I was busy on an important case?" Malone said, in a voice that he knew, by actual test, carried practically out into the hall. Then, under his breath to Maggie, "You'd better call up right away and tell them to send over a quart of the usual."

"Not so fast," Maggie said. "If you ask me, Mr. Petty looks more like a fast touch than a fat retainer," and, opening the door, she showed in the little bookkeeper.

What met the legal eye was a very frightened and nervous Mr. Petty. He patted the chair before sitting down in it, as if he expected it to be wired for an execution.

"You'll have to excuse me," he began haltingly. "You see, Mr. Malone, I've never had anything to do with the law before. Of course I expect to pay—" He fished a tired ten-dollar bill out of his wallet, stole a speculative glance at Malone out of the corner of his eye, and decided to add another ten. "I know your professional services come high," he explained, "but mine is a serious case, I'm afraid."

"What do you expect me to do, Mr. Petty?" Malone asked. "Arrange a settlement for you with Gloria Vanderbilt?"

The little bookkeeper looked puzzled. "But I don't even know Gloria Vanderbilt. No, it's Carmelita. Of course I never really promised to marry Carmelita, but, well, you know how women are."

Malone said, "I see. Something in the nature of a breach of promise."

"Something like that," Mr. Petty said. "And I thought you might see her for me and—well, lawyers know how to handle such things."

"And how much would you be prepared to go to avoid embarrassment, Mr. Petty? Say a cool million or so?"

"Oh no, nothing like that," Mr. Petty replied quickly. "You see, Carmelita loves me."

"In that case," Malone said, "let's say half a million."

"No, no, Mr. Malone, you don't understand. It isn't money."

"Not money?"

"No, it's just that I can't marry Carmelita. You see, I'm already married. Thirty years this coming Wednesday, and I promised my wife—"

"I see," Malone said, "and you want me to convey your regrets to the lady." He was beginning to feel sorry for the little man. "In that case," he continued, "it would be appropriate to offer something, don't you think—by way of heart balm."

"That's what I wanted to see you about, Mr. Malone. I promised to fly with Carmelita to Monte Carlo—her mother lives in Monte Carlo, you know—but that was before Mr. Benson offered to help me out so I could put the money back in the safe—"

Malone sat up. "*What* money back in *what* safe?"

"Why the three thousand dollars I embezzled, Mr. Malone. Mr. Benson was very nice about it—he's our general manager. Before he flies to Pittsburgh this afternoon he is leaving the money in the safe for me, and I'll pay it back to him out of my salary. And tomorrow night I'm going over the books to set everything straight for the auditors on Monday morning. But it's Carmelita I'm worried about. At first I thought I'd borrow a little more of the company money, just enough for the trip,

and send the money back when I got a job. I understand they handle a lot of money in Monte Carlo and they might be able to use a man who's good at figures."

"I see," Malone said. He wasn't sure just yet what he *could* say.

"But I couldn't do that now. Not with the auditors coming on Monday. And not after the way Mr. Benson treated me when I told him about the three thousand dollars. But I still want to do what's right by Carmelita. So I thought, if you could see her for me and—give her this."

Mr. Petty took a large plain envelope from his pocket and handed it across the desk to Malone.

Malone said, "Would you mind telling me what's in it? I just want to be sure I'm not acting as accessory before—or after—a case of grand theft."

"Oh it's nothing like that," Mr. Petty said. "Just something—personal. Carmelita will understand."

And with this Mr. Petty rose and left, with such alacrity that it was not till he was gone that Malone realized he had neglected to leave Carmelita's address or even her full name.

3.

The headline in the Monday morning *Examiner* was broad and black, but the story was brief.

Algernon Petty, bookkeeper for the Pittsburgh Products Company,

was found shot to death last night in a spectacular payroll robbery at the company's Chicago plant, 3545 Clybourne avenue. Emil Dockstedter, the nightwatchman on duty, reported the shooting to police who hurried to the scene. They found Petty in a pool of blood in front of the open safe. Officials said cash in the amount of \$200,000 was missing from the safe. According to watchman Dockstedter, the money was delivered to the plant early Saturday to meet this morning's monthly payroll, today being a bank holiday. George V. Benson, general manager, was reported flying back from Pittsburgh today, having left Saturday for a home office conference.

Dockstedter said that shortly after 10 P.M. he heard a shot fired and hurrying to the office found Petty dead on the floor. He fired after the fleeing bandit's getaway car from the office window, but was unable to stop it, or make out the license number of the car. Chief of Detectives Daniel Von Flanagan promptly ordered an all-out alarm for the fleeing bandits.

The victim had been in the employ of the company for 30 years. He is survived by his widow, Mrs. Sophia Petty, 2437 N. Damen Ave. Five years ago last Friday, Mrs. Petty was quoted as saying, Mr. Petty was awarded the company's 25-year medal for honest and faithful service.

Malone tossed the paper on his desk and sat down glumly, staring

out of the window while he slowly removed the cellophane from his cigar and lit it.

Maggie read the story and looked across at Malone. He was still staring out the window, lost in thought.

"I know what you're thinking," Maggie said. "You feel you should have done something about it. But what *could* you have done? Anyway, it's too late now. As for Carmelita, Mrs. Sophia Petty wouldn't thank you for dragging *her* into the case. What was it she told Petty, that her mother lived in Monte Carlo? *Nobody's* mother ever lived in Monte Carlo. Besides, how do you know she wasn't in cahoots with the bandits? It wouldn't surprise me if she was off to Monte Carlo all right—right now—with her share of the loot tucked away in her little overnight bag."

Malone took out the envelope the little bookkeeper had left with him. "I suppose, as Mr. Petty's lawyer, I have the right to open this now," he said. He tore open the envelope and emptied the contents on the desk. It was an airplane ticket to Monte Carlo. One person. One way. Made out to Carmelita Maquire, 1428 N. Jensen St., Chicago, Illinois.

4.

It was a six-flat tenement in the near north side slum district. A knock on the first door down the hall brought out an old Polish woman who told him in broken

English that the Bednarskys in the third floor rear kept a boarder, a girl. Mrs. Bednarsky, after a few minutes of cautious evasion, admitted that the boarder's name was Maquire, that she worked behind the quick-lunch counter on the corner.

Carmelita Maquire, it turned out, was a brown-eyed blonde in her middle twenties, with a face that might have been copied out of a court painting of a Spanish princess, and traces of an Irish brogue in her speech. There were Maquires on his mother's side back in Ireland, Malone told her, and after that the going was easy. Evidently she hadn't read the morning papers, and Malone bided his time as he chatted with the girl over the ham and eggs she had set before him on the counter.

She did not remember her father, she confided. Her mother once told her he was a Spanish croupier in the games at Monte Carlo. He vanished one day and was never heard from again. "Mother still lives in Monaco," she told Malone. "I've always dreamed of going back some day."

With as much tact as he could manage, Malone broke the news to her and turned over the envelope Mr. Petty had left with him. After the first shock she sobbed quietly for a while, dabbing at her eyes with a corner of her apron. Then, "He was like a father to me," she said. "Yes, I knew he was married. He never deceived me about anything."

He was a gentleman, he was. I always called him Mr. Petty. When we went places, weekends, he always took separate rooms, with adjoining bath, like nice people do. I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except that you were his friend. He went to you in his trouble. He didn't do anything wrong, did he, Mr. Malone? The police—they won't be coming to *me*, will they, asking me questions about—well, you know—?”

Malone patted her hand gently. It was a soft, well-groomed hand for a girl who slung hash in a quick lunch joint. He could easily imagine her dressed in the latest Paris fashion, the center of attention as she swept into the Monte Carlo casino.

“Maybe not, if you answer my questions first,” Malone told the girl.

From her answers Malone learned that she had met Mr. Petty about a year ago when she waited on him at a lunch room near the plant where she was working at the time. He had given her presents from time to time, inexpensive things, and money from time to time, which she said she had sent to her mother in Monaco. Apparently she knew nothing of his embezzlements. He had never introduced her to his friends. She said she had seen him last about two weeks ago and the account of her movements over the weekend sounded spontaneous and unforced. Unless, he reminded

himself, unless it should turn out that this vision of slightly tarnished innocence was serving him up something new in Irish blarney—with Spanish sauce. No, he decided. It was just one of those simple, unbelievable things that could happen only to the Mr. Pettys of this world. And simple young things like Carmelita Maquire, who go along trustingly with anything that comes along, only to be sideswiped by fate, like an unsuspecting pedestrian in the middle of Saturday night traffic.

“It's true, every word of it,” Malone told Maggie when he got back to the office. “Even to the mother in Monte Carlo. Just the same I advised her not to leave for Monte Carlo just yet. If the police get wind of this they will want to question her, and it won't look so good if she's left the country in such a hurry.”

The telephone rang and Maggie answered it. “It's Von Flanagan,” she said.

Malone said, “Tell him I'm in conference.”

Maggie relayed the message and handed the phone to Malone saying, “Tell him yourself. This is no fit language for a lady's ears.”

Malone took the receiver and held it twelve inches from his ear till the bellowing stopped. “Malone, Malone, are you there?” the voice resumed, in more moderate volume.

“Yes, I'm here,” Malone replied.

"Where are you, in Indo China? I can't hear you very well."

"You can hear me all right," the Chief of Homicide replied. "What I want to know is, what have you got to do with this payroll robbery and murder? We found your name and address on the victim's body."

Malone said, "Maybe he was planning to give me as a character witness to St. Peter at the pearly gates."

"That must be it," Von Flanagan came back, in a voice that had more edge and less volume to it. "Because right here in his little book—entry made last Saturday—John J. Malone, retainer, twenty dollars. Are you going in for cut rates now?"

"Got to meet the amateur competition," Malone said. "Anyway, it looks as if my client has met with foul play. I suppose you know by this time who his assailants are."

"Don't give me that, Malone. "What I want to know is, what was Algernon Petty doing in your office the day before he was murdered?"

Malone said, "He wasn't consulting me about getting himself murdered, if that's what you're thinking. The man you should be questioning is George V. Benson."

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

"I don't know," Malone said, "but I've got a hunch."

"Benson was in Pittsburgh when the job was pulled," Von Flanagan said. "He's due back in less than an hour, and if you've got any evidence involving him in the crime bring it

to my office and confront him with it. And it better be good, or you'll need that twenty buck retainer to buy yourself cigarettes in the County Jail. Ever hear of false arrest, accessory before the fact, giving misleading information, failure to report—"

Malone hung up the receiver and jumping up reached for his hat.

"What's the hurry?" Maggie called out after him.

"I've got to go see a lawyer," Malone said, and bolted, with surprising celerity, out the door.

5.

"To the Municipal Airport," Malone told the cab driver, "and never mind the red lights. I've got friends at City Hall."

"I've heard that one before," the cabby shot back over his shoulder. "What's the big rush?"

Malone said, "*The accessorius post mortem* has just been caught *in flagrante delicto*."

"Happens all the time," the cabby said, and settled back into moody silence the rest of the way.

At the airport Malone went straight to the ticket window. "I've got to fly to Pittsburgh Saturday afternoon and be back here in time for an important homicide last night," he told the clerk. "Can I make it?"

The clerk blinked, started writing up a ticket, blinked again and, "You mean Saturday night out of

Pittsburgh," he said, "There is an extra plane back to Chicago on Saturday nights, arriving here Sunday morning at—"

"Did you say Sunday morning?"

"Yes sir, Sunday. But that won't leave you much time in Pittsburgh. I wouldn't advise it, sir—"

Malone said, "Thank you, I was only inquiring."

At the information desk he was told that the plane from Pittsburgh was preparing to touch down, and put in a page call for George V. Benson.

Malone waited till Benson had shaken off reporters with a curt "No comment," and presented his card. "The matter of a loan of three thousand dollars you made my client, Mr. Algernon Petty, last Saturday," he explained.

Benson had stuck the card in his pocket with the air of a man who has other business on his mind and is not to be detained. Now he took it out again and read aloud, "John J. Malone. Not *the* John J. Malone," he said.

"Thank you," Malone said. "I thought you might wish to discuss this little transaction before you talk to the police."

"It was simply a matter of helping out an old employee in a jam," Benson told Malone over a highball in the airport bar a few minutes later. "Besides, it would have been bad publicity for the company. I had no idea it would lead to anything—he seemed like such a harm-

less sort. Must have been in a lot deeper than he let on, to try anything like this."

"What do you mean?" Malone said.

Benson said, "Surely, Mr. Malone, you don't think Petty could have thought up anything like this by himself. He must have had confederates."

"Then why did he come to you with his story about the embezzlements?"

"Oh, so you know about that too?" For the first time Benson looked disturbed. "What else did he tell you?"

"He said you promised to leave the three thousand for him in the safe Saturday afternoon. Of course you knew the payroll cash was in the safe. Didn't you think it was a bit of a risk to leave a man like Petty alone with two hundred thousand dollars when he had just confessed to embezzling company funds?"

Benson looked down at his glass. "I can see now how that might be misconstrued," he said. "Of course you understand I had no intention of accusing Mr. Petty of anything. It was just that I couldn't understand—" He took out his wallet and handed Malone the confession the little bookkeeper had signed. "Here, you keep this," he said. "Or better yet, destroy it. There is also Mrs. Petty to consider. And the trouble he was having—with women, I mean. I suppose he told

you about that too? Imagine, women! A man like Petty. I wouldn't want to have it on my conscience—"

"That's very generous of you, Mr. Benson," Malone said. He put the signed confession in his pocket.

"I would destroy that if I were you," Benson said. "I wouldn't want anything to come out that might be misinterpreted—can I give you a lift, Mr. Malone?"

In the cab on the way to police headquarters Benson was still nervous and disturbed. "I dread all this fuss—reporters, police—I suppose I'll have to testify at the inquest. It would be a great relief to me if I had a good lawyer—" He looked speculatively at Malone.

The little lawyer nodded. "Come and see me. Any time." At police headquarters he took leave of Benson, explaining it was only a short walk to his office. "I might begin by giving you one piece of legal advice," he said on parting. "If Von Flanagan should ask you why you took the midnight plane back from Pittsburgh Saturday and what you were doing in Chicago Sunday night, don't tell him a thing. Remember nobody is compelled to testify against himself. The good old Fifth Amendment!"

Without turning to look back Malone hurried to the corner and boarded a streetcar to the office. No point in running up cab fares, he told himself. Not on a twenty-buck retainer.

Back at the office Malone handed Maggie the signed confession, saying, "Put this in my safe deposit box first thing tomorrow morning when you make the bank deposit. Did I have any phone calls?"

Maggie gave him a straight look. "What bank deposit? And whom did you expect a call from?"

"There *might* be a bank deposit, and I'm expecting a call from George Benson. I just left him at police headquarters. He seems to think he'll be needing my professional services."

"Don't tell me it was Benson!"

Malone said, "I'm not ready to say it was anybody—yet. But it *could* have been Benson. Let's take a trial balance." He took out a fresh cigar and lighted it carefully before continuing. "All right, motive: Two hundred thousand dollars is enough motive for anybody, anytime. Opportunity: He could have flown to Pittsburgh Saturday afternoon, checked in at a hotel and seen or called somebody from the home office, and caught the night plane back to Chicago with plenty of time to kill Petty and return to Pittsburgh on the night plane, and deposit the payroll money in an airfield locker. Meanwhile the police would be searching for the bandit killers, and—no bandits. Because . . ." Malone watched a funnel of cigar smoke ascend slowly to the ceiling, "because the safest crime

to commit is one in which the only obvious suspect is the one everybody is searching for and nobody can find—because he doesn't exist."

"Perfect," Maggie said. "Unless somebody saw him come back. Unless somebody noticed that he hadn't spent the night in his hotel room, or saw him getting off the plane there in the morning, or returning to his hotel room. And what about the murder weapon? And the night watchman?"

"No crime is that perfect," Malone said. "Besides, Benson may save everybody a lot of trouble yet by cracking up and coming clean with the whole story. He was pretty scared when I left him. Yes, I have an idea we'll be seeing Mr. Benson soon."

That evening the papers carried the news that all reports of the fleeing bandits had proved false alarms, that auditors had failed to find any irregularities in the slain bookkeeper's accounts, and that, according to Captain Von Flanagan, the department had undisclosed information on the identity of the payroll mob and was preparing to stage a series of lightning arrests. There was also a statement by George V. Benson to the effect that no effort or expense would be spared by his firm to bring the murderers to justice.

It was nearly midnight when the telephone in Malone's apartment rang. It was George Benson. His voice was low but urgent. "I've got

to see you right away. Alone. I'll be right over." In less than fifteen minutes he was at the door, a shaken, almost incoherent, man.

"I need your help, Malone. You'll have to believe me. I had nothing to do with the robbery or the murder. I was only trying to help Petty. But what do you suppose happened to-night? Eric Dockstedter came to my home. He's our night watchman, you know. For the longest time he kept talking, beating around the bush, and then it dawned on me what he was trying to say. He suspects me of having committed the robbery and the murder! Didn't want to make any trouble for me, he said, loyalty and all that, to the firm, to me personally, but he had a sick wife, a son-in-law that was in some kind of jam, he wasn't in too good health himself and was thinking of retiring anyway, and all that kind of talk. Trying to shake me down. Trying to blackmail me!"

"What did you say?"

"What *could* I say? I denied it, of course. I couldn't fire him. He might go to the police anyway. I stalled. Told him I'd have to think it over. There must be some way to stop him, Malone. But quietly, without any publicity. There'll be expenses, of course. I'm not a rich man, Malone, but a thing like this—will a thousand take care of it? The initial expense, I mean."

Malone tried not to look at the crisp hundred dollar bills on the

coffee table. "As your lawyer—and I haven't said I'll take the case yet—I would have to ask you a few questions first, Mr. Benson," Malone said. "Why did you fly back from Pittsburgh Saturday night, and what were you doing in Chicago between Sunday morning and Sunday night when you flew back to Pittsburgh?"

"How did you know—" Benson began, and stopped himself abruptly. "Who says I was here Sunday? Did anybody see me?"

"I was only guessing," Malone admitted. "Just a shot in the dark, but it seems to have rung a bell. Come now, Benson, I'll have to have the whole story—straight—if I'm going to take your case. You may have to explain it to the police later, anyway."

"I suppose so," Benson replied dejectedly. "Although there's nothing to it, really. Nothing that has any bearing on the case. It—it's something personal."

Malone said, "I see. The blonde alibi. You'll have to think of something more original, Mr. Benson."

"I'd hoped I could keep her out of this," Benson said, shaking his head sadly, "But I suppose you'll have to check on it. I'll need time, though, to sort of prepare her for it."

Malone shook his head. He handed Benson the telephone. "Now," he said. "Just say I've got to see her right away. Alone. And don't try coaching the witness."

Benson did as he was bidden, then drove Malone to the rendezvous. As he pulled up before the apartment hotel he turned to Malone. "This is going to be a delicate business," he said. "I can trust you, of course."

"You can trust a lawyer with anything," Malone said, "and don't mention a word of this to your wife."

7.

The blonde alibi proved to be a blonde all right, and everything else a man could wish in the way of an alibi. Serena Gates was neither surprised nor shocked.

"I've been expecting something like this ever since it happened," she told Malone right away. "I'm not the kind of a girl you think I am, Mr. Malone. Things are not really as bad as they look."

Malone looked again and decided things didn't look bad at all. In fact, things were every bit as good as they looked, even in the dim half light that concealed as much as it revealed of the shapely figure.

"You'll have to excuse my informal attire," Serena said, drawing a wisp of the filmy negligee over her shoulder. "You see, I had already gone to bed. It's about yesterday you want to question me, isn't it? Can I fix you something to drink?"

After the fourth highball and what Malone told himself was a very satisfactory investigation of the

facts, he came away with the conviction that Benson's alibi was just a trifle short of what he needed to eliminate him as a suspect. According to Serena Gates he had left her apartment shortly after eight o'clock in the evening driving a rented car, as he usually did on his visits. The crime was committed at ten. This would have left him plenty of time to drive to the plant, return the rented car and take a cab to the airport. Serena might have been lying about the time, but if she was it did not promise well for Benson if he had no better alibi than she was willing to give him. Besides, she seemed to be prepared to take an entirely fresh view of her amatory loyalties. The little lawyer made a mental note to look further into this aspect of the case.

When he got down to the office at noon he told Maggie about the events of the night before. Maggie was unimpressed. "Von Flanagan has been telephoning like mad all morning," she told him. The words were hardly out of her mouth when the phone rang. It was an entirely changed Von Flanagan.

"We're up against a blank wall, Malone. You've got to help me out. We've run down every suspicious car report, and no dice. I've never seen anything like it. No fingerprints, no murder weapon, no suspects."

Malone said, "Have you questioned the night watchman?"

"Yesterday and again this morn-

ing. Same thing. He heard a shot, found the body, and fired after the getaway car. Ballistics supports the guy's story. The bullet that killed Petty wasn't from his gun. I know your suspect is Benson but you're crazy. We've checked his alibi. He was in Pittsburgh all right."

Malone said, "Maybe you're barking up the wrong alibi. And maybe there *weren't* any bandits."

"Malone, Malone, you're holding out on me." The tone was something between a plea and a threat. "If Petty told you anything about Benson, it's your duty—besides I'm your friend, and if you make one false move, Malone, so help me—"

"I'll be ready to tell you all I know in a few hours," Malone said. "Meanwhile, put a tail on Benson. We may need him before the night is over." He hung up.

"Malone," Maggie said, "I've seen you stick your neck out before, but this time you've *really* done it. How can you prove Benson killed Petty and stole the money? Motive? Sure. And now, with this blonde in the picture, double sure. Opportunity? Swell. He could have done it in the two hours between eight and ten. He might have done it, he could have done it, but *did* he do it? And where are your witnesses? Where is the murder weapon? And where is the money? I suppose you think Benson is going to make a full confession, produce the gun, and turn over the money, just to get *you* out of a mess."

"Maggie," Malone said, "I think I need a drink."

"No use looking in the Emergency file," Maggie said, "You killed that bottle yesterday."

The telephone rang. It was Benson.

"Dockstedter just called me. Gave me till noon tomorrow. He wants fifty thousand dollars. You've got to do something. Malone," He paused. "I talked to Serena on the phone this morning. She's acting kind of strange. What did she tell you, Malone?"

Malone said, "You haven't got a thing to worry about. A clean conscience is a man's best defense. Sit tight and don't do a thing till you hear from me. And don't go near Serena again till I give you the all clear. The police might be shadowing you." He hung up. "What was I saying, Maggie?"

"About money," Maggie said. "Why don't you use some of that thousand Benson gave you?"

Malone was indignant. "That money goes right back to Benson the minute I put the finger on him. You forget I've got a client. Algeron Petty."

8.

It was a perplexed and dejected John J. Malone who walked into Joe the Angel's City Hall here early that evening.

"Joe," Malone said, "have I got any credit left around here?"

"Liquor, yes. Money, no," Joe the Angel said. "What's the matter now, Malone? The client he no pay?"

"The client he pay," Malone said. "Twenty bucks. Then he get shot, and two hundred thousand dollars missing. Make it a gin and beer."

"I read about it in paper," Joe the Angel said. "Too bad. Don't worry, Malone, you find the bandits. Yes?"

"I find the bandits no," Malone said. "Joe, I need flowers."

"Ah, for the funeral. Sure, Malone."

"Not for the funeral, Joe. For a lady."

"Ah, for a lady. Same thing. I mean, I call my brother-in-law, the one owns funeral parlor, and he send over flowers left over from funeral. What's address?"

Malone gave him Serena Gates' address, decided to call her up, and then changed his mind. Better surprise her after the flowers are delivered. "Tell him to put in a card saying 'Flowers to the fair,' and sign my name to it," Malone called over to Joe the Angel who was already on the telephone.

Over a second gin and beer Malone unburdened his heart. "Imagine, Joe. I've got the case as good as solved. The suspect had the motive. He had the opportunity. His alibi is two hours short and the lady in the case is on *my* side. All I need is the evidence—or at least a witness."

Joe the Angel said, "The lady, maybe she help you?"

"I don't know," Malone said. "She admits he was in her apartment till eight. How would she know what he was doing between eight and ten," he paused, "unless she followed him," he paused again, "unless—" He set the beer down on the bar. "Give me a rye, quick, Joe. Make it a double rye. I've got to think."

He downed the double shot. "I've got it, Joe," he beamed. "I think I've got it. If Benson is two hours short on his alibi, so is Serena Gates. I've got to go and see the lady again. How about a ten-spot, on the cuff?"

"For a lady, that's different," Joe the Angel said, and handed over the ten.

"Thanks," Malone said, "and can I borrow your gun?"

With a look of utter confusion Joe the Angel handed Malone the gun. "First it is flowers. Now it is a gun," he muttered, shrugging his shoulders. Malone was already on his way out the door.

9

This time Serena Gates was both surprised *and* shocked at Malone's unexpected visit. It took a foot in the door and an ungentlemanly heave of the shoulder to override the lady's remonstrances. Serena was furious.

"What is the meaning of this? Malone, you must be crazy."

"Call it the impatience of youth."

He looked around the living room. It had every appearance of a hastily planned departure, stripped of every personal belonging. He noted that his flowers to the fair had been delivered, and deposited in the waste basket. Three suit cases stood ready near the door. One of them particularly struck his eye. It seemed singularly out of place, large, metal-bound and quite unladylike.

"I was just planning to leave," Serena explained nervously.

"So I see," Malone said. "Can I help you with your baggage? This looks like the heavy one."

With his left hand he reached down for the big metal-bound suitcase, while his right hand moved to his hip pocket. The lady was faster on the draw but slower on the rebound. With a swift lashing motion of his right arm Malone slapped the gun out of her hand. In the clawing, kicking, catch-as-catch-can wrestling match that followed Malone had no reason to revise his previous appraisal of Serena's physical charms, but he realized how much he had underestimated her muscular development. It took most of what he had once learned from Dr. Butch ("The Killer") Hayakawa about the gentle art of jujitsu to persuade the lady to listen to reason.

"I guess you could have handled that baggage yourself, after all," he said, still breathing hard. Keeping Serena covered with his own gun

he picked hers up on the floor and stuck it in his coat pocket. "If it's Benson you're waiting for, you can just take it easy," he told her. "He'll be along in due time—with the police right behind him. But maybe it isn't Benson. If it were, you would have given him a better alibi. Or were you planning to double-cross him and let him take the rap while you made a fast getaway?"

Serena was silent, glaring at him with the pent-up fury of a cat waiting its opportunity to spring again.

Malone said, "No, I guess it wasn't Benson, after all. Between eight and ten Sunday night you had as much opportunity to commit the crime as he had. You forgot that when you tried to short him on his alibi. All right, who was it? You didn't handle this job alone, did you, or am I underestimating you again?"

"Malone," she said, "there's two hundred thousand dollars in that suit case. Don't be a fool. There's still time if you and I—"

"A generous thought," Malone said, "and a flattering one."

"Make up your mind, Malone. They'll be here any minute—"

"So there *were* others," Malone said. "And now you're ready to double-cross them too, if I'll split with you." He reached for the telephone. "Get me Captain Daniel Von Flanagan at police headquarters," he told the hotel operator.

Serena screamed, "Malone, don't be a fool! Malone—!"

"Get over here right away," Malone told Von Flanagan, after explaining the situation to him briefly. "And bring Benson with you."

Von Flanagan and his squad had barely arrived on the scene and staked out to arrest the bandits when they arrived. Malone heard a knock on the door and then the shooting started. When it was over, two subdued bandits, one of them slightly wounded, were brought in. At sight of Serena Gates one of them shouted "Stool pigeon! Double-crosser!" and lunged toward her, but Von Flanagan's cops restrained him.

"There's the payroll haul," Malone said to Von Flanagan, "and here's the lady's gun."

"That makes three guns," Von Flanagan remarked. "One of them should tell us who fired the shot that killed Petty. Nice work, Malone."

"I was just doing my duty to my client, Mr. Algernon Petty," Malone replied. "That's what he retained me for."

When he was finally alone in the apartment with Benson Malone said, "What are you going to do about the night watchman? Fire him, or lend him money to get his son-in-law out of a jam? And, speaking of money, here is your thousand-dollar retainer. I'm sorry, I guess I had you figured wrong."

"You'd better keep it," Benson said, "I'm going to need a lawyer to defend me—in a divorce suit."

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To quote the ancient philosopher, Anonymous: "We all have our dirty little ways."

One man's meat . . .

BY JIF FRANK

THEY had been in the drugstore since noon. They sat in the chipped booths at the back, past the old counter with its profusion of nickel crackers, and napkins, and straws, leaving the plywood seats only long enough to trade magazines from the assortment on racks near the window.

"Al, let's go over to Phoenix," said the smaller boy.

Al continued to read and the boy tried to look over his shoulder at the pictures.

"Later," said Al. "Let's wait for Billy."

"What're we going to do when he gets here?"

"I don't know. What're you supposed to do on Sundays? You sit in the drugstore and look at magazines. That's what you do on Sundays."

"Let's go to Phoenix."

"We can't go. My brother's got the car."

"We can thumb a ride. There's lots of traffic, and somebody will pick us up."

They heard the bell at the front and saw Billy come through the big door and wave and walk over to the girl behind the counter. The boys watched him as he talked to her and heard her laugh and say no. He grinned and came back to the booths and sat down with Al and John and waited for the girl to bring a coke. He talked with the girl until Mr. Wilson came in and she hurried to the counter and picked up a glass and began wiping the damp circle with a cloth. Mr. Wilson frowned and took a newspaper from the wire rack and went into his office.

"Did you get the car?" asked Al. "We've been here since dinner."

"Couldn't get it," said Billy. "We got company and they're going somewhere after awhile."

"What're we going to do?" asked John. "I want to go to Phoenix."

"Hey, Billy," said Al. "Do you remember when that old man picked us up and he thought you were on dope? Man, I thought I'd die laughing."

Billy hadn't forgotten and he laughed. They had had a good time that day. Some of the kids still talked about it.

"All right," said Billy. "Let's go to Phoenix. Call Linda and we'll get her to fix the ticket."

Linda came to the booth and leaned over the table and began writing the check. Billy blew into the top of her blouse with a straw and she moved back and told him to stop it because Mr. Wilson could see them.

Mr. Wilson went to the register when they got out of the booth and scowled at the ticket and then gave them their change and they walked out onto the street and turned down the vacant sidewalk toward the highway intersection.

"Hit the sign, Billy," said Al.

Billy ran a few yards and jumped, catching the sign above the door of the furniture store with his finger tips and laughing as it swayed back and forth on its hinges.

The old man who owned the store struck his head out the second-floor window and shouted at the boys to leave his sign alone. They laughed

and Billy ran back and hit it again, slapping it hard on its metal side, and a small piece of neon tubing fell to the sidewalk. The man shook his fist while the boys watched him and then turned and continued down the street. The old man stared after them and finally wagged his head and closed the window.

They walked to the caution light at the end of main street and turned at the hotel and paraded shoulder-to-shoulder the few blocks to the edge of town. They began waiting across the highway from the Texaco station, and an old Buick came by before they had been there ten minutes. The car was barely moving until the driver saw them and speeded up. He looked away from them toward the service station and they laughed and yelled, but he kept his eyes from them and passed them by.

A pickup was next and the driver smiled at the boys and pulled off the road and waved. John stuck his head in the open window and asked the man where he was going.

"Phoenix," he said. "Hop in the back, boys."

"Uh, just a minute, please," said Billy. "How are your tires?"

He walked slowly around the pickup, kicked the left front tire, and then walked back to the man and said the tires looked just fine.

"Have you got any insurance?" he asked.

"Insurance? What'd you mean? Have I got any insurance? Do you want a ride or don't you?"

"Well now, insurance is important," said Billy. "A guy could get killed in a wreck like you're driving. What would our friends think if we got killed in a wreck like this? Think how it would look in the papers. Man, I can see it now: Leading Citizens Killed in a Wreck of of a Wreck."

The man shifted into gear and spun off, forcing the youths to move backward out of the way of flying gravel. He looked back and yelled something they could not understand.

"Man, did you see his face?" laughed Al. "By the time he gets to Phoenix he'll be a nervous wreck."

"Billy, that's the funniest thing I ever saw," said John. "I thought he would pop a blood vessel when you called his pickup a wreck."

They waited a few minutes and walked across the road to the station and watched Jones fix a truck flat. They were drinking cokes and talking with a salesman from California when the new station wagon pulled in. A thin man in a brown suit got out and asked Jones to fill it up and to check the oil, if he didn't mind. He watched Jones clean the bugs off the windshield, and then paid him and went to the restroom.

"Hey, Mister. Are you going to Phoenix?" asked Billy. "We've had a little car trouble and need a ride to Phoenix."

The man told them it would be fine with him if they wanted a ride and Billy opened the door to the

front seat while Al and John climbed into the back.

"Sure is a nice car you have here, Mister," smiled Billy, as the man drove carefully from the drive to the highway and slowly around the curve, shifting gears as if he was still unfamiliar with them. He gained speed, passed a cluster of road signs, and headed down the long road to Phoenix.

"Is it all right to turn on the radio?" asked Billy.

"Yes, yes, I guess it would be all right," said the man almost absent-mindedly. "Do you like music?"

"Yes, yes," replied Billy. "Yes, yes, I like music."

Al and John sputtered in their attempt not to laugh at Billy. They listened as he began talking to the thin, mild man. Billy winked at them and reached for the rear-view mirror and turned it toward him, combing his hair and watching the man's reaction.

"Kind of hick music, isn't it?" he said, and turned the dial from the station selected by the man.

The man looked at Billy and frowned. Billy disarmed him with a smile and asked him if he had a cigarette. The man reached into his pocket and handed Billy a new package of Pall Malls and told him he would have to open them.

"Fine," said Billy. "Now you know, boys, this is really nice. The smoke for discriminating people. We sure are. Here we sit. Flying to Phoenix. Riding in a new car with

a nice man. A particular man. No. Wait a minute. It says peculiar. Now isn't that something? When he stopped at the station, I knew right away that he was a peculiar man. Nope. Sorry, it does say particular. Want a smoke, boys?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Al. "Thank you very much. You're a kind person. You know you're very kind, don't you? Must be because you're a particular person. Thank you very much. John, would you like to have a cigarette with us?"

"Yes. Yes. Uh, yes, please," said John.

The man looked at the boys but did not say anything. Billy smiled as if to say they were just kidding and asked the man if he had a light. The man handed him a small box of wooden matches.

"Ah," said Billy. "Strike-anywhere matches. Now, that's handy. Just strike 'em anywhere, boys. You don't even need the box. You see, these are strike-anywhere matches."

He stopped smiling and leaned forward, conscious of the man's attention, and touched the match to the dash and pulled slowly, lightly, across the shiny surface.

"Nope, they didn't do it," he said. "Shame on you matches. You're not very good strike-anywhere matches." He watched the man's thin long fingers grasp the wheel, the knuckles turning white and small drops of perspiration appearing on his forehead. Then he leaned forward, casually, deliberately, and struck the

sulphur tip hard against the metal, streaking and blackening the finish, and the match burst into an orange flame.

"There you go, matches. You have redeemed yourself. Al, did you see that old match redeem itself? You can't always tell a match by its box, can you?"

The man did not protest. He did not even look at Billy. He held the wheel stiffly, his eyes and face turned toward the road, hurrying. He drove too close to the edge of the black-topped surface and the right wheels slipped to the side, spraying gravel underneath the car and sending a trail of boiling dust around the car. He swerved as the car skirted back onto the asphalt.

"Whoa, there," laughed Billy. "This is a tricky road. Being straight and all like it is. You've got to be careful what you do on these straight roads. Now that's what I'm good at. I'm a good driver. Do I look like a good driver to you?"

"Yes. Yes. You look like a fine driver," he said and then tried not to look at the boy.

"You see, men," said Billy. "That's how particular people are. They can just look at a man and tell whether he's good driver or not. Al, you're not a good driver. You flunked driver's ed. Al, the man doesn't think you're a good driver."

Al leaned over the seat and touched the man's shoulder. The man jumped forward and Al laughed. He smiled at Billy and

tapped the man on the shoulder again.

"Don't you think I'm a good driver, too? he asked?"

"Yes. You are probably a very good driver," the man replied weakly.

"Probably! Bill, the man thinks I'm probably a good driver," said Al. "Probably! Oh, man. That hurts. You want to see me drive? Tell him, Billy. Tell him what a good driver I am."

"He's really a good driver," said Billy. "He only flunked driver's education twice. Let him drive."

"I had better not," said the man. "The insurance." His voice seemed to fail. "The insurance may not be any good with him driving."

"Man, we won't have any trouble," Al protested. "I'm a good driver. Tell him again, Billy. He trusts you. Tell him I'm a good driver."

"We had better not stop," said the man. "I'm in a hurry and we can be in Phoenix pretty soon, if we hurry. He tried to sit straighter and pushed harder on the accelerator."

"He's in a hurry, men," said Billy. "If you're in a hurry, turn right at the next pavement and you'll save eight miles."

"We had better not," said the man. "This is a good road. We'll be there soon."

Billy looked hurt and turned to the man and said, "Boys I think this man is putting us on. He's just trying to make fun of us. He doesn't really want us to drive his new car."

He says he's in a hurry, but when we try to be nice and save him eight miles, he won't do it. Are you putting us on, Mister?"

"No. No," said the man. "I'll take the other road, if it's faster."

He slowed down and turned onto the older, narrower pavement and speed up again to discourage their talk of changing drivers. The road was deserted and he looked for a spot along the edge.

"Man, this is living," said Al. "Riding along in a new car and leaving the worry of driving to someone else. Give me another Pall Mall, there, Billy." He leaned back in the seat and placed his feet at the back of the man's head.

They drove about twenty miles down the road. The boys became silent, tired of the long drive and oppressive heat, anxious to reach Phoenix. The tense driver relaxed, more sure of himself now, and made one last check of the road ahead and in the rear-view mirror. He pulled to the side of the road and told the boys he wanted to check his tires. He took the key from the ignition, got out, and opened the door where Al was sitting.

"Put your feet down and get out."

Al, surprised at the tone of the man's voice, turned toward him and started to grin and then he saw the gun. He took his feet from the seat and walked to the back of the car. He was still trying to smile when the man shot him. He slumped slowly to the sand.

Billy was running when the man came back to the side of the car. He tried to weave in the soft desert silt, running hard, his feet leaving deep imprints with each stride. The man watched him run, smiled, raised the revolver to eye-level, and fired. Billy took two more leaps and plunged forward, rolling in the sand.

John was on the floorboard with his hands over his head when the man opened the door. He lay there with his eyes closed, waiting, until he realized the man was only looking at him, and he almost relaxed. The man shut the door and went over to the clump of Cereus plants where Billy was sitting and shot him in the head. John began crying and opened the door and told the man

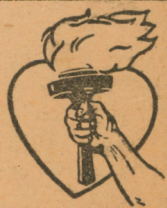
he was sorry, he didn't mean anything by what Al and Billy had said.

"I know, son," said the man. He smiled and helped John out of the car. "It's all right. I understand. We all get our kicks someday," and pulled the trigger once more. "You know," he said, "I thought for awhile there I wouldn't get to do it."

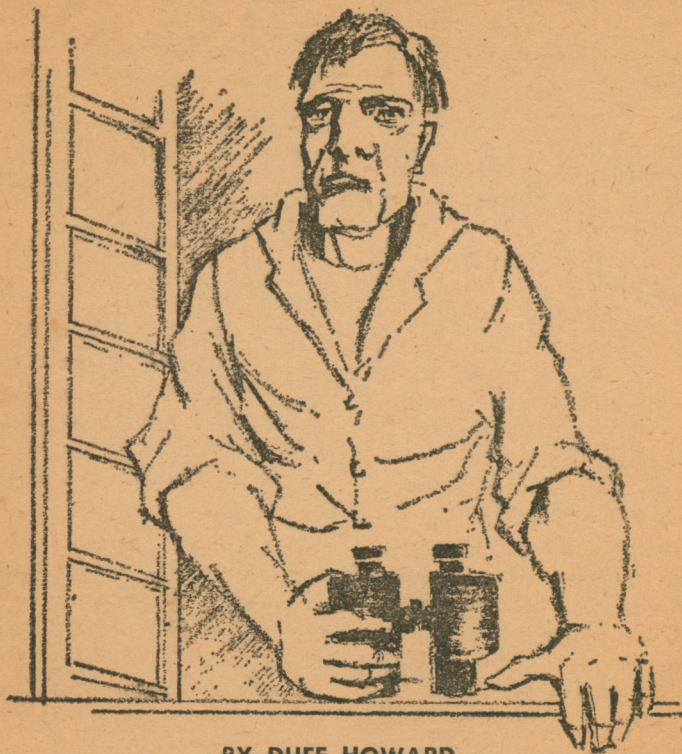
He didn't move the bodies although he knew he would have to change cars again, but got in and headed toward Phoenix. The sun was going down when he arrived on the outskirts of the city, casting a reddish-orange tinge. Arizonia was pretty this time of year and it would be nice in Phoenix. It had been a good day.



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HEART FUND



RELUCTANT WITNESS



BY DUFF HOWARD

He had witnessed a murder and now he had two things to fear . . . the killer and the police.

SUNDAY—ever the day after the night before. A heavy head and cups of black coffee on a late fall afternoon. Little comfort for a night and early morn of booze, women, jokes and laughter—followed by hours of restless sleep. This had

been my steady diet for months. Trying to forget that 'Mum' was no longer with me in this big old house. But, at least the day was well on its way to being over.

The weekdays weren't bad; rising early, dressing quickly, I was out of

the side door at dawn. That first breath of crisp country air sucked deep into the lungs was invigorating. In minutes I was gone from the memories of a loving mother. At this early hour, the small town was yet to awaken. The streets were deserted except for the cars parked here and there, standing patient guard while their owners slept. Smoke billowed from the foundry stack and floated wisplike upward to mingle with the low-hung fog that was about to be burned off with the first rays of the sun. Soon, the town would start to live—killing off these quiet minutes of solitude until the dawn of tomorrow—but for these few moments, six days a week, I alone was able to drink in this still beauty.

The drive down town to the small restaurant was hardly more than starting the motor and drifting. The town nestled in a gully surrounded by small mountains—every road led down to the center. The smell that greeted me when I opened the door of the shop was ever the same—coffee—coupled with the odors of the tables, chairs and stools and the food that was in preparation for the day's menus. It was a warming smell and I felt welcome. The pattern never changed—Rus had my steaming cup of coffee on the counter along with a small pack of buns. My lunch for the day was packed and waiting in the familiar brown paper bag. Small talk with Rus between bites and sips, and I was on my way. The familiar

clank of heavy restaurant dishes and Rus's low whistle of an old forgotten song ended as I closed the door of the shop. A slow drive of perhaps half an hour would get me to my destination—the dirt and grease-laden cab of a lumbering power shovel in a stripping hole. The hours were long and tedious, but the pay was excellent. I worked with men, hard men, but there was a bond between us in the challenge of finding and tearing up the black gold from the seemingly bottomless bowels of the earth. Every evening I returned home, only to shower and shave and leave as quickly as possible for my evening meal at Rus's Eatery. Wednesday and Saturday were date nights; no steadies, just attractive unencumbered females. League bowling and poker with the boys occupied the rest. My only hours alone in that big empty house were in sleep. One day I would get up enough nerve to sell my memories and be gone—but not just now—I didn't want to leave them too soon.

It was Sunday again—I had slept most of the day after the long revelry of the night before. Several black cups of hot coffee followed by a couple of aspirin tablets had helped to lighten my heavy head. The Sunday papers lay in a pile on the floor as I sat staring out of the window at the not too distant mountain. My gaze rested on the jutting formation of large boulders at the top—the Indian Rocks—we

used to call them when we were kids and played in their shallow caves. More memories came flooding back; I could smell the burning leaves and twigs in the still-damp cave from the fires we lit to roast our stolen apples. Sometimes, the wetness of the wood and leaves would make heavy smoke that drove us out into the fresh air, burning our eyes and making us gasp for cleaner breath. But, once ablaze, the fire made a warm refuge as the flames danced and cast shadows on the knobby boulders and permeated the air with scorched apples held by long, freshly-cut branches. For a moment, I longed to live that scene in the flesh—but life would not have it.

The article I had just read came to mind—good binoculars handy by the window wasn't a bad idea after all. I headed for the car where I kept mine, wondering if I could see—even a little way—into the caves of my childhood. I returned to my vantage point by the window rather than go to the front of the house outside and have the neighbors wondering what I was looking at.

The rays of the setting sun from the west made a picturesque scene of the mountain. The jutting rocks stood out, casting shadows below and into the mouths of the caves. I scanned the depth and breadth of the evergreens and leaveless trees, looking for a sign of the deer that should soon be working their way

down the mountain trails for a refreshing drink at the reservoir dam below before moving farther down to their grazing fields. Finding no life whatsoever, and with my eyes tiring from the constant scanning, I put the glasses aside and continued to stare upward at the rock formation, still recalling the childhood adventures I'd had. I must have been deep in daydreams, for I didn't notice the two figures until they were well out onto the overhanging rocks. I reached for my binoculars and focused my gaze on what appeared to be two men; one in a light red jacket, the other in a bright blue. The colors stood out well as the rays of the setting sun still lingered on the mountain.

Standing very close to the edge of the rock formation, they appeared to be drinking in the beauty of their view as they pointed and gestured in various directions. As I watched, the man in red stepped a bit behind the man in blue—the two seemed to become one. The next thing I saw was the man in blue grasping the air as he fell downward. His struggling form bounced from boulder to boulder, gaining momentum with the steep descent. Glancing outward from the smaller rocks near the bottom, the blue-jacketed form rolled some yards farther, coming to rest against a small clump of bushes. I raised my glasses, expecting to see the man in red cautiously picking his way down the face of the rocks to the side of his

friend. Instead, he just stood there, silhouetted in the sun, staring downward as if in shock and glued to his place. After a few minutes, he turned and made his way back through the path at the top of the mountain. I could barely see the top of his head, now, but my eyes were drawn to a shiny glare—must be the top of a car, I thought. The glare began to move—it turned and wound its way slowly down the curving macadam road. I could make out the color, now . . . maroon . . . a maroon Cadillac.

For a man whose friend had just fallen off a cliff and lay seemingly lifeless at the bottom, this Joe certainly was in no hurry to get help. He must be in shock. Anyway, he was on his way to somewhere and in no time the mountain should be climbing with rescuers. I felt shaky—perhaps a good stiff drink or two would calm my nerves. I returned to the window with my bottle—still no sign of life on the mountain or in the blue jacket. I watched and waited . . . finally, it was beginning to get dusk. I followed every car on that road with my binoculars, waiting to see if they slowed to turn into the reservoir lane several hundred yards below where the man lay. What had happened to the fellow in red . . . why didn't he come back to aid his friend? . . . I wondered. Dusk turned to darkness and I could no longer see the blue jacket . . . only the headlights of the autos moving

up and down the curving road. I turned on television to pass the time—checking the mountain every few minutes for lights—none appeared. The news was no comfort; the war in Viet Nam was going badly, a plane crash in the mid-west and a murder on the subway plus a drop in temperatures to near-freezing. I began to think of that man lying there all night in the cold. If help didn't soon come, I'd have to call the police.

Perhaps it was the mention of murder on the subway that got me to thinking about the events of the afternoon, but all of a sudden, I realized that I had been a witness to a deliberate killing. There would be no rescue party tonight . . . I had to call the authorities. Then the words of the TV commentator crossed my mind . . . "The only man in the subway car who went to the aid of the stabbing victim was himself murdered minutes later when the thug re-entered the train and thrust the same knife through him. His reward for valor was death!" I wasn't about to get mixed up in any homicide investigation nor have a killer come looking for me . . . a fast phone call with the barest of details was all the police would get from me. I dialed the number and waited . . . it seemed an eternity before someone at the other end lifted the receiver. "Chief of Police Walker, speaking." The voice was familiar—even on the phone—in a small town they all

were. "Chief . . . there's a man lying at the bottom of the Indian Rocks up by the reservoir . . . I saw him pushed over this afternoon . . . I think he's dead . . . he hasn't moved!" I said it all so fast and in one breath that I paused before returning the receiver to its hook. It was then that I heard the Chief's voice, "Who is this calling . . . hello . . . hello . . . Mike, is this you?" A shutter went through me . . . I hung up with a start. I hadn't given thought to disguising my voice . . . well, what was done was done . . . I couldn't change things, now. I could see just as much from my bedroom window upstairs; so I locked my doors, turned out the lights, and armed with my bottle of booze, trudged wearily up the steps to watch what rescue I could from the comfort of my bed. Some minutes went by—I caught myself dozing off—then I saw them—the lights. There were several cars moving rapidly in the reservoir road which was several hundred yards below where the blue-jacketed man lay. The cars halted . . . tiny lights began moving up through the trees . . . one by one they congregated about the spot. Beams of light were cast upward, scanning the overhanging rocks. Then, their tiny rays were pointed down and the procession moved slowly toward the waiting cars. Guess they'll leave further investigation for daylight . . . I thought. I watched until the cortege

wound down the mountain road and out of sight . . . then I flattened my pillows and shut my eyes, praying for a long sleep.

The shrill jangle of the telephone woke me. I looked at the clock . . . 6:30 . . . must have forgotten to set the alarm. "Oh, damn that thing . . . why doesn't it stop ringing!" My head throbbed with every step down the stairs. I yanked the receiver off the hook. "Yeah . . . who is it?" I was burning. "Mike . . . this is Rus . . . did you oversleep? You told me to call whenever you didn't show at the usual time." "Oh . . . Rus . . . yeah, I guess I did. Thanks . . . guess I forgot to set the alarm . . . I'm a little under the weather . . . but I'll be down as soon as I get organized." I slammed down the receiver, angry with myself for oversleeping. To hell with shaving . . . I thought. I took two aspirin out of the medicine cabinet and went to get dressed. I felt like crawling back into bed with my thumping head, but I knew that idea would get me in hot water with shift boss, Tony Polchin.

The cold crisp air stung my nostrils as I stepped outside. I paused to gaze up at the mountain . . . my eyes resting on where the two men stood, then following the imaginary path downward to the clump of trees . . . the blue jacket was gone. My breath made smoky air as I worked to clear the window. That guy wasn't kidding

when he said we were due for a drop in temperature. The car felt cold and damp as I slid into the driver's seat. The spell of the ride downtown was broken by the lateness of the morning. Cars were beginning to move as people hurried to work. As I opened the door to Rus's, the smell of the coffee and food made me nauseous . . . I told Rus to skip the java and I searched my pockets for change to pay for my pre-packed lunch. "Lot of excitement in town today, huh, Mike?" I gave him a puzzled look. "Didn't you see the morning paper, Mike? . . . the murder . . . the murder last night on the mountain!" He shoved the paper toward me. "Here, read it for yourself!" *ANONYMOUS CALL SENDS POLICE CHIEF TO MURDER SCENE!* . . . the words were spread across the front page in big black headlines. I read on . . . "Only clue is phone call at night . . . Chief of Police Walker surmises it may have been murderer wanting his victim's body found!" The words brought back the sickening sights of the day before . . . I wanted to get out of there . . . I wanted to breathe clean air. I threw a handful of coins on the counter . . . "I'm late, Rus . . . keep the change!" I grabbed my lunch and headed for the door.

Towering mounds of earth came into view as I neared the stripping area. It was a barren sight since the leaves had fallen. Black dust kicked

up as I left the main road and entered one of the many pot-holed arteries to the stripping pits. All around me, lumbering trucks moved about, spilling dust and chunks as they headed for the breaker. The familiar sound of rusty chains and iron hitting rock and of sputtering machinery reached my ears. Ever so slowly these earth-gulping monsters moved ton after ton of dirt, rock and coal until they appeared to be tiny toys in the mammoth craters they had created. Spaced by mountains of their own making, and as far as the eye could see, boom after boom jutted upward. As I neared my shovel, I could see it stood idle. The boss's olive-drab jeep and two trucks stood nearby . . . several men were in conversation. In my mind, I could hear the verbal barrage that was about to be uttered by boss, Polchin, at my late arrival. Apparently, the boys talking with Tony knew I was in for a dressing down, and as they noted my car approaching, beat a hasty retreat to their cabs and headed in the opposite direction, kicking up a screen of dust that slowly drifted backward and noiselessly engulfed my car in a garment of greyish particles. For a time, even Tony was hid from sight . . . and I'd have been very happy if he hadn't re-appeared when the small storm subsided. I pulled up along side of him, rolled down my window and sat waiting. He rolled the half-smoked cigar between thick lips as

he leaned down. "I warned you . . . Younger . . . that if that shovel stood idle when we were on a vein, I'd replace you!" Fire shot out of his eyes. "If Yurick hadn't called in sick . . . he'd be in that cab now and you'd be drivin' truck . . . do you understand!?" I nodded. "I overslept!" "Yeah . . . what was it this time . . . broads or booze?" There was contempt in his voice as well as anger. "I didn't leave the house all day yesterday . . . for your information . . . and if you think Yurick's a better shovel man than I am, put him in my cab . . . I don't give a damn . . . I may just blow this place, anyway!" I started the car and began revving up the motor. "Shut that damn thing off!" he shouted. I let up on the gas. "Now . . . get the hell over in that cab and start working . . . and remember . . . you're over an hour behind . . . move that lazy rear of yours . . . do you hear me? . . . I want coal out of that hole . . . tons and tons and tons of it . . . now move!" I started to crawl out of the seat. He shoved his face next to mine. "And . . . next time, Younger . . . don't bother to show up late unless you prefer the seat of a truck to that of a shovel!" With that, he climbed into his jeep, made a sharp turn in a semi-circle and headed up the road. Tony had mellowed in his choice of words . . . must have attended early Mass . . . I thought.

I felt weak as I inched my way

down the sloping incline toward my shovel. I was glad to swing into the small confines of the cab. It was cold and damp and the oil-dirt smell hung heavy. I shivered. The lumbering giant shuttered as I started the engine; it wouldn't be long before the cab was warmed by the heater. The gears were stiff and the noisy sounds of rusty chains grinding against cold metal were a welcome to my ears . . . I began to feel better.

My peace of mind was short lived about two hours later when I noticed a two-toned police cruiser moving slowly down the road. The trooper moved in next to my car. Without setting foot out of his, he gave mine a thorough going over and then settled back to watch my movements in the cab. I began to get edgy and my hands became moist in my heavy gloves. In my preoccupation of moving as much coal as I could in as little time as possible, I had forgotten about the murder. From the looks of things, Chief Walker must have recognized my voice on the phone last night . . . or that state trooper wouldn't be camped on my doorstep right now. Well, they still couldn't prove anything . . . so I was going to stay tight-lipped and un-involved for as long as my play-acting would keep me. I swung the boom out and let the bucket drop, scooping up a heap of coal. As I moved to unload it on the other side, I noted Tony's jeep moving at a fast clip

toward the two parked vehicles. He swung down from his seat as the trooper alighted from his. They stood talking, but I could tell from their glances in my direction that I was the topic of conversation. I swung my cab around for another sweep at the vein. On the return trip, I saw that they were headed in my direction. Tony made motions for me to stop the shovel; the silence left my ears ringing. I was about to crawl down when Tony shouted for me to stay put. I wondered if they expected me to make a break for it. I hadn't done anything wrong . . . why should I worry . . . but my insides told me I was.

The two of them crowded into the small space in back of my seat. I waited for the cross-examination to begin. I didn't even bother to turn around. "Mike . . . this is Trooper Nichols from the Lofty sub-station . . . he'd like to ask you some questions." I swung the seat to one side, then the other. "Yeah . . . what kind of questions?" There was contempt in my voice and they both knew it. "If you don't mind . . . Younger . . . I'd like to see your face!" It was a command. "I just bet you would!" I took my time in turning. Tony's face was red with anger, but he said nothing. The trooper's gaze was one of superiority. His face was eagle-like; pointed nose, beady—shifting eyes and thin lips, which now began to curl in a half-snarl as he was about to speak. I hated his

guts without even knowing the man . . . but just that eagle-face was enough for a starter . . . plus the fact that he was about to pry into my private life. I knew then and there that he'd never get any cooperation from me. "I understand you were late for work this morning." "Sooooo . . . is that a crime? I overslept!" I turned so that I didn't have to look into his eagle-eyed face. "I understand you live on the outskirts of Danton?" I could tell by the sound of his voice he was getting rattled. "You, sir, understand correctly!" I swung my seat in the other direction. "Mike," Tony quipped, "I think you could be a little more cooperative." "About what?" I shouted. "Why should I be answering questions . . . I've done nothing wrong!" This time I moved my face in line with his. "What'd I do, Trooper . . . what's this third degree all about, anyway?" His hand shot out and grabbed my jacket. "Now . . . you listen to me little man . . . you're talking to an officer of the law . . . understand?" I shoved his hand away; this move brought fire to his beady eyes. "Keep your hands off me . . . Trooper . . . that uniform doesn't mean a thing to me . . . not a damn thing!" I shot back. "Button your lip . . . smart guy!" He made a threatening fist. "How'd you like to take a little trip down to the sub-station? . . . maybe a little roughing-up will knock some of that cockiness out of

you, buster!" "O.K., Nichols . . . I'll be glad to go with you . . . just as soon as I call a lawyer!" He turned as if to leave, then swung around. "I'll be back . . . Younger . . . I'll be back!" With that, he jumped from the cab and headed for his cruiser. Tony, mouth agape, was about to lay into me but changed his mind and lit out after Trooper Nichols. I watched as they had a short conversation beside the cars; then, Nichols climbed into his and sped off up the road, obviously heated over my cocky attitude. I smiled to myself . . . even felt a little proud . . . until I noticed Tony headed my way. Here we go again . . . I thought . . . another battle royal!

Tony came barging into the cab. "What in hell are you trying to do? Get our trucks pulled in and our drivers arrested?" His face was red with rage. "We've always had good relations with the state police and that's the way it's gonna' stay . . . do you understand?" He was shouting, now! "You just better hope that Nichols doesn't blow the whistle on us. And, if there's any fines on our trucks . . . they'll come out of your pay . . . savvy?" Now, it was my time to shout! "Well, no eagle-eyed s.o.b. in a uniform is gonna' kick me around, either, Tony . . . and don't forget it. What in hell is this country coming to . . . we're supposed to live in a free country . . . not Russia . . . or a Germany with

Gestapo tactics. Damn it . . . I got rights, too!" "Well, exercise them off of coal company property, next time!" He turned and swung down from the cab. I felt like telling him to go to hell and find another operator . . . but thought better of it . . . I had to eat like the rest of 'em. I started the engine and slammed the boom around. For the rest of my day, I would work out my frustrations and anger by gouging out chunks of coal with boom and bucket. There was pleasure in ramming those giant teeth into a wall of black gold. One could always pretend it was something else . . . like a state trooper with an eagle-face and beady eyes. And, after the coup de grace, I could always bury him under a pile of the stuff. I smiled to myself at the thought.

I was glad to see my shift end. Tony never returned, so I headed for home. A clean shave and a soothing warm shower would help to ease my aching bones. I even felt a tinge of hunger. Hope Rus has something good on the menu for tonight. All the way home I kept trying to figure out why Nichols took my guff and then backed down when I appeared ready to go with him. Well, one thing was certain—Chief Walker suspected me or he wouldn't have passed his thoughts on to the state police. I knew I could deny my innocence about the phone call, but one thing was certain—I was in for a long siege of police questioning unless I decided to tell

all that I saw and get it over with. Either way, I was in deep. Until the killer was found, I was a target for another killing; when he was, I would be the star witness for the prosecution. I didn't like the way things were stacking up at all. My hunger pangs suddenly disappeared.

As I turned up my drive and slid from my seat, I glanced up at the mountain. A shiver pulsed through my body. All I wanted to do now was to clean up and get away as soon as possible. But, my first thought was on a quick shot or two of good booze to tide me through the next half hour. Armed with the bottle, I was drawn to the picture window. There on the floor beside the chair were the binoculars . . . my first link in the chain of guilt. They must be hid . . . I thought. I picked them up and headed upstairs.

I was about to step into the shower when I heard the door bell chime—damn it . . . I thought . . . a guy can't even shower 'n shave in peace. If this is the way things are going to be, I may as well blow town! I grabbed my robe and hurried down to answer the ring. Hidden behind the kitchen curtain, I watched as Chief Walker paced nervously outside. There was no smile on his face when I opened the door . . . only signs of a tired, sleepless man besieged with many many questions and no answers to fit them. Neither of us spoke. As he entered, he turned and pulled aside the curtain,

peering in the direction of the Indian Rocks. Without a word, he walked into the adjoining room and stood gazing out of the picture window in the same direction. I sighed within . . . thank God I had noticed the binoculars and removed them. Without turning, he broke the long silence; his voice sounded weary. "Mike . . . level with me . . . did you make that phone call last night?" I was afraid my quivering insides would betray me. I couldn't play deaf and dumb, even with Chief Walker . . . who'd never come up against a murder in his lifetime on the force. Instinct and intuition were all the tools needed to separate the wheat from the chaff . . . but I would try for all I was worth to be just one minute-sized granule if it would keep me from the threshing machine.

"I read the morning headlines, Chief . . . if that's the call you're refering to . . . but I wasn't the one who made it! Is that why you're here . . . looking out of my picture window at the mountain?" I was surprised at the calming indifference that suddenly came upon me . . . or was it the liqueur? "Chief, I had a terrific hangover yesterday . . . spent most of the day and night in bed . . . sick as a dog. I'm just beginning to feel like eating . . . but if I don't soon get something into my stomach, I'm going to be sick all over again!" I thought I sounded convincing enough. "I know, Mike . . . you

look kind of bushed, too, but I've got to find the guy who made that call . . . he's our only hope for finding the killer. He said he saw what happened! . . . I know that voice, Mike . . . as well as I know my own. It's someone in this town . . . someone I know . . . and I've got to find him before my memory of the voice fades!" I shrugged my shoulders. "I wish I could help you, Chief. I want to see the killer caught as much as you do . . . but right now my tummy tells me it's time for food. I have to get this stomach straightened out or I'm gonna' lose my job. I was late for work this morning, and Tony threatened to fire me if it happened again! I'm already in hot water over that state trooper!" His face took on interest. "What state trooper?" "Why, Trooper Nichols! He came bustin' into my cab today askin' stupid questions an . . ." Walker looked annoyed. "What questions?!" "Well, he knew I'd been late for work and he wanted to know if I lived on the outskirts of Danton. When I didn't give him any cooperation, he threatened to drag me down to the sub-station for questioning. When I mentioned getting a lawyer, he backed down. Said he'd be back, though, the s.o.b." The chief heaved a sigh. "I know who you mean, Mike . . . I had trouble with him myself last night. He tried to muscle in on our investigation but I put him in his place." He toyed with a vase from

the table. "But, from what you've just told me, I guess he intends to conduct one of his own. Every trooper in the region hates his guts, since his old man, who's a political big-wig in Tremont, had several of the boys shipped to oblivion in the sticks out west. So, everyone goes overboard trying to avoid stepping on the toes of Papa Nichol's fair-haired boy." He set the vase down and started for the door. "Well, he can't touch me in this small town . . . but if anyone wants the job as police chief, I'll gladly give them help in getting it. This is my town and I run the law enforcement in it. You let me know if this s.o.b. comes around again! I'll keep in touch, Mike." He opened the door and was gone.

Rus's was beginning to crowd up as I entered. I exchanged nods with those that I knew and moved to the back of the room. The air was electric with the talk of murder . . . I was beginning to feel sorry that I came. I spied the daily paper on a nearby table and decided to hide behind it to avoid conversation. Rus came for my order. "How's the tummy?" he asked as he readied the tablet. "Feelin' better, Rus, but I gotta nurse it. Make it something light and quick . . . and . . . look . . . I'm not in a conversation mood, o.k.?" "Gotcha," he nodded and headed for the kitchen. I hardly had the paper opened when he was back with my order. "One bowl-chicken rice, toast

and coffee . . . light enough for you?" "Sounds fine. No desert, Rus, leave the check." He ripped the sheet from the tablet and headed for another table. The soup was tasty and I could have downed another bowl, but the place was crowdin' up and I wanted out before someone cornered me in conversation. Jeanie, the counter girl, gave me her best smile but even that didn't cut any ice with me tonight. I threw a handful of coins on the counter and told her to keep the change. This time the smile was vexing . . . it was worth the dough.

Outside, the air was chilly, but smelled fresh after the warm cooking odors of Rus's. I had parked my car some distance from the Eatery because of the 'no parking' signs scattered around. Damn town fathers . . . I thought . . . the more cars—the tougher they made it for the drivers! I glanced at my watch . . . time enough to get in a few practise games of bowling before leagues began. Nearing my car on the dark street, I noted a late model Cadillac directly behind. As I came even with the front fender, a voice cut me short. "Younger!" I turned around. "Get in . . . I want to talk to you!" That commanding voice . . . I'd heard it before . . . but who? I leaned down to see. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed the eagle-beaked nose . . . Trooper Nichols . . . in civies and a private car. He looked

different without his trooper hat and uniform . . . but the nose . . . that nose . . . how I'd like to push it into his ugly face! "What do ya want from me, Nichols? I said all I had to say this morning!" His hand shot out of the window and grabbed at my jacket . . . I moved away. "I said get in, Younger, or do you want me to drag you in?" "Go to hell!" I replied, and started to walk away. "Younger!" I heard the car door open and I turned for the fight . . . but, I was looking down the muzzle of a revolver . . . I froze! "Get in and sit quietly and you won't get hurt . . . now move!" He gave me a shove. I wasn't about to argue with the gun or his ugly voice; I walked between the two cars and slid into the front seat. As I did, he slipped the gun into a shoulder holster and pulled his jacket shut. My heart was beginning to pound . . . I was scared . . . damn scared! He started the motor. "Wait a minute, Nichols, can't you ask your questions here? . . . I have a bowling league in an hour!" I turned to face him but he stared straight ahead. "Shut your mouth, Younger . . . I'll do all the talking! Forget bowling . . . you won't be doing any tonight!" He started to back up. "Like hell I won't!" I replied, as I started to open the door; but a sharp pain in my stomach made me double up . . . I hit the dash with my head as I clutched at my gut. For a time, I didn't know where I

was. Nichols shoved me farther forward as he leaned heavily in my back in order to close the open door. When he got off my back, I straightened up as best I could, hardly able to breathe. The s.o.b. must have used his elbow. "Don't try that again," he said as he pulled the car away from the curb. I knew he was trained for this rough stuff, but I couldn't understand why in hell he was taking it out on me. A few cocky remarks didn't warrant gestapo tactics.

As we swung around the darkened block back to the brightly lighted center of town, I became aware of the color of his car . . . a maroon. It lit a spark in my mind, but I couldn't place why, when the surging pain in my stomach cleared all thoughts from my brain. We were heading out of town . . . I wondered where and why! "How much did you see on Sunday afternoon?" His voice was ugly. "How much did I see of what on Sunday afternoon?" I tried to sound my old cocky self . . . but I made ready for that elbow. "Look, Younger, I know it was you who called Chief Walker that night . . . now . . . how much did you see?" He turned on me in anger. I moved toward the door. "I didn't see anything . . . and I didn't make that call!" I shouted back. The sound of my own raised voice gave me added courage . . . but, it was short lived, as his arm shot out. The pain was sharper this time because of the first jab. I let

my head rest on the dash as I clutched my stomach, breathing as light as I could to ease the throbbing. "You s.o.b.," I muttered under my breath, "I'll get you for this!" He must have heard me. "Speak up when you talk to me!" he shouted, as he grabbed my jacket collar and pulled me up. The car weaved across the road. "The pain . . . the pain!" I yelled, as I gasped for breath. He steadied the car. "You ought to know by now, Younger, that I'm not fooling. I want answers . . . you hear?" Now, quit stalling around!" He made another quick move with his elbow and I moved to cover my middle with both arms. "How much did you see!?" He was near to screaming. He floored the gas pedal and the car lurched forward. "How'd you like to die mashed up against the dash?!" he shouted. "For God's sake . . . slow down, Nichols!" I yelled. He let out a shrieking laugh, taking his hands from the wheel. The car weaved. I had mental visions of tangled bodies . . . I was shaking inside. "Talk . . . Younger . . . talk!" I closed my eyes, not wanting to see the death that was sure to come. "I'll talk . . . Nichols . . . I'll talk . . . but slow this car down before we're both killed . . . please . . . slow it down!" I was near to sobbing when he let up on the gas and steadied the car. I cradled my head in my arm and leaned against the door . . . drained of all mental and physical courage. He drove on in

silence, knowing he had beaten my resistance to the ground. Nichols knew he'd get his answers the next time he asked.

As the car slowed and cut off the main highway, I uncovered my eyes and sat up. It was then that I realized we were heading into the stripping area . . . I was puzzled. "O.K. . . Younger . . . start talking . . . you've been silent long enough!" His voice was ugly again. I took a deep breath and grimaced at the sharp pain. "I saw a guy in a blue jacket fall off the rocks . . . that's all." "You told the Chief he was pushed over . . . or didn't you read the account of it in the paper?" "No I didn't read the paper . . . and I was so excited when I made that call that I don't remember what I said to Chief Walker." He grabbed my arm and squeezed hard. "Regardless of what you did or didn't say to Walker . . . I want to know what you saw on that mountain yesterday!" He squeezed harder . . . I winced. "Look, all I saw was a man fly outward . . . the other guy was behind him . . . I don't know if he slipped or was pushed. I was excited at the time! Honest . . . you gotta believe me!" I was pleading. "I don't believe you!" The car came to a screeching halt. He lunged at my throat with his big hands! I backed against the door, trying to protect myself with raised arms. I wasn't the biggest guy in the world, but he was a strapping six-footer, so I was no physical

match in this or any situation with him coming at me. "Don't hit me!" I begged, but still bracing for the expected blow. He grabbed my arms in his huge hands and pulled them from in front of my face. His muscular vice-like grip sent stabbing pains through them. He let go of one arm and spun me around with the other, yanking it into and up my back. The pain was unbearable . . . I thought he was going to break my arm off. "My God, Nichols, don't break it . . . the pain . . . the pain!" I screamed. He cursed! I must have passed out.

The sting of cold water against my face helped revive me. It sent a chill through my body. I was lying on my back and there was a light in my eyes . . . I couldn't see a thing when I did open them. I turned my head to avoid the beam . . . the light followed. "Wake up, Younger, we're not through talking yet!" I rolled to the side, trying to dodge the light. The pain in my stomach and arms throbbed with every movement. "Take that damn thing out of my eyes, Nichols!" I yelled. He dropped it down to my chin. My body felt cold and numb. I raised up on my elbows; then to a sitting position. The pain made me feel sick. There was no moon and the heavy clouds made the surroundings eerie black. As my eyes adjusted, I could see we were along a stripping road, where the huge piles of dirt and rock jutted upward. "I'm cold!" I complained. "You're gone be a

lot colder, Younger, before the night's over. You know . . . you're a sucker for punishment . . . you know that?! You know what I want to hear and yet you're willing to take a beating piece by piece just to hide it. . . . I don't understand you at all!" He threw the beam into my eyes again; I turned my head. "smarten up . . . or I'll wrap you over the skull with this flashlight . . . come on, now, give with the story . . . the right story!" He kicked my right leg. The sharp pain made me want to kill him . . . I'd had about enough abuse for one night. I made a move to get up. A shove from his foot sent me sprawling! He laughed. I felt for a rock, and he spotted my groping hand and moved to stomp on it. I tried to roll away, but I wasn't fast enough. I shoved at his leg with my free hand, but he ground his shoe harder. "Oh . . . oh . . . oh . . . Nichols . . . please . . . please . . . take your foot off my hand . . . the pain . . . the pain!" I was shouting and sobbing at the same time. He lifted the pressure. I doubled up, nursing my aching hand. "How much more of this are you willing to take, Younger!" he shouted. "I got all night if you have enough life left!" I'd had enough pain. "O.K., Nichols . . . I'll tell you what I saw," I said, gulping in air, "but after I do, I want you to tell me why you gave me such a beating over what I saw yesterday afternoon." I knew my voice sounded in

a half-sob, but I didn't care, I was sick from the pain and scared . . . scared as hell! "Sit up, Younger!" he commanded, "your voice sounds garbled . . . and stop actin' like a baby . . . I can't stand to see a grown man cry!" There was contempt in his voice; I hated his guts. Wearily I rolled from my side and raised myself to a sitting position with my one good hand. "I was looking at the rocks through my binoculars when I saw these two men; one in a blue jacket, the other in red. They stood looking and pointing for a few minutes—then the one in red faded behind the one in blue. The next thing I saw was this guy clutching the air, bouncing from rock to rock as he fell. The guy in red just stood there for a while, then headed for his car in the clearing in back. I thought he was going for help, but when no one showed up by the time it got dark, I thought I'd better call the police . . . I didn't identify myself because I didn't want to get mixed up in anything . . . that's all!" I could feel the warm moistness of the blood as it oozed from my gouged hand and I was wishing I could wash out the dirty gravel that he'd ground into it with his shoe. "What else did you see?" "I told you . . . Nichols . . . what do you want from me?" My voice broke again. "You little cry baby . . . call yourself a man . . . talk, damn you . . . or I'll really give you something to cry about!" He raised his

arm as if to strike me with the flashlight! "Could you see who the men were?!" He towered over me . . . arm raised as if to clout my head with the light. I shielded my face. "Did you recognize anyone?" "Hell no . . . my binoculars aren't that powerful . . . no binoculars are at that distance!" He lowered his hand. "What color was the car, Younger?" So that was it . . . that was what he was digging for . . . then it hit me! Maroon . . . that was the color of the killer's car . . . the same as his . . . a Cadillac . . . a maroon Cadillac. Good Lord . . . I thought . . . Nichols is the killer of that poor guy on the mountain! No wonder he was knocking the hell out of me . . . I was the only one who could link him to the murder! "What was the color of the car, Younger?" I hesitated. "Maroon . . . I think it was a maroon Cadillac." He snickered. "Now do you get the connection, Younger? . . . the reasons for your beatings . . . and the reason I can't let you leave this place alive?" I was panic stricken . . . I didn't want to die . . . not out here . . . alone . . . and in the dark. My God, what was I gonna do . . . I was no physical match for this sadistic maniac. I lowered my head in my arms and began to sob. Nichols began throwing the beam of light in all directions, as if in search of something.

"O.K., crybaby . . . on your feet!" His voice held only disgust.

Knowing any hesitation on my part would bring more misery, I slowly got to my feet. "I guess by this time you've figured out who you saw on top of that mountain yesterday . . . haven't you, Younger?" I wiped my face with my sleeve. "Yeah, Nichols, I've figured it out. But, why'd ya push him over . . . the poor guy . . . I can still see him clutching at the air and bouncing from rock to rock. I'll never forget that sight as long as I live!" I hunched over from the soreness in my stomach. "Don't worry, Younger, you won't have to remember it very long. In fact . . . you're gonna know what it feels like to take that little trip yourself!" His voice sent a shudder through me. "This poor soul you're talkin' about . . . he was no poor soul! He was a dirty, rotten, stinkin' blackmailer . . . that's what he was . . . and he was gonna blackmail my father for every penny he was worth! My father . . . my father . . . one of the most powerful men in this state! Why . . . even the governor jumps when my father says jump! Nobody . . . but nobody . . . is ever gonna blacken the name of Thomas A. Nichols . . . not while I'm alive!" His voice was a snarl. "I'll push every s.o.b. who ever tries off a cliff . . . understand?!" He was shouting . . . not to me in particular . . . but to the whole world! "Just like I pushed that slob off the mountain . . . and . . . just like I'm gonna push you down a stripping hole!" He was

hysterical, now, shouting and laughing at the same time! Then he stopped and the silence was frightening. He moved toward me, grabbing my jacket and twisting as he pulled my face up to his eagle-nosed one. "I just saved the state the cost of a blackmailing trial . . . that's all!" He shoved the flashlight into my eyes to read my reaction . . . I closed them. "No dirty, rotten hood is gonna drag my father's name through the mud . . . do you understand that . . . Younger!" He shook me so hard my feet left the ground. "So . . . now you know why that guy took a fall . . . don't you?!" He shook me harder! "Now you know why you're gonna take a fall, too, don't you, Younger!?" He shoved me away; I stumbled and fell. "Look, Nichols," I pleaded, "if the guy had it coming . . . he got what he deserved. But . . . look . . . I haven't done anything against your father . . . why kill me?" I was begging on both knees. "But you did do something wrong, Younger," he fired back, "you saw me push him and you reported it to the police . . . I can't let you live . . . I can't!" His big frame towered over me. "Please don't kill me, Nichols . . . please don't kill me," I pleaded, I didn't know it was you!" His big hand shot out and I was being drug to my feet. "But you do now!" he replied. "Please, Nichols, I won't tell . . . I've kept quiet, haven't I? I don't want to get involved . . . look, I'll leave town

. . . just fade from sight. You'll be safe, I promise!" I clutched at his jacket; he shoved me away. "The police have ways, Younger! They'd get it out of you . . . and that would embarrass both me and my father! Sorry, Younger, I can't take that chance!" He shoved me in front of him; I hunched over with pain. "Now . . . walk slowly . . . no quick movements . . . understand. Or, I'll be forced to shoot you in the back!" I had to forget the pain . . . I had to concentrate on some kind of a plan for escape. But how . . . when? . . . there wasn't much time left. "Tell you what I'm lookin' for, Younger! I'm lookin' for that strippin' hole that has that endless bottom! You know the one . . . where you look down and your eyeballs spin with the distance!" Panic almost overtook me . . . I thought of running . . . but changed my mind. "It's around here, isn't it? I passed it this morning . . . but all of these piles have me confused in the darkness. But, we'll find it . . . won't we, Younger?" I kept silent. To hell with you . . . I thought . . . shoot me in the back if you want to . . . it's a hell of a sight better than being shoved down a stripping hole! "I did a lot of looking around today after I talked with you," he snickered as he flashed the light from side to side, "I knew by your actions that you knew more than you were willing to admit. I knew you saw something on that mountain you were keeping

quiet about . . . you didn't fool me at all!" That ugly gloating mouth of his . . . I thought . . . how I wished there was a way to close it forever. "You weren't fooling me, Younger, I was already planning your demise then . . . but when I saw that deep stripping hole . . . I knew that was for you!" He paused again to study the piles; I kept walking. "I rather take pleasure in watching people fly through the air . . . it gives me an elated feeling. Everybody I eliminate from here on will get the same treatment! Only . . . it has to be a different and new way each time . . . do you hear me, Younger?" He had fallen some distance behind, but kept the light on my back. "A high building . . . or an airplane . . . I can see them clutching at the air . . . end over end . . . down, down, down!" His sadistic ramblings . . . he couldn't be sane! I half-turned . . . he seemed to be preoccupied in his mental wanderings about height! This might be my chance . . . I thought. I knew we were near the hole by the size of the mounds of dirt piled around it. My thoughts started racing . . . when should I make the break for freedom? It had to be just at the right moment or my life was lost!

There were several deep holes nearby . . . but knowing his sadistic mind . . . he wouldn't settle for a mediocre plunge . . . I'd have to go over the steep gorge . . . the

one etched in his mind by his daylight search. I had only a few minutes from the time he discovered its presence and the climb up the surrounding dirt and rock. What was there left that I could do? "Oh, God," I prayed, "give me an idea . . . any idea . . . I want to live so very badly!" His voice cut the silence. "Slow down, Younger!"

I stopped . . . every minute counted, now. He kept flashing the light from side to side . . . searching . . . ever searching for his bottomless pit! Then . . . the idea struck! Some of the holes didn't go straight down . . . some had slight ledges before the drop! If I could manage to scramble up one of the lower piles and drop from sight over the other side and crawl to the ledge before being shot in the back, I might have a chance for escape! If I let out a scream as I went over . . . and shoved some rubble down along with it . . . he might think I made a mistake in my haste . . . and fell to my death. At any rate, it would probably slow his pursuit until I could bed myself down in the dirt and rock. "Oh, I know what is going on in that little head of yours, Younger!" His voice startled me out of my thoughts. "You're trying to figure a way to outsmart me. Look kid . . . I've been trained in this stuff . . . you're not dealing with an amateur . . . you're dealin' with a pro . . . a pro!" I had to stall for time; I buckled over as if in more pain.

"Those two raps you gave me in the stomach with your elbow . . . I think I'm gonna be sick!" I bent way over, as if I were going to go down on my knees. I made regurgitating sounds. Thinking I was about to throw up, he took the light off me and turned around, walking back, studying the piles. This was it . . . my chance! I took off as fast as my throbbing body would carry me; zigging and zagging as if in combat. He heard my footsteps and swung the light in the direction of the sound. He tried to cover me with the beam and fire at the same time, but he couldn't—not while in motion. I gained ground each time he slowed to fire. I was trying to put as much distance between us on level ground as I could before trying to claw my way up one of the smaller piles on either side of the road. My heart was pounding so fast—I thought it would jump right out of my chest. Tears streamed down my face; every gulp of air was a sob. I was running so fast, my feet hardly seemed to touch the ground.

I picked a pile to my left so I could follow the light's progress with just a slight turn of my head. I began clawing the rock and dirt. Some of it gave way and I lost ground; some held and I gained. I was almost winded but escape was the difference between living and dying . . . and I wanted to live so very badly. His light was dim at that distance . . . it gave me hope that I'd reach the top. Thank God for

the cloudy nite. Just a few more yards and I could slide over. I knew Nichols could hear the dirt and rock as it slid beneath me . . . he kept the beam in the direction of the sound. A spent bullet made a dull thud to my left. I clawed the pile more fiercely! Another thud . . . this time below me! He must be getting desperate . . . I thought . . . firing without a visible target. How many shots had he fired . . . in my haste I forgot to count! Ape-like—on all fours—I clawed the mound of rubble; dust from the loose dirt and rock flew into my gaping mouth as I gulped for air; my mouth felt dry and parched and I choked and coughed as the tiny particles drifted upward. I kept track of Nichol's light out of the corner of my eye . . . it wouldn't be long before the beam reached me and he'd have an excellent shot at my back! I paused to gauge the distance left to climb and realized I was less than a body length to the top! I dug my shoe into the pile and shoved with every fiber of my being. My foot held . . . I had made it! Ever so gently, I eased myself over, inching sideways to avoid sliding downward too fast. The pile must have a ledge . . . I thought . . . the pitch is somewhat gradual. My stomach and hand throbbed as I drug myself over the rock and slate. Some stones—loosened by my movements—rolled downward. The larger ones—gaining speed in their descent—bounced over the ledge

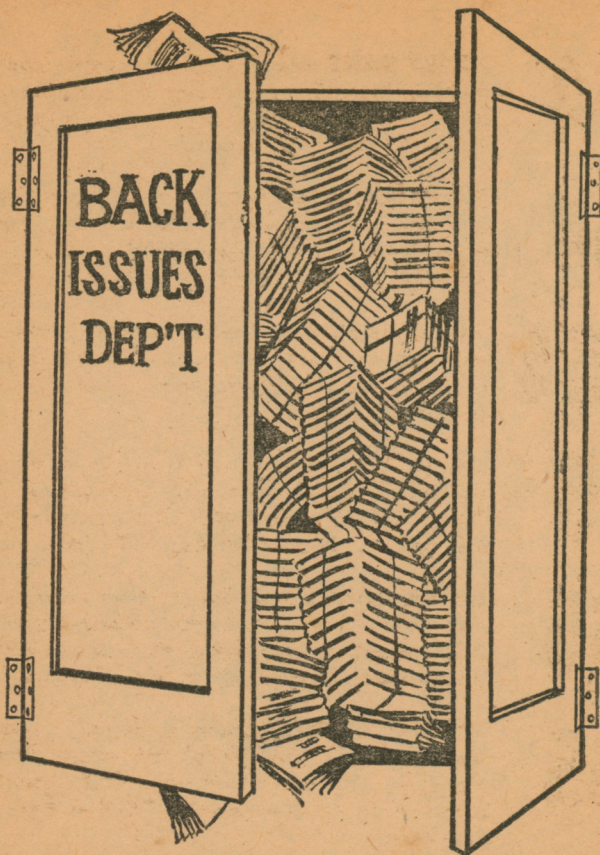
and could be heard in the echoing depth below. I shuddered at the thought of taking that plunge.

Nichols must have reached the pile and started up; I could hear the sound of the sliding earth coming from that direction. I had to reach the ledge before starting to dig in—that way I could drag the rubble over me with little fear of slipping off. If I tried it now, I might cause a slide and go down with it! I was intent on my own cautious movements until I heard Nichols nearing the top of the pile. I paused—twisting my head in the direction of his climb. The absence of the light puzzled me as the sound of sliding dirt and rock got nearer and nearer. All of a sudden, Nichols came barging over! His momentum was so great that his huge body stumbled downward, loosening the rubble. He let out a piercing scream as he plummeted out into the air! His horrified voice became fainter and

fainter as it echoed from the gouged walls of the hole. A dull thud . . . then the last scrapings of some still loose stones . . . and then silence—dead silence in the black of night. There was no hurry now, only the careful climb back up. I bowed my head in silent prayer.

In the morning I would find Nichols' gun and flashlight half way up the pile where he had discarded them in his haste to track me down. Perhaps he thought his bare hands would help him claw his way up faster. At any rate, the gun was useless—its bullets spent. But, the flashlight may have saved his life although he would never know it . . . I knew it had saved mine. I didn't want any mementos of this brutal night . . . my thoughts and my bruises were enough! As I inched my way back up the pile, I wondered if the name of THOMAS A. NICHOLS would ever again make the governor jump!





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VENOM

It was a particularly virulent streptococcus that was killing Dr. Davis' patients. But the source of the infection was not to be found in a test-tube.

THE DOOR of the doctor's room at the University Hospital opened and a slender, dark-haired, young man in white trousers and jacket hurriedly entered carrying a patient's medical chart under his arm. Daylight was just breaking, and the clock on the wall showed 6 A.M. He looked worried as he nervously dialed a number on on the phone.

After three rings, a voice answered, "Dr. Davis speaking."

"Dr. Davis, this is your resident, Boyce Hardwick, at the University Hospital. Sorry to call you so early, but it's urgent."

BY
GUY
GOWEN

"That's okay, Boyce. What's up?"

"Mrs. Palmer, your patient in Room 201, has a temperature of 106."

"Are you sure? It doesn't seem possible."

"I checked it twice myself."

"I'll be right over."

In about forty minutes Dr. Davis arrived. He was a man in his early fifties, tall, broad-shouldered, with sandy-colored hair, a ruddy complexion, and steel-gray penetrating eyes. Dr. Davis was head of the Department of Surgery, a position he had held for just ten months. When he was appointed, he was the youngest man ever to have attained such a responsible position at the University.

As he went to the dressing room to slip on his white jacket, he said "Let me see Mrs. Palmer's chart."

Boyce had been pacing up and down, and it was with an expression of relief that he handed the chart to Dr. Davis, saying, "Here it is, sir."

"Thanks, Boyce," said the doctor, thumbing quickly through the pages. His lips pressed together harder, and harder, as he reviewed the data. "I don't understand it," he finally said. "We operated upon Mrs. Palmer only 48 hours ago. It was clean surgery. Come on. Let's go up to see her. I hope we can do something about it, but it doesn't look good."

As they entered Room 201, they saw Mrs. Palmer propped up in bed with an ice bag on top of her head,

and sipping water through a straw. Her face was flushed, she was breathing rapidly, and there was an expression in her eyes, not of worry, but rather of uncomprehension. Setting down the glass of water on the bedside table, she said, "You're up early. Don't you doctors ever sleep?"

As he approached the bed, Dr. Davis smiled, and said, "We grab a little here and there. I had to come over to the hospital on an emergency so I decided to check on you. How do you feel?"

"Hot, thirsty and I have a headache."

"You have a little fever," said Dr. Davis, "and I'd like to check you over a bit." He motioned to the nurse to lower the bed, and proceeded to examine Mrs. Palmer's throat, and chest. Then he had the nurse uncover the abdomen. At the edges of the bandages was a redness which extended outward in several thin lines. Dr. Davis had seen enough, and quickly but gently recovered the surgical area. "Mrs. Palmer," he said. "We'll try to make you more comfortable, and I'll be in to see you this afternoon."

Outside the room, Dr. Davis motioned Boyce Hardwick to accompany him down the corridor to the window. "Boyce," he said, "Mrs. Palmer won't last out the day."

"There must be something we can do. A blood transfusion, a large dose of antibiotic."

"If there was anything I could

do, I'd do it. In all my years of surgery I've never seen such a fulminating, postoperative strep infection. And it had to happen to what was really a case of simple surgery."

"But how?" asked Dr. Hardwick. "She had the usual prophylactic antibiotics."

"There's only one answer. One of us in the operating-room that day is a carrier of an anti-biotic resistant streptococcus. I'll arrange immediately with Dr. John Derry, our pathologist, to have nose and throat cultures of each person concerned."

"But we all wore masks."

"They can be imperfect. Also a sterile rubber glove can leak . . . which brings up another point. I want you to examine the hands and arms of each person who handled anything at the operating table during Mrs. Palmer's surgery to see if they have any open sores or skin lesions. Also check the hospital sterilization equipment. Finally I want operating-room A closed, cleaned and disinfected."

"Where will you do the case you have scheduled this morning?"

"Boyce, we'll do no more surgery until we find out who's carrying the strep. I'll talk to Mr. Harper and explain the situation. It's only a chronic appendix. He won't mind going home until next week. I'll be in the Pathology Department for a few minutes talking to Dr. Derry. Afterward, I'll meet you on Two and we'll make rounds.

I hope we don't find any other strep infections."

Dr. John Derry's appearance belied his reputation internationally as an outstanding pathologist. He was short, corpulent, his hair was always mussed, and his eyebrows would have made John L. Lewis jealous. Clothes were of no interest to him, and he generally looked sloppy. Dr. Derry was just past sixty, but his black hair still refused to add more than an occasional strand of gray. This was accentuated by the heavy black-rimmed glasses he wore. These contained unusually thick lenses, and as he peered at you his eyes were almost froglike. He was an early bird, and was already at his desk when Dr. Davis entered. Looking up, he said, "Hello, Ralph, what brings you to these humble quarters so early?"

"John, we've a problem in surgery. There's a virulent strep loose, and we need your help."

"Sure. Let's have the details."

"Last Monday I performed a simple bi-lateral salpingectomy on a Mrs. Palmer the wife of one of my good friends. This morning, 48 hours later she has a virulent strep infection with a temperature of 106 plus. The area around the wound is beefy-red, and streaks of lymphangitis are already in evidence. She's quite toxic, and she'll be dead by midnight."

"There were no surgical complications?"

"Absolutely none."

"She had the usual course of prophylactic antibiotic?"

"Yes."

"Even with an antibiotic resistant strain it would take a massive dose of the bacteria to act fatally so quickly. We'd better get a blood culture, and a culture from the wound, right away. Can you get permission for an autopsy?"

"I hate to tell Ed Palmer his wife is going to die, and at the same time ask permission for a 'post', but I'll do it. It may save future lives. This is certainly a blot on me as head of the department of surgery."

"This could happen to anyone," said Dr. Derry, "But I must admit a postoperative strep infection is almost unheard of since the introduction of penicillin. As you know, they're usually due to staph. and pyocyanus. Anyway, I'll help all I can. I'll get our bacteriologist on the job right away. Whom do you wish cultured?"

"Boyce Hardwick, my resident, Ted Orvis, my intern, Patricia Collins, the chief surgical nurse, Velma Harris, the assistant surgical nurse, Harry Strong, my anaesthetist, and of course myself. How long will it take to determine which one of us is a carrier?"

"About 18 hours. A little longer to type the organism."

"Fine. I've cancelled all further surgery until I hear from you."

Dr. Davis now rejoined Dr. Hard-

wick on the second floor. They made rounds, and returned to the doctor's lounge. They both sat in the leather sofa, leaned back and relaxed in silence for a few moments. Then Boyce Hardwick said, "Except for Mrs. Palmer, all the patients we operated on Monday seem to be okay."

"Thank the Lord for that," replied Dr. Davis. "Also Tuesday's patients seem to be following a normal course, but we won't know about them for another 24 hours. I want you to keep a close check on each patient. If there's any evidence of infection, call me wherever I am and whatever the hour may be."

"Yes, sir. Incidentally, there's one thing that puzzles me."

"What's that?"

"You operated on six persons Monday. Five were clinic patients, and Mrs. Palmer was the only private patient. Why was she the one to develop the infection? The surgery in the others was much more complicated . . . why in three you had to open the large bowel."

"I wish I knew," said Dr. Davis. "Probably coincidence. I'll be at the medical school for my class between one and two, then to my office. After that I'm going home and will be there all evening. If I hear nothing further from you, I'll be in at eight-thirty in the morning to make rounds."

When Dr. Ralph Davis arrived the next morning, Boyce Hard-

wick was waiting for him in the doctor's lounge, and greeted him with, "One of your patients who was operated on Tuesday is starting to run a slight fever."

"Which one?"

"The patient in 210."

"How much elevation in temperature?"

"100.5. It has been normal until the nurse took it at eight this morning. I didn't call you because I knew you'd be on your way over."

Putting on his white jacket, Dr. Davis said, "Let's see him first, then we can make general rounds. If it's what I suspect, I want to immediately check with Dr. Derry regarding the nose and throat cultures."

When Dr. Davis entered the Pathology Laboratory a few minutes later, Dr. Derry looked up from his microscope, and said, "Ralph, you look like someone who has just had bad news. Another postoperative infection?"

"Right, but this time in one of the patients I operated on Tuesday."

"Who was it?"

"Jacob Herrick, brother of the President of the Board of Directors of the hospital."

"Whew! How bad is it?"

"A beginning cellulitis around the operation site, and a slight fever. It's a strep all right, but I think we can pull him through. I came in to ask if there's anything on the nose and throat cultures."

"Not till this afternoon. By the way, Ralph, how many patients did you operate on on Tuesday?"

"Four, why?"

"How many were private patients?"

"One, Mr. Herrick."

"So, on Monday the only private case you operated on developed a postoperative strep infection, and on Tuesday the same thing happened. In other words, out of ten surgical cases the clinic patients got along all right, but the private ones developed infections. Doesn't that seem odd?"

"Boyce Hardwick raised the same question, but I told him it was probably coincidence."

"Possibly so," said Dr. Derry, "But I haven't seen a postoperative strep infection in this hospital for over fifteen years. Anyway, we'll get cultures on Mr. Herrick and see if it's the same organism that infected Mrs. Palmer."

"Sorry to spoil the hospital's record," said Dr. Davis.

"Cut it out, Ralph. I don't know what the answer is, but I'm sure it isn't your fault. Where'll you be, if I want you?"

"On the surgical floor finishing my rounds and trying to save Herrick. By the way, I've been requested to meet with the Director of the hospital and the Chief of Staff later this morning, to discuss the postoperative infections. As you know, Mrs. Palmer died yesterday evening. If anything happens to

Mr. Herrick, or another infection occurs, on my service, my name will be mud, if it isn't already."

When Dr. Davis reported to the office of the hospital Director at eleven o'clock he was sure he now knew how those people must have felt who were called before the historical Spanish Inquisition. As he entered he saw Oliver Cradwell, the Director, sitting behind his huge desk which was littered with miscellaneous papers. Cradwell was a large, rotund man with a chronically flushed face, thinning brown hair, and matching wispy eyes. In discussions or arguments he always tried to use his six-foot-two and 240 pounds to advantage in attempting to smother opposition. He had a compatible thunderous voice when he chose to use it. To his right was his antithesis in size, Dr. Cleveland Hasper III, a cadaverous man of small stature, with an unusually prominent forehead overhanging dark-ringed sunken eyes. Dr. Hasper's main qualification for being Chief of Staff was that his grandfather Dr. Cleveland Hasper I had been the founder of the hospital. He chose to keep his associates continually reminded of this fact.

Mr. Cradwell motioned Dr. Davis to a chair in front of his desk, and said, "Dr. Hasper has requested this meeting, so I will turn it over to him."

Dr. Hasper began with, "Dr. Davis, we brought you to this in-

stitution as the most suitable replacement for retiring Dr. Fred Wellington who had headed our department of surgery with distinction for many years. It was our hope you would pick up where he left off, and continue our famous tradition. Instead we find our hopes shattered, and the reputation of our institution in a precarious situation. You have been with us only a few months, but in that time you have had more postoperative strep infections than Dr. Wellington had in over fifteen years. How do you explain this?"

"One of my surgical staff is apparently a strep carrier," said Davis. "With the help of Dr. Derry we hope to have the answer within a few hours. Once the person has been identified, he will be relieved of further duty in the surgery department until his condition is cured. If any breach of surgical technique occurred, it will be discovered and corrected."

"But of course," said Dr. Hasper in his usual stuffy manner, "A surgeon of your caliber, qualified to head the department at our University Hospital, is not supposed to permit a breach of technique, if that is what happened. In any event, it will be necessary for you to appear before the Hospital Board at its meeting next Tuesday, and be prepared to offer an explanation of the unfortunate events that have occurred."

"I quite understand," said Dr.

Davis, rising and making his departure.

That afternoon as Drs. Davis and Hardwick were discussing a patient's chart at the floor nurses' desk, the phone rang. "Two South," said the nurse at the desk. "Yes Dr. Davis is here. I'll tell him." Hanging up the phone and turning to Dr. Davis, she said, "Dr. Derry would like to see you in his lab at once. It's quite important."

"Thank you," said Dr. Davis. "Boyce, you carry on here while I find out what John has on his mind. Maybe it's about the cultures."

As Dr. Davis entered the lab, the pathologist was studying a blood agar plate. "Ralph," he said, "All of the nose and throat cultures of those who assisted you on Monday were negative for strep."

"My resident examined all of them for open skin lesions and found none, so where does that put us?"

"It tells us the postoperative infections didn't come from the people who assisted you."

"John, could the organisms have been blown into the operating room through the air-conditioning inlet?"

"That could be a remote possibility, and I checked on it. The system is working perfectly, and there's no cross-connection with any area in the hospital where there are infectious cases. Besides, if the infection was air-borne, why weren't some of the other cases you operated on affected?"

"Touche," said Dr. Davis, "But there must be an answer."

"There is, if we can find it. I'm beginning to develop a theory which I'll keep to myself for the moment. Take a look at this blood agar plate. What do you see?"

Dr. Davis picked up the plate and looked at it for a few moments. "Pinpoint colonies surrounded by a zone of hemolysis. Strep."

"Take another look."

"They seem to be mucoid in type."

"John, you'd make a good bacteriologist. I had the same impression which usually means virulence, but I can't be sure for a few hours. By that time we should have enough growth from your second infected patient to make a comparison. By the way, how is Mr. Herrick?"

"He doesn't seem to be as sick as Mrs. Palmer, thank God. We may have a chance of controlling his infection."

"I'm glad to hear that. I know you're on the spot, at least for the time-being."

"Meaning what?" asked Dr. Davis.

"That's all I can tell you today. It's after five-thirty. Let's knock off. How about stopping by my office when you come in in the morning?"

"Sure, I'll see you then. In the meantime I'll try to analyze the innuendo you threw out a few moments ago."

When Dr. Davis entered the pathology department the next morning he could see Dr. Derry was excited about something. He was greeted with, "John, I've arranged for an immediate meeting in the Director's office. Hasper will be there. It's important you attend, if possible."

"I'll go right along with you. What's up?"

"Plenty. I could tell you now, but I'd just have to repeat myself to the others. Briefly, there's more to those postoperative infections your patients had than was first apparent."

When they arrived in the Director's office, Mr. Cradwell said, "Let's sit at the small conference table. It will be more comfortable. Now, Dr. Derry, I'll turn the meeting over to you. You indicated there was considerable urgency to our getting together."

"It is urgent," replied Dr. Derry. "Someone in this hospital is trying to undermine Dr. Davis' reputation."

"I'd say he is trying to undermine his own reputation with the two postoperative strep infections," said Dr. Hasper, caustically.

"Dr. Hasper," said Derry, "I think your condemnation is decidedly premature. I feel fairly sure those infections were not Ralph's fault. It is my belief they were planted."

Hasper looked at Cradwell with a startled expression, then said,

"That's fantastic. In all my years of medical practice I never heard of such a thing. On what do you base such a wild theory?"

"First, neither Dr. Davis nor those who assisted him are strep carriers. Second, the hospital sterilization equipment is working perfectly. Third, the bug could not have come in through the ventilating equipment. Finally, there was no break in surgical technique."

"Humph . . ." snorted Hasper.

"Also," said Dr. Derry, "I think it's odd the strep infections occurred only in Dr. Davis' private patients. On the same days he operated on ten clinic patients all of whom followed a normal course."

"It could have been coincidence," suggested Mr. Cradwell.

"Absolutely not!"

"What makes you so sure?"

"The organism which caused the infections has been identified as *Streptococcus equisimilis*. It is of animal origin and rarely affects humans. There are eight sub-types. In both patients we found sub-type 5. Statistically, the chance this could be due to coincidence is infinitesimal."

"Good Lord, where could it have come from?" asked Dr. Davis.

"I think I know exactly where it came from . . . a stock culture we maintain for students in medical school. The organism was isolated about 15 years ago from a patient with sore throat who had acquired her infection from raw milk."

"On what do you base your assumption?" asked Dr. Hasper.

"Each year," replied Dr. Derry, "we make a fresh culture and seal it. After I identified the organism from Dr. Davis' patients, and reviewed the situation, I checked on the culture. Call it a hunch, if you will. The seal had been broken."

"But couldn't that have happened when the cultures are moved about?" said Dr. Hasper.

"Not the way we seal anything as potent as that organism."

"Why would anyone do such a thing?" asked Dr. Davis.

"Obviously," replied Dr. Derry, "Someone hates you, and decided this was the way to hurt you most . . . to try to destroy your career. The big question is, who? The strep had to be introduced into the wound at the time of surgery, which at least limits it to those who assisted you on Monday and Tuesday."

"That means either my resident, interne, chief surgical nurse, assist-surgical nurse, or the anaesthetist," said Dr. Davis.

"Exactly."

After a few moments of thought, Dr. Davis said, "I can eliminate the assistant surgical nurse and the anaesthetist since they did not come in contact with the field of operation. I refuse to believe such a thing would be done by Miss Collins, my chief nurse, Dr. Hardwick, my resident, or . . ." Dr. Davis hesitated a moment, then

continued, "or Dr. Orvis, my interne."

"Why the hesitation?" asked Dr. Derry.

"Something occurred to me, but then seemed too negligible to mention."

"Maybe you'd better mention it anyway."

"I know my senior interne has been displeased because I don't allow him as much freedom as my predecessor, Dr. Wellington, but that's nothing unusual. I felt the same way when I was an interne. However, I can't believe he'd do anything of this sort."

"Who knows what motivates people to do some of the things they do," said Dr. Derry. "Dr. Orvis' reaction may be deeper than you think. As a member of the hospital staff he would have ready access to the bacterial culture. As far as I am concerned, he is suspect. Now, who else have you crossed swords with since you joined our faculty?"

"No one to my knowledge."

Turning to the Director of the hospital, Dr. Derry asked, "Mr. Cradwell, how do you wish to proceed with this investigation? I'm sure you'll concede it's necessary."

"Definitely," replied Mr. Cradwell. "For the time being I'd appreciate it if you would take on the job. With your vast experience in forensic medicine and the fact that you are the special consultant to the coroner's office makes you the logical one. I realize this is a

potential police matter, but we do not wish any premature publicity. Do you agree, Dr. Hasper?"

"Certainly," said Dr. Hasper. "John has worked with the police before, and knows exactly how to handle the situation."

Turning to John Derry, Cradwell said, "Okay, it's your baby."

That afternoon Dr. Derry stopped Ralph Davis just as he was about to sign out, and said, "Can you come up to my office for a few minutes?"

"Sure, John. Something new?"

"I'll tell you when we get upstairs."

When they reached Dr. Derry's private office, and he had closed the door, he said, "Ralph, I think I'm about to come up with the answer to your postoperative infections, but I need some information from you. I'm afraid you're too naive about human nature."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you didn't tell me the facts about your assistant surgical nurse, Miss Harris."

"What facts are you referring to?"

"When I asked who might have a grudge against you, you didn't mention her name."

"That's right, because I didn't feel it was so. She has been quite impersonal, but is a good worker and well qualified."

"Wasn't she Dr. Wellington's Chief surgical nurse before he retired?"

"Yes."

"When you accepted the position as head of surgery, you brought your own surgical nurse, Miss Collins."

"Correct. It was in the agreement."

"Miss Collins became chief nurse and Miss Harris was under her supervision. In other words Miss Harris was demoted."

"I suppose you would call it that," said Dr. Davis, "Although Miss Collins has certainly gone out of her way to make Miss Harris feel otherwise. Anyway, what's this all about?"

"I've been doing some checking," said Dr. Derry. "Your interne has never been near the stock cultures, but Velma Harris, your assistant surgical nurse, has been there several times. Also she borrowed a book on bacteriology. All of this is too much coincidence."

"This is hard to believe," said Dr. Davis. "Velma has been friendly and most cooperative with Miss Collins and me."

"Ralph, you've had enough psychology training to know it's the person who silently builds up venom within himself who's the most dangerous. If, when you demoted her, she had told you to go to Hell, and quit, she'd have satisfied her frustration and that would have been it. Instead, she had an implosion rather than an explosion."

"What do we do now?" asked Dr. Davis.

"Is Velma Harris on duty?"

"She should be, but I haven't seen her today. Maybe she's sick."

"Ralph, I think you and I had better pay her a visit, pronto."

"If you think she's guilty, shouldn't you call in the police?"

"At the moment she's just suspect, and I want to talk to her first. By the way, where does she live?"

"In an apartment about two blocks from here, within easy walking distance."

When they arrived at the Belden Arms, Dr. Derry asked the desk clerk for Velma Harris' apartment number.

"Miss Harris is in 504," she replied.

"Please ring her apartment," said Dr. Derry, "and ask if Dr. Davis and Dr. Derry may come up for a few minutes."

The desk clerk rang 504 several times, then turned to Dr. Derry with a puzzled expression. "That's strange," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Harris must be in her apartment. I've been here all day, and I haven't seen her go out."

"Is there any other exit?" asked Dr. Derry.

"No, she would have to pass this desk, and she always hands her key in when she leaves. Maybe she's sick."

"When was the last time you saw her?" asked Dr. Derry.

"Yesterday afternoon when she picked up her key."

"Has she talked to anyone on the phone today?"

"No."

"Ralph," said Dr. Derry, "This looks serious."

"You mean she might have killed herself?"

"It's possible, and we'd better have a look in her apartment," said Dr. Derry. Turning to the room clerk, he continued, "This is an emergency. Please get your duplicate key, and come to Miss Harris' apartment with us. I'll take full responsibility for your letting us in."

When they reached Room 504, Dr. Derry knocked gently several times, then banged forcefully. There was no answer. "All right," he said to the room clerk, "Open up."

In anticipation of what might be found inside the door the room clerk's hand shook so she couldn't fit the key into the lock. Finally Dr. Derry said, "Here, give me the key. You act like you had the thirty-third degree jitters."

As the door opened into the semi-dark apartment, the room clerk stepped inside and said, hesitatingly, "Are you there, Miss Harris?" Receiving no reply she reached along the wall on the right side until she found the light switch. As the lights came on Drs. Derry and Davis entered. It was a typical one-bed room apartment with a small kitchen and dining nook. The living room was empty, so they crossed to the alcove on the

right which bordered the kitchen. At the dinette table was a shadowy figure apparently resting her head on her folded arms. The room clerk turned on the kitchen light, and Dr. Derry gently touched the shoulder of Miss Harris. She remained immobile. Grasping her more firmly, he tried to raise her to a sitting position, then allowed her to drop back into her former position.

Turning to Dr. Davis, he said, "Rigor mortis has already set in."

"You mean she's dead," shrieked the room clerk.

"Quiet down," said Dr. Derry, "and go and call the police."

"This is horrible," said Dr. Davis. "Why would she do such a thing? Not being chief surgical nurse couldn't have meant that much to her."

"I'm sure you're right. Mrs. Palmer's death is another matter. I feel certain she never planned to kill anyone, and knowing she had actually murdered someone, although unintentionally, was too much for her to bear. She probably had learned of my inquiries, and felt sure she would be found out."

"Barbiturates, I suppose," remarked Dr. Davis.

Dr. Derry looked around for a moment then reached down and picked up an empty bottle from the floor. He looked at the label, and said, "Allonal."

As they both waited for the police to arrive, Dr. Derry prowled

around the apartment. He had just completed a survey of the living-room and started for the bedroom when there were the sounds of many footsteps in the hall. The room clerk had left the door open when she hurriedly left, and suddenly the room was filled with a conglomerate of humans who quickly separated themselves and began to perform specific tasks. There were flashlight pictures, and multiple dustings of various components of the apartment for fingerprints.

From this entourage a figure separated itself and approached Dr. Derry. "John, what are you doing here? This is the first time in my experience the chief coroner's physician has been on the scene of the crime ahead of the police. Usually we have to call you."

John Derry laughed and turned to Dr. Davis, "Ralph, I want you to meet Inspector Frank Berro, Head of Homicide."

The man who stuck out his hand was not what Dr. Davis had envisioned as an inspector of police. Frank Berro was not chewing on a cigar, did not wear a sloppy hat, and was not shouting orders in a Hitlerian fashion. His black hair, cut a la Carey Grant, was uncovered. He wore a dark suit, blue shirt with dark tie, black, moccasin type shoes recently shined, above which his trousers broke only slightly with a crease that would have done justice to a stain-

less steel blade. His face was ruddy, and his eyes had an intentness that obviated distraction. Their darkness was intensified by the black horned rim glasses he wore. The jaw was firm but not exaggerated, and the lips were thin but not cruel. If there were any doubts about the physical stamina of Inspector Barro, Dr. Davis quickly dropped them as he felt the grasp of a set of muscles that could have crushed his fingers like a sledge hammer.

The amenities over, the Inspector said to Dr. Derry, "All right, John, we have a dead body, you beat us to the punch, so what's it all about?"

"Frank," said Dr. Derry, "The dead girl is Dr. Davis' assistant surgical nurse. She didn't show up for work today, so we came over to see why."

"Come on, John, the Chief Corner's Physician doesn't come calling just to check on absenteeism. Let's quit pawning about and get down to facts. You had some other reason for being here."

"Yes we did," said Dr. Derry, "But we didn't expect to find this. We wanted to question Velma Harris about some operating room incidents."

"Meaning what?"

After Dr. Derry had explained his suspicions, the inspector said, "That's a new one in my book. How are you going to prove anything? Just because someone commits suicide, and that's what it

looks like, doesn't mean he is guilty of a crime."

"Right. I've already looked over the body, so you can take it to the morgue. I'll be over to do a post later. In the meantime, with your permission I'd like to look over the apartment."

Inspector Berro called to his lab crew, "How about it boys? Are you all through?"

Detective Manson said, "About five more minutes, chief."

"All right, John, when we leave, the place is yours. I'll post a man outside, and you can call on him if you need any help. I don't know what you'll be looking for, but if you find anything, let me know pronto."

After the police had left Dr. Davis said, "John, I know you're playing some kind of hunch. How about letting me in on it."

"Specifically I don't know what I'm looking for. However, the guilty finger points at Velma Harris. Unless we are being mislead, there should be something around this apartment which would prove or disprove our theory. If she was guilty, she had to have a way of introducing the infection into your patients. It would be logical that there would be evidence around here how this was done. I've tried the living room and have found nothing. To me the next reasonable place to look would be the bedroom. If you will follow me, Ralph, we'll have a look around. If I do

find something, I want you as a witness."

The bedroom was neat but unostentatious. The bed, dresser and dressing table were antique white. To the right of the bed which was backed against the South wall was a matching bedside table containing one of the new miniature reading lamps. The door to the left of the bed opened into a small dressing room adjacent to the bathroom. To the left of the bed a picture window looked over Hardin Avenue, the drapes, a neutral beige, matched the bedspread and the slipcovers on the two small barrel chairs. The bed headboard contained several books and a small radio.

After turning on the light and pulling the drapes, Dr. Derry first looked in the drawer of the bedside table. The conglomeration that met his eye caused him to grunt, take out the drawer and turn it upside down on the bed. There were letters, an address book, bobby pins, scissors, a nail file, two decks of cards, some snapshots and other odds and ends. He next moved on to the dressing table. There were the usual cosmetics and perfumes on the glass top. The one drawer revealed nothing but combs, two brushes and some costume jewelry. Moving on to the dresser, he opened each drawer and looked through its contents. There was nothing but the usual woman's clothing and paraphernalia.

After tagging along with Dr. Derry for several minutes, Dr. Davis said, "John, while you're looking around in here I'm going out and see what I can find in the kitchen."

"Sure, go ahead."

Ralph Davis wasn't remotely sure what he was looking for, but as he deliberated where to start, he saw the light on the oven turn red. Thinking this was strange, he walked over and opened the oven door. It was not on, so he opened the door of the warmer just below. Sitting there was a drinking glass in which stood a test tube with a cotton plug, containing a cloudy liquid. He immediately shouted to Dr. Derry, "John, I think I've found what you're after."

Dr. John Derry took one look, checked the temperature setting for the oven warmer, and said, "It's set at 100 degrees, and is a perfect incubator for her purposes. I'll take the test tube and its contents over to the lab and run a check, but there's still the problem of how she introduced the infection into the patients during surgery. Let's take a closer look around here."

After several minutes of scrutinizing kitchen drawers and cabinets, they came to the refrigerator. As the door was opened Dr. Derry spied a small box sitting on the bottom shelf of the door compartment. He picked it out and opened it. In it were several empty geletin capsules and one which contained

an opaque substance. Smiling, he said, "Ralph, if this capsule contains what I think it does, and the same is true of the liquid in the test tube, I should be able to give you the answer to why you had the postoperative strep infections."

"How soon will you know?"

"I'll make some preliminary smears as soon as I get to the lab. Then I'll make some fresh cultures from the test tube and capsule fluid. Give me about 36 hours for an opinion."

At twilight the next evening, Dr. Ralph Davis was standing in front of the floor-length windows of the livingroom in his modern penthouse apartment. There was something about looking out over the city and seeing the lights come on, one by one, that never ceased to thrill him. It was relaxing and compatible with meditation, and the events of the past few days began to pass-quickly through his mind. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the ringing of the door-bell. He turned to see the maid admit Dr. Derry who quickly dropped his hat on the bench in the entryway, and came into the living-room.

Walking over to where Dr. Davis was standing, he said, "Ralph, I was on the right track. The material we found in the test tube and the capsule in Velma Harris' apartment were pure cultures of the same strep isolated from your two patients with infections."

"But that still doesn't tell us how she got the organism into the patients. After all, she never came in contact with the operating table, and only passed things to Miss Collins, the chief surgical nurse."

"And that's how it was done, I'm fairly sure."

"What do you mean?"

"After you have opened the abdomen and controlled the hemorrhage, what's the usual procedure next?"

"We always pack warm laporotomy sponges around the area."

"And where do you get the lap sponges?"

"From the assistant surgical nurse through my chief nurse. John, you mean the sponges were deliberately contaminated."

"That's my theory, and it seems to be the only reasonable conclusion."

"But how did she do it?"

"Remember the capsules we found in the refrigerator?"

"Sure."

"All she had to do was bring one of them with her to the operating room, conceal it inside one of her sterile rubber gloves until the abdomen had been opened and you asked for lap sponges, then release it and crush it on one of them. The strep culture would have been quickly diffused throughout the sponge and when you placed it on the open wound, the organism would have been immediately introduced into the cavity."

"But wouldn't we have noticed the pieces of capsule?"

"She could easily have dropped them on the floor, unnoticed."

"That's true. We were all too busy to watch what she was doing. One thing still puzzles me. Why did she put the capsule containing the strep in the refrigerator. As you said, the oven warmer was a perfect incubator."

"The girl was smart, Ralph, and knew something about bacteriology. If you keep incubating the organism in the same culture medium, it will eventually destroy itself. Once the maximum growth has been obtained, the culture can be refrigerated and further growth inhibited. Apparently she grew the strep for what she considered a suitable time, then prepared three capsules full of the culture and placed them in the refrigerator until ready to use. She had one for Mrs. Palmer

who died, one for Mr. Herrick who recovered, and one for Mr. Harper whose operation you postponed."

"What an horrendous affair," said Dr. Davis moving over to the small bar inset in the wall to his right. "John, let's have a drink and get the dirty taste out of our mouths."

Dr. Derry slipped up on one of the bar stools, and said, "Agreed, I'll take a bourbon and water." The drinks ready, Dr. Derry continued, "By the way I forgot to tell you there's a meeting with the Board of Directors in the morning."

"Now what?" said Dr. Davis. "Something else wrong?"

"On the contrary. You are going to get a personal apology from the hospital Director and the Chief of Staff. I hope that Dr. Cleveland Hasper III has learned value judgments frequently boomerang."



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Baby . . .

Don't Cry

*"Look, son, I've known you both a long time.
I only want what's best for that lovely little
wife of yours."*

BY MARIE ELSTON COLLAMORE

THE tired, desperate, preoccupied eyes rested dully on the ground as he pumped gas into the dusty car with out-of-state plates. He rubbed one grease-covered hand through the short brown hair and raised his head to rub the taut exhausted muscles at the back of his neck.

That was when he saw the baby.

He must have been about a year and a half. He stood on the back seat, the blue eyes gazing steadily, solemnly, and very, very sleepily at the big man in blue denim who pumped gas at midnight on this lonely road.

He stared back and felt a small shuddering sigh escape. He could feel the sadness and desperation flow from his tensed muscles and racked nerves to center themselves in his staring eyes. He gazed hungrily at the small figure in the bright red wooly sleeper.

The dark-haired young mother reached back, pulled the little boy gently down on the seat, and put a bottle on his mouth. For a moment the blue eyes still stared at him, but almost immediately they closed and the bottle dropped from his hands. He straightened and closed his big hands on the gas pump. He thought quickly of the tall young man who had gotten out of the driver's seat, stretched with exhaustion, and asked where the men's room was.

He stared harder at the small sleeping face—and decided.

Leaving the gas to pump itself, he took a large monkey wrench from the garage and went around to the men's room. The man there was rinsing his face with cold water. Before he had any idea of what was going on, the wrench crushed the back of his head.

He dragged him to the edge of

the woods behind the station and hit him until he was sure he was dead.

He went back to the garage and took a can of engine cleaner from the shelf. He soaked a clean rag with it and went back to the car.

The gas had stopped pumping, so he unfastened the hose and reset the pump.

Then he walked around to the passenger side, opened the door, and quickly covered the woman's surprised face with the soaked rag. He held her down tightly until she stopped fighting him. The baby slept on.

He took the woman carefully out of the car and back to the woods and hit her as he had hit her husband until she, too, was dead.

He went back, turned out the station lights and locked up. It was almost one.

He started up the travel-stained car, leaving the door ajar so as not to wake the baby, and backed it around to the still-warm bodies in the woods.

He opened the trunk. It was filled with luggage, most of which he piled high in the front seat. The rest he laid flat to make more room. He dragged the bodies to the car and crammed them in on top of the suitcases.

He got back in, closed the door gently, and drove through the station. He turned right, traveled a few hundred yards down the asphalt, and turned right again on a

rutted, seldom-used dirt road. He drove carefully, trying to avoid the worst bumps, but after a few hard jounces he heard the baby start to stir in the back seat.

For the first time he felt his cold calm waver and a twinge of panic start, but he remembered the bottle and slowed to a crawl as he felt for it in the back seat. He found it and put it in the baby's mouth.

The stirring stopped, and as the road curved back toward the main road he heard the regular breathing of sleep again. He finally came to the quarry. He parked the car under the trees back from the edge of the water and turned off the motor. He looked to be sure the baby was asleep. He was.

He crossed the clearing quickly and found the path. Going as fast as he could in the darkness with the branches whipping at his face and body, he trotted through the woods.

Thinking practically, he wished he had thought to bring a flashlight, but he knew the way well enough for he was soon emerging from the trees behind the station at the exact spot where the bodies had lain.

He paused to kick some leaves over the bloodstained earth, then got quickly into his pickup truck and roared through the station, turned right, right again into the ruts, and back to the quarry. He left the truck in the clearing and walked over to the water, as though to be sure it was still there. It was—so deep that when his cousin had

drowned there three years ago they hadn't even tried to drag for his body.

He realized for the first time that the moon was full. With the car lights out, the moonlight was reflected from the inky pool. He lifted the baby carefully, being sure to take the bottle too, and put him on the front seat of the pickup.

He opened all the windows of the car, started it up, and drove it to the edge of the black pool. He got out, jammed a suitcase against the accelerator, and reached carefully through the window to slip it into gear, jumping back quickly as the car leaped off into the dark water.

It sank immediately.

He walked back to the pickup. As he got closer, he was suddenly startled and a bit frightened to see the small face at the window of the truck. In the moonlight he felt the solemn eyes examining him.

He stopped, uncertain. When the baby made no move to cry, but only continued to stand silently at the window, he went around and got in.

In the darkness of the truck, the little boy turned around to look at him again. When he put on the lights, the little finger pointed at the dashboard and the blue eyes admired it silently.

He laid the child gently on the seat and put the bottle back in his mouth.

When he reached the main road he looked over and found the sleepy

eyes still on him. He reached over and felt the small starfish hand close over his own rough finger.

It was then that he had the first realization of what he had done.

With a gushing relief, with a welling up of joy from the depths of his very being, he knew the agony, the desperate hopelessness of the past year was over.

He had left home this morning a desperate man. A man who is about to lose the one he most loves—no, worships—is very much of a desperate man.

But now he would not lose her. He was coming home with a son for her, and a son for himself too. He loved him already. The eyes were closed again now that the road had changed from ruts to asphalt, but the small fingers still held his.

He didn't want to, but as he had a thousand times that long day, he heard the doctor's words again.

"Look, son, I've known you both a long time. I only want what's best for that lovely little wife of yours."

She was lovely, and little. He had never stopped being amazed that anything so lovely and little could belong to a big rough guy like him.

"A year ago, when you two knew for sure that you weren't going to have any kids of your own and applied to the adoption agency, if you'd been accepted, *maybe* this wouldn't have happened.

"*Maybe*—and then *maybe* it would have happened anyway."

The doctor's honest face had contorted with concern, and he'd rubbed his bald head roughly with frustration.

"The thing is it *has* happened. She's gone past common unhappiness and ordinary depression over this thing, son.

"People have to face up to things that go wrong—to accept them and go on to other things. She's not doing that. Her mind and her whole being are standing smack in the middle of this suffering, and they just won't move out to think or feel anything else. To her nothing else is important, and soon nothing else is going to really exist.

"Slow but sure, she's coming to the point where what's real and what's not real, for her are going to depend on what they have to do with this . . . well, with this obsession, son, because that's what it's coming to be.

"I know you love her like your own soul, son. Anybody who knows you knows that. But it's far beyond you, or anything you can do, now.

"And don't be blaming yourself. The seeds of this must have been planted a long time ago. It just took the right combination of rain and weather, let's call it the right set of circumstances and pressures, to make it sprout.

"The thing is—you just can't help her any more—and neither can I. She's got to go into a hospital, and you're got to face it."

Glancing down at the small sleeping face, he gently freed his hand from the little fingers to negotiate the sharp cutback near his home.

When he'd come home the night before to find a brand new crib and dressing table and baby carriage, he had finally realized what the doctor had meant.

She had been really happy for the first time in months, her lovely face so alive again that he had held her tightly and tried to share her smiles, though the fear had risen like icy water in his belly.

She had a million good and rational explanations. They might still have a baby—the doctor might be wrong. His sister might come with her family—forgetting that those children were old enough to be in school now.

Well, he thought, now the crib would be filled. Some place far away the carriage would be pushed in the sunshine, and this little boy would have his diapers changed on the new dressing table.

He turned into the driveway. The lights were still on. She always waited up with coffee and a sandwich.

He picked the baby up as gently as he could, but he woke immediately and straightened up in his arms, the eyes blinking sleepily toward the light from the house. One small hand held onto his shoulder and the other clutched a button on the front of his jacket.

He went in the back door and

was surprised not to find her in the kitchen. He felt like laughing out loud as he walked through the house. He wanted so to see her face when she saw the child.

He went up to the bedroom, but she wasn't there either. He noticed a dim light in the smaller bedroom, and pushed the door open.

"Honey . . ."

She didn't seem to hear him. She was rocking the new crib gently. It contained several furry toys, some pink blankets, and a baby bottle. She smiled with love into the crib.

"Honey . . ."

She turned quickly and motioned him to silence. Looking intently into the crib, she continued to rock.

He shifted the little boy to his other arm.

"Honey, look what I've got." He spoke a little louder just as the child in his arms pointed to the crib and said "Baby?" very clearly.

She turned on him sharply, her hoarse whisper rising to a muted hysteria in her anger.

"Be quiet—and get that child out of here. She's just going to sleep. Get him out of here, I said!"

He stood transfixed. The enormity and horror of it flooded his mind. She was gone from him, as far as she could possibly go. The empty crib was now her world.

As the now unwanted child in his arms pointed and spoke again, she leaped at them wildly, raining furious blows on both of them as she pushed them from the room.

The little boy cowered against his shoulder and began to cry.





He sat slumped and bloody in the car, a broken gin bottle at his side. He was very dead.

THE PAST IS DEAD

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY
JONATHAN CRAIG

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BURT OGDEN, my partner, and I had just got back into the RMP car after our nightly break for supper, or breakfast, or whatever you want to call a meal you have at two a.m., when the speaker on the dash sputtered metallically and the lady dispatcher's voice gave our code number. I lifted the hand phone off its prongs and told her to go ahead.

It seemed a citizen had found a dead man in a car parked just off Riverside Drive. The citizen had told a patrolman, and the patrolman had called the station house from a pull box. I got the address, Burt kicked on the siren, and we started over there. It was a Monday night, and traffic was light.

I glanced over at Burt, who was driving. "What in hell are you looking so smug about?" I asked.

He fed the Ford a little more gas. "It's your squeal, Lew," he said. "All yours."

He meant I'd have to do all the paper work. Our night watch out of the Eighteenth starts at five-thirty p.m. and ends at eight a.m. the next morning, and like most other detective teams, Burt and I always split the watch so that one of us catches all the squeals from eight-thirty till two, and the other catches them from two till eight. During the first part of the night, Burt had been acting as the detective in charge, and I had acted as his assistant. Now, on the last half of the watch,

we had changed roles. I was now the detective in charge of all investigations we might make during the rest of the night, and Burt would assist me.

There wasn't much of a crowd around the car, and the patrolman standing near it seemed to have things under control. We parked the RMP on the far side of the street and crossed over to him.

The patrolman touched the brim of his cap. "Hello, Sergeant."

"Hello, Sam," I said. "What've you got here?"

"Looks like a homicide, sir. Somebody clobbered hell out of him with a bottle." He opened the door for us and put his flashlight on the man behind the wheel.

The body had slumped over against the door and the head rested against the window. He had been about thirty, I guessed, a very thin man with a pinched, small-featured face and cropped blond hair. There was a bad bruise that spread from his left temple down across his cheek bone. The skin had been broken at two points in the bruise and there had been considerable bleeding. On the seat beside the body there was the neck and upper part of a square gin bottle, and scattered over the seat and on the floorboard were several fair-sized shards of glass.

"Well, at least we're sure of one thing," Burt said. "He didn't slam off instantly. There's too much blood for that."

I nodded, took the flashlight from Sam, and leaned into the car. Sam would have already made sure of death, I knew, but I had long since made it a personal rule to double-check the beat cop, or anyone else.

There is no tissue in the human body more sensitive than that in the eyes, and if you can touch one of them without causing the slightest movement of the eye or eyelids, the person is either in a very deep coma or he is dead. If, in addition, the eyelids are flabby and will stay open and hold their position, you have just that much more evidence. After death, eyes lose their luster as a result of the evaporation of moisture, and the muscles which control the pupils relax, so that the pupils are no longer perfectly round nor are they of the same size. I made a quick but thorough examination.

All the signs were there, positive proof that the man was dead.

2.

There was a new wallet in the man's inner jacket pocket, but it contained no money and nothing that would give us a make on him. There was an identification card in one of the plastic inserts, but it had not been filled out.

I twisted the registration certificate on the steering post around so that I could read it. It was made out in the name of a Miss Theresa Campbell, 831 West Sixty-First

Street, Manhattan. I entered the name and address in my note book, and then went through the rest of the man's pockets. I found just the usual things, a comb, handkerchief, keys, loose change—nothing to help us. The glove compartment contained another bottle of gin, a small flashlight, a couple of road maps, and half a carton of cigarettes.

"Who is he?" Burt asked.

"No identification," I said. I turned to Sam. "Where's the guy that found him?"

Sam nodded toward an elderly man sitting on a rear bumper of the car in front of the murder car. I walked over to him.

"I'm Sergeant Keller," I told him. "I understand you reported this to Patrolman Clary over there."

"That's right," he said. He didn't get to his feet. His face was drawn and he looked as if he might be sick. "I saw him, and then I started up to the corner—to that bar up there—to call the police. But just before I got there, I saw that cop—that officer—over there. He was just turning the corner. I yelled at him."

"What's your name and address?"

"My name's Edward Lohr. I live at the Colmar Hotel. That's at Fifty-Sixth and Amsterdam."

I wrote it down. "Did you touch the body, Mr. Lohr?"

"Me? No, sir!"

"Did you see anybody around the car?"

"Not a soul."

"What'd you say to the officer when you called to him?"

"Why, I just said, 'Hey!' I guess. I don't exactly remember."

"Did you tell him there was a dead man in the car?"

"Of course I told him."

"How'd you know he was dead, Mr. Lohr? You said you didn't touch the body, so how'd you know?"

"Listen here. I was in the First World War. I was at St. Mihiel and I was right in the middle of the fighting at the Meuse-Argonne. I seen a lot of dead men then, and I've seen a lot since. I don't need no complicated machinery to tell me when a man's dead, mister, and that's for damn sure."

"I need this for my report," I said. "You know how it is."

"All right. But don't go making out I can't tell when a man's dead or not. I—"

"How'd you happen to be along here at this time of the morning?" I asked.

"I couldn't sleep. I got asthma. I ain't slept in a bed in the last nine years. Most times I sleep sitting up in a chair. Sometimes, when it gets real bad, I just plain have to get up and walk around, no matter what time it is."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"It ain't no picnic—not when you're pushing seventy, like me."

"You know who the dead man is?"

"I sure don't. I never saw him be-

fore in my life." He started to get to his feet, and I helped him.

"You going to take me down to the station house, I suppose," he said. "Just for doing what I figured was my duty, you're going—"

"No, sir," I said. "But if you'll wait around a few minutes, I'll see that you get a ride home."

"Thanks." Then, suddenly, he sank back down on the bumper. "Maybe I'd better rest a bit first, though. This thing's sort of taken the starch out of me."

3.

I walked back to Burt Ogden.

"Funny thing," Burt said. "Everything this guy's got on is brand new. His shoes and every stitch of clothes, and even that billfold. All right out of the shop. Hell, even that show handkerchief in his pocket still has a manufacturer's sticker on it."

"Looks like he came into some money."

"Looks like he came into some money."

"Sure. You ever know a guy to go out and buy *everything* new, even a billfold, unless he made a hit somehow? You take a guy catches a long shot at the track, or makes a few straight passes with the dice—why then he might feel like splurging. But usually a guy just buys what he needs."

I nodded. "They're pretty good duds, too."

"Yeah. They set him back plenty."

A police car drew up, double-parked, and an assistant M.E. and the lab crew came over. The crowd was a little larger now and beginning to push in too close. Burt and Sam turned and started getting the crowd back where it belonged.

The assistant M.E. nodded at me. "How's it going, Lew?"

"Not bad. I hear you're leaving, Ted."

He grinned. "Uh-huh. Sue and I are moving upstate. I'm going back to general practice."

"We'll miss you."

"Same here." He turned toward the murder car, where the lab boys were already making photographs and measurements and dusting the metalwork and the shards of glass for prints. "You get a make on him?"

"Not yet."

"We've got a new arrangement at Bellevue, Lew. I can do the autopsy tonight, if you like."

"I'd appreciate it."

"All right. Call me there in a couple of hours and I'll let you know what I find."

"Thanks. I'll see you again before you leave, Doc."

"Sure, Lew. We'll have a stirrup cup." He wasn't pleased about leaving, I knew. No matter what part of police work you get into, there's something about it that gets into your blood and stays there.

Burt came back and we stood

watching one of the lab boys putting the parts of the broken gin bottle into a large manila envelope. He handed the envelope to me, and I sealed it and coded it and signed my name across the flap. Later, it would be taken downtown and booked as evidence. I asked if there had been any clear prints. There had been only one, I was told, and that on the bottom of the bottle. All the rest had been blurred beyond use. The bottle from the glove compartment, the flashlight, and other items, might prove more helpful.

I went over the RMP car and called Headquarters. When I had been routed to Lost Property, I asked for a reading on the murder car. I gave the description, license number and so on, and then lighted a cigarette and sat back to wait for the check to go through. It didn't take long. Neither the car nor the plates had been reported stolen.

I got back to the murder car just as the Bellevue wagon rolled up. The attendants got their stretcher out of the back and came over to Burt and me.

"How about it, Sarge?" one of them asked. "You got a little package for us?"

I glanced at the assistant M.E. "You finished, Doc?"

He shrugged. "For now, I am."

I scrawled a receipt, the attendant signed it, and then he and his partner took the corpse to the wagon and drove away.

"How long would you say he'd been dead, Doc?" I asked.

"Not long. No more than an hour, certainly."

"That's for sure?"

"Yes."

"Not much question about the cause of death, I guess," Burt said.

"Well, I don't know," Doc said. "I've seen much worse injuries to the front part of the head, without the victim ever even losing consciousness. I've seen terrific fractures of the skull, with considerable damage to the brain, and still consciousness never left for a moment. On the other hand, the same kind of damage to the back part of the head usually causes death."

"Well, we'll call you a little later and get the full story," I said. "And listen, Doc. Before you go back, I wish you'd take a look at that old guy sitting on that bumper over there. He looks pretty sick to me."

"Sure. You know what's wrong with him?"

"Ashma, he says. And he found the body, which didn't do him a hell of a lot of good."

"All right, Lew. I'll give a look."

"And make sure he gets home okay, Doc."

"All right." He walked over toward Edward Lohr.

"It looks like you pulled a honey," Burt said. "I don't envy you this case one bit."

"And the worst is yet to come."

"That it is. That and the paper work." He grinned. "What now?"

"We haven't got much choice," I said. "The car's registered to a Theresa Campbell, over on West Sixty-First. That's the first stop."

I left instructions with the chief of the lab crew to have the murder car towed to the police garage when his boys had finished with it, and then Burt and I got in the RMP, made a U-turn, and headed for Sixty-First Street.

4.

Somehow I had expected Miss Theresa Campbell to be rather young. She was not. She was somewhere between forty-five and fifty, and nearly as tall as I was, although she couldn't have weighed much more than a hundred pounds. It had been a long time since I'd seen anyone quite so thin. She'd registered the usual surprise and alarm when Burt and I identified ourselves, and now, as she asked us into her apartment, I could see she was trying desperately to be calm.

She closed the door carefully, moistened her thin lips, and stared at me.

"What—" she began, and then stopped and started over again. "What did you want to see me about?"

"We'll have to ask you a few questions, Miss Campbell," I said.

"Of course. But what's this all about?"

"First, we'd like to know where you've been the last couple of hours."

"Why, I've been right here. Right here in the apartment. What—"

"You have anyone who'll corroborate that?"

"I—don't think I understand."

"I'm sorry. I mean, was there anyone here with you? Did you make any phone calls? In short, can you prove you were here?"

"I just said I was, didn't I?" Her lips compressed into a hard, bloodless line. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"I'm afraid not," I said.

"I demand to know just what you think you're—"

"This is just routine, Miss Campbell. It isn't much more pleasant for us than it is for you. These questions have to be asked, and it's our job to ask them."

She glared at me, and then at Burt. "Honestly!"

"Did you see or talk to anyone in the last two hours?"

"No, I did not!"

"And you didn't leave at all?"

"No."

Burt had walked over to a cocktail table, and now he lifted a gin bottle, the same brand we'd found in the murder car, and glanced at me significantly.

"Put that down!" Miss Campbell said. "I'll not have policemen coming in here and acting like they own me and everything in my apartment, drinking my liquor—"

"You own a new maroon Pontiac, don't you, Miss Campbell?" I asked quietly.

Her eyes whipped back to me. "That automobile is properly parked, officer."

"Where?"

"Where is it parked? Why, down in the street, of course. You should know, if you know it's mine."

"You loan it to anyone tonight?"

"No, I did not. I'd like to know what in the world you're getting at." She paused. "You mean you found it somewhere else? You mean it was stolen?"

"We'll get along a little faster if you let me ask the questions," I said. "Do you know a man, about thirty years old, blond, a man with a very slight build and sort of a pinched face?"

All the hostility drained from her face and her eyes grew wide. "Dell!" she whispered.

"Del who, Miss Campbell?"

She stepped close to me, her eyes searching mine. "What have you done to him?"

"We haven't done anything to him," I said.

"What's happened to him?"

I glanced at Burt, and then back at Miss Campbell. There's no easy way to do it. When it comes to telling someone that someone else is dead, just about all you can do is say it. I told her we'd found the man dead in her automobile, and that he'd been murdered.

It was a full ten minutes before we were able to quiet her down enough to ask any more questions. Then I said, "You're our only

source of information, Miss Campbell. The more you can tell us about the victim, the sooner we'll be able to find his murderer."

She shook her head slowly. "There's so little to tell. I—I met him in the Automat. He sat down at the same table, and we got to talking. He seemed like such a nice young man, so clean-cut and all . . ."

"What was his full name?"

"Delbert Ferris."

"Local?"

"What?"

"I mean, was he from New York City?"

"Oh, no. He was from the South. He had this lovely accent, and at first I thought he was just putting it on. But he wasn't. I could just sit and listen to him talk by the hour." She spoke in a strained, soft voice, as if it didn't matter whether Burt and I heard her or not.

"You know just where in the South he was from?"

She shook her head. "I never did find out. He'd always tease me about it. One time he'd say one place, and the next time he'd say another."

"What kind of work do you do, Miss Campbell?" She apparently didn't hear me, so I asked her again.

"Oh, my work. Why, I'm a nurse."

"An R.N.?"

"No. A practical nurse. I take care of older people, you know."

"That pays pretty well, does it?"

"It all depends. I've been very fortunate." She was answering almost mechanically, like an automaton. If she was putting on an act for Burt and me, she was giving us our time's worth.

We spent another twenty minutes with her, and it bought us exactly nothing. She'd known Delbert Ferris about six weeks, and all she really knew about him was that she was in love with him.

It's a pattern you run into often in police work. A middle-aged, unattractive woman, without friends or family, meets a good-looking younger guy on the make. All the guy has is brass, but he has plenty of that, and pretty soon the woman, who has probably gone for years with no male attention of any kind, falls so hard she loses all perspective. She spends every dime she makes on the guy, and throws away her savings on him, trying to hang on to an illusion. Theresa Campbell had staked Delbert Ferris to a new wardrobe, given him nearly three hundred dollars in cash, and bought the new Pontiac just to please him.

But, she told us, she'd known none of his other acquaintances, had never inquired about where he lived, and had no idea of what he did with his time when he wasn't with her. He'd never spoken of having trouble with anyone, and she could think of no reason at all why anyone should want to kill

him. She did recall, however, that once when she'd asked Del what line of work he was in, he'd told her he'd come to New York to try to break into radio or television as a hillbilly singer. He had not, so far as she knew, been successful. She told us she didn't know Del had planned to use the car after he'd brought her home, around seven o'clock, and that he must have had an extra set of keys made for himself without telling her about it.

In short, she knew—or said she knew—next to nothing. We'd learned the dead man's name—if even that wasn't a phony—and that was about all.

Burt glanced at me questioningly.

I glanced at my watch. It was ten minutes past four.

"Miss Campbell," I said, "if we send a car over for you about six o'clock, would you mind going over to Bellevue Hospital and making an official identification for us?"

She stared at me a long moment, her eyes almost expressionless.

"We don't like to ask," I said. "But it has to be done."

"Is it—absolutely necessary?"

"I'm afraid it is."

She nodded slowly. "I'll be ready then."

"About six o'clock."

"All right."

That would give the assistant M.E. time to have completed his autopsy and make the body presentable again. I glanced about the

apartment, mulling things over. I sensed we wouldn't get much further with her, at least right now. After Burt and I had checked around a bit, we might have some better talking points and, if so, we could take her down to the precinct and question her at length.

"You'll be sure to keep yourself available for us, won't you, Miss Campbell?" I asked. "It'll be to the best interest of all of us."

"Yes, of course."

5.

On our way down in the self-service elevator, Burt said, "Well, what do you think? You figure she's our girl?"

"Could be."

"If she was leveling, then she had one hell of a funny reaction, if you ask me. You notice it? She broke up, but she came out of it, and then she went into some kind of shell. Like a trance."

We drove back to the Eighteenth, signed in, and then checked the Known Resident Criminal files for both Theresa Campbell and Delbert Ferris. Neither had ever been carded. I called Headquarters, asked for Stats and Records, and requested a check-through on both of them. Then I had the operator switch me to the Bureau of Criminal Identification and asked that, rather than sending any prints that might be found to the F.B.I. in Washington by mail, they send

them by wirephoto and request an expedite. Meanwhile, Burt was out in the next room, going through the Wanted cards.

I'd have to wait a few hours before I called any of the police contacts in the talent agencies and among casting directors to see if any of them knew of a hillbilly singer answering Delbert Ferris' name and/or description; but I did call a stool I knew, an entertainer who often appeared on programs with a rural flavor. He said he'd never heard of Ferris, but he did give me the name of the agency that seemed to have a monopoly on hillbilly and ballad singers.

Burt came back into the room. "Not a thing," he said. "Man, I sure hope we don't have to go through the mugg books."

"If we have to, then I'll do it," I said. "I'll do that, and you can do the paper work. Fair enough?"

He grimaced. "Nothing doing. I'll take the mugg books every time."

The phone rang. It was the assistant M.E. "I think maybe I've got something for you, Lew," he said.

"Fine. I can use it."

"Well, this one had a tattoo. Upper left shoulder. It was originally a nude girl—very detailed, I might say, about three inches high. But someone had dressed her up, so to speak. That is, they'd looped a ribbon around the more vital areas. It—the ribbon, I mean—was

obviously done at a much later time. It's still quite bright, while the girl herself has faded a bit."

"Sounds like he might have been a service man at one time or another," I said. "I remember that a lot of boys in World War Two had to get their tattoos cleaned up. Seems the brass thought some of them were pretty obscene."

"That's what I was thinking," he said. "Well, I thought it might help."

"It will, Doc."

"Next point is the cause of death," he said. "That blow on the head didn't do it, Lew."

"No?"

"The damage was more apparent than real. What actually killed him was a ruptured liver. There was no external evidence at all, but when I opened him up I found he'd taken a blow to the upper part of the abdomen. That's where the liver is, you know—in the upper right side of the abdomen. It's an easily injured organ. You'd be surprised just how little it can take." He paused. "My guess is that whoever killed him hit him first on the head and then over the abdomen. That would explain the amount of blood we found resulting from the blow to the head. Excessive bleeding doesn't stop until the heart does, and his heart didn't stop until shortly after he received the blow to the abdomen."

We talked another minute or so, and then I hung up and called Stats and Records again. I told them

about the tattoo on the dead man's left shoulder and asked that they check the Oddity File. This file has been the pride of the S&R for many years. It is actually a cross-reference file, with physical oddities broken down into such categories as scars, amputations, tattoos, harelips, and so on. The file has proved invaluable to the whole department, because often a physical oddity is the only thing about a person that the witness or complainant can recall.

Twenty minutes later I got the reports from both S&R and BCI. There was no make. And the single fingerprint from the bottom of the gin bottle was still the only clear print they'd found, except for Ferris' own prints, a set of which had been taken at the morgue by the detective on duty there. All other prints had been too undefined or smeared for our purposes. It was a bad break, and a very unusual one. It meant our job was going to be much tougher. The single print, I found, was now on the wire to Washington, together with the request for an expedite.

I hung up the phone and glanced at Burt. "Looks like we'll have to hit those mugg books after all," I said.

He nodded glumly.

"Well, I guess we might as well go downtown and get started."

"I suppose so. You want to stop off for a cup of coffee first? I feel a little beat."

"Sure. Why not?"

We were on our way out of the squad room when Ed Seibert came in. Ed was a long-time friend of Burt's and mine, an ex-detective lieutenant who had retired from the official force and opened his own private investigating agency. The three of us had kept in close touch, giving one another a hand now and then.

Burt and I sat back down and Ed leaned a hip against a desk and grinned at me.

"I was just downtown," he said. "I got to chinning with the boys in Stats, and they told me you were trying to get a make on a character named Delbert Ferris."

"That's right," I said. "You know him, Ed?"

"Nope. But I know somebody who does."

"Go ahead," Burt grinned. "Be mysterious, Ed. Make us sweat for it."

"Well, I've been making an investigation for a man named William Stanton."

"You mean the guy who owns the chain of restaurants?" I asked.

"That's the one. A very wealthy guy, incidentally. And a real handsome cuss, for his age, too. Well, anyhow, Stanton got the idea his wife might be running around. She's about half as old as Stanton, about twenty-five, and pretty as all hell. Stanton didn't have anything definite. He said one of the maids

at his place had told him Mrs. Stanton had been leaving the house right after receiving telephone calls, and that she'd acted suspiciously. Well, to make a long story short, I tailed her a few times. She wasn't exactly running around, but she was meeting this guy—this Delbert Ferris."

"Shacking up?" Burt asked.

"Nope. They never even hit any saloons. They'd just meet on a corner somewhere, or in a coffee shop, and talk a while. I was never able to get close enough to hear what they were saying. I tailed the guy after one of these meetings, and he took me on a tour of Forty-Second Street. I don't think he missed a single shooting gallery, and every time he passed a book store he'd go in and look at the sex books. He hit maybe half a dozen places that sell those sets of nude photographs. He must have looked at more than a thousand sets of the things before he got through. He didn't buy any, though. Finally, he walked back uptown to the Avalon, on Forty-seventh Street. I had an in with the room clerk, so I checked. He lived there, all right."

"He registered under Delbert Ferris?"

"Yeah. That's the first time I'd heard his name."

"You get anything else on him?"

"Not a thing. He'd signed the register as being from right here in New York, but he hadn't given a street address."

He paused. "Well, that's just about it, I guess. I told my client what I'd found out. He paid me off, and gave me a bonus, and told me he'd call me again if he wanted the investigation continued. I haven't heard from his since."

I nodded.

"Thanks a lot, Ed. We'll get right out there."

He wrote an address on a slip of paper and handed it to me. "I wish you luck. I hate to lose a client, but murder is for the official cops, not me."

"How about having some coffee with us, Ed?" Burt asked. "That's where we were heading when you came in."

"No, thanks. I've got to get some sleep. I've been up ever since yesterday morning, trying to put the lid on another of my cases. I'm going straight home and hit the sack."

We went downstairs with him, said good night, and then got back into the RMP once more.

"Maybe we're finally going to get some action," I said.

"Don't bet on it," Burt said. "You might queer our luck."

7.

The Stanton residence was half-way out on Long Island, and by the time we'd reached it, it was almost six A.M.

Mr. Stanton himself let us in. He was fully clothed, and he seemed deeply agitated, though civil

enough after we'd identified ourselves. The living room was immense, and justified the Stanton home's reputation as a showplace.

We gave it to him straight. He didn't blink an eye. He listened to us without interruption until we were through, and then there was a long silence while he studied both our faces carefully, in turn, as if he were sizing us up for some reason of his own.

"I won't make an issue of this with the commissioner," he said finally. He had a firm, almost pontifical voice. "I choose to overlook this outrage to my wife and myself. I can understand how you might make such an error, and I'm certain that your mistake is the result of muddled thinking, rather than a deliberate attempt to abuse your position as police officers." He paused, and his voice grew even more firm. "But I will tell you this, and I hope you will relay it to your fellow officers. If either you, or anyone else, ever again annoys my wife or me on this matter, I'll bring the influence to bear to insure—"

"Listen, Stanton," Burt said. "I don't know who you think you're horsing, but it isn't us. If you want to play a hard guy, fine. But not with us. You got that?"

Stanton's eyes narrowed. "Leave this house at once."

"If we leave, we'll have to take you with us," I told him. "Can you account for your whereabouts since midnight?"

He started to say something, then apparently changed his mind. He stood staring at me, thinking it over.

"Yes," he said at last. "My wife will tell you I spent the night in our room. Will that be sufficient to satisfy you, or shall I—"

"May we speak to Mrs. Stanton?"

"You may not. She—"

"It's all right, Bill," a woman's voice said. I turned to look toward the archway to the rear of the house. The woman who stood there was in her middle twenties, a very beautiful woman with short dark hair and slightly tilted blue eyes. She came toward us slowly, tightening a housecoat about her waist.

"Donna!" William Stanton said sharply. "What are you doing here? Go back upstairs!"

She shook her head. "It's no use, Bill. This had to happen, sooner or later."

"No!" he almost shouted. "No, damn it! Get back upstairs!"

She walked over to him and put her arm around him, and then turned slightly to face Burt and me. "My husband had nothing to do with it," she said, and now I noticed that her voice had a faintly southern inflection and cadence.

"Donna, for God's sake!" Stanton said.

She looked straight at me and I saw her shoulders straighten beneath the thin material of her housecoat. "I'm the one you want, officer. I killed Del."

Her husband grasped her arms and shook her, his mouth working strangely. He was trying to talk, but he could not. Suddenly, he released her and sank down in a chair and covered his face with his hands. His whole body shook, and for a long moment there was no sound in the room. His wife looked at him with the deepest compassion I'd ever seen on a woman's face, and then she turned back to me and took a deep breath.

"Del meant to ruin our lives for us," she said softly. "He was blackmailing me, and I knew that sooner or later he would come to Bill and start blackmailing him, too."

"Why was he blackmailing you, Mrs. Stanton?"

"Because he knew that Bill and I were not really married. We'd gone through the ceremony, of course, but it wasn't legal. You see, I was still married to Del. I married him almost ten years ago, when I was fifteen. Our families lived next to each other, down in Mississippi. They were sharecroppers, and a girl can marry down there when she's fourteen."

There was a long pause, and then she said, "Del drank so much, and beat me so much, that I couldn't stand it. I ran away. I came here to New York, and I took any kind of jobs I could find. I finished high school at night, and then I went to business college. When I met Bill,

eight years had passed and I was working as a secretary for one of Bill's friends. Mississippi, and the cotton plantations, and my marriage to Del—they all seemed like part of a horrible nightmare. When Bill asked me to marry him, I didn't have the courage to tell him about Del..." Her voice broke.

"I—I never heard from Del again until a few weeks ago," she went on. "He'd found out somehow that I'd married a wealthy man, and he came here and threatened to expose me if I didn't give him a thousand dollars. I did—but then he called me again and said he'd sold out too cheaply and that he wanted ten thousand. I guess I became panicky. I kept holding him off, making promises I knew I couldn't keep, but tonight he called again. My husband was out of town on business, and I told Del I'd meet him in New York. He had a new car. We drove around for hours. He kept drinking gin. We argued, and I pleaded with him, but he wouldn't listen. Finally he parked and tried—tried to become intimate with me. He said he had a right to, because I was still his wife.

"As I say, he tried to make advances, right there in the car. I fought him off, but he started to hurt me. I got hold of the gin bot-

tle somehow, and I—I hit him. I think I hit him more than once, but I'm not sure. He fell away from me, and I jumped out of the car and ran up the street."

"Did you know you'd killed him?"

"Oh, yes. When the bottle struck his head, it made such a sickening, horrible sound that I knew I'd killed him."

I didn't say anything. There wasn't any point in telling her that if she'd kept herself from hitting him again after she knocked him out with the blow to the head, she wouldn't have a murder rap hanging over her.

"What'd you do then, Mrs. Stanton?" Burt asked.

"I took a train home. My husband came home a short time later. I—I told him everything. He said he'd known all along that I'd been seeing Del, that he understood, and that the only thing that mattered was that we were together. He—"

"We'll wait for you on the porch, Mrs. Stanton," I said.

As I followed Burt through the door, I glanced back at her. Her eyes were on me, and the look was there—the look you find when someone stares into the kind of future that was waiting for Donna Stanton.



*"Hell!" he exclaimed, as much to himself as to Nick.
"Why does it always have to be the ones you like?"*



It was a beautiful morning; much too beautiful a morning for a man to be hungry.

Michael (Mickey) Ruark closed the one eye he had opened to explore the state of the weather, and tried to draw the anonymous security of sleep back around him like a protective blanket.

It was a mistake for him even to obliquely construct that simile in his mind; a mistake because he was already too warm with a warmth that, despite the crisp coldness of the autumn mountain air, pinched the flesh of his naked buttocks and flanks where he had writhed off the covers in an unproductive attempt to ease the headache that extended its torture to every nerve in his body. But the coldness wasn't cold enough to relieve his hangover torment, and the torment was too great to let him retreat into sleep.

Hopelessly he buried his head in an unwarmed mound of pillow,

THE HOT ONE

BY
J. ROBERT CARROLL

soaking up the momentary chill that soothed his fever with no more satisfaction than if he'd pressed a burned finger against a piece of cold steel—within seconds the heat raged more fiercely!

He groaned, then stretched out a hand to grope for the tablets of aspirin he had left on the floor beneath his bed. His hand collided first with the nearly full bottle of beer he had also left there in prophylactic anticipation, recoiling as he mentally tasted its flat, stale deadness. He found the aspirin and tortured them to his mouth, then washed them down with a swallow of the beer. He fought with the swallow desperately, to keep it from up-ending.

The grim, brief effort to coordinate his movements had taken more energy than he had to spare; he just barely managed the bottle to the floor unspilled, before he wilted into the cushioning bed, trying to draw from it the comfort it was supposed to provide, but which the dull agony of his aches refused him.

Whether it was the contrast between the excruciating torture of his concentrated effort and the nightmarish numbness of relaxation, or whether it was a subtle flow of enzymes released by the psychological effect of the aspirin, he experienced a momentary isolation from his suffering that let him begin to think with some semblance of logic, though his thoughts were at first curtained by incoherency.

What was it I saw? Oh! The morning . . . oh, what a beau-ti-ful morn-ing . . . oh, what a beau-ti . . . oh, what a beaut! Ooooh . . . morning, morning, morning, morn-ing, morn . . . mourn . . . mourn! That's me, mourning . . . mourning because I'm hungry. Hungry? Hell! I couldn't even eat a piece of toast . . . milk or otherwise . . . milk . . . mother's milk . . . kindness milk . . . kindness? Kindness!

His mind focussed with a jagged sharpness.

A job! That guy offered me a job! What guy?

His mind careened wildly through flashes of last night's boozing, searching for the face behind the job.

That's him . . . coming through the door . . . withdrawn . . . examining the crowd . . . shy . . . if I nod to him as though I recognize him, maybe he'll stop . . . sure . . . and he caught my eye . . . that did it . . . now, what'll I say to him . . . I'll have to talk, like people . . . the weather, that's safe.

"Sure looks like summer's going to hang on through December," I said as he took the stool beside me.

"Yeah," he said nodding his head, not ignoring me exactly, but still, looking out over the crowd almost as though he were searching for someone. "Give me a schooner," he asked the bartender, "and what about you?" he said, noticing my all but empty glass.

"I shouldn't," I said, sort of trying him out for size, "I've already had the one I could afford, and I build up a tremendous thirst after I have two, and I'm broke and out of a job and . . . well, I just shouldn't." All of which was the truth except the part about the one I could afford. I'd already had five and I hadn't bought any of them, nor could I afford to.

"What t'hell," he said cheerfully, almost as though I'd turned on a switch, "y'only live once. I got the dough, we both got a thirst, let's drown together.

"Two schooners," he said to Nick the bartender who had been waiting patiently for me to act out my little part. We had an understanding, Nick and I. Besides, Nick knew a live one when he saw one.

"Don't I know you from someplace?" I said, "I could swear we'd quenched a thirst from the same bucket someplace before."

"I doubt it," he said, his eyes taking on a faraway, cool glaze, "I'm a stranger here."

Okay, so he doesn't want to talk about his past, that's all right with me; I don't want to talk about my real past either, but that doesn't keep me from yarning up an interesting new one.

"Might of been when I was in LA, teaching," I went right on as though he hadn't answered, "or maybe after I went to MGM."

"MGM?" he asked, brightening up, "You an actor?"

"Frustrated," I explained, turning on the vocabulary to see how he felt about that, ". . . stunt man."

"Say, that must have been interesting! Whad'ya do?" He took a hefty two inches off the top of his schooner, but he didn't wipe the foam off his lip with his sleeve on his hand, or lick it off; he took out a clean handkerchief and blotted it off. It came so natural to him I was sure he wasn't making with a phony background bit, and the 'kerchief was really clean, and linen too.

"I substituted for Burt Lancaster for a while," I said, figuring he wasn't enough of a fan to know that Lancaster took most of his own falls.

"Say, that's right, you do look a little like him! Same height, same build, same hair, same eyes, same teeth . . . better lookin' though."

A *little* like him, I thought—I'm a dead ringer for him. What I really had been was a stand-in for him, for two heavenly money-grubbing days . . . until I showed up so drunk I could hardly stand on my feet. "Come on now," I said, joshing him, "you don't have to flatter me, *and* buy me drinks."

"No, really!" he insisted, "I'm not tryin' to embarrass you, but y'*are* better lookin'. What kind'a stunts d'ya do?"

"Trapeze work in that circus thing he did, acrobatics, falls, that sort of thing."

"No kidding? Whyd'ya quit?"

"Broke my neck. Spent nine in-

terminable months in a cast, then a year in a sanitarium to get off the dope."

"Dope?" he asked, his eyes narrowing just a hair; not shocked, just alert.

So that's what it was—dope! Unh-huh! I knew there was something crawling over the grave of his past; maybe it still was.

"Morphine, I think," I explained, "whatever they used to kill the pain of the pressure on my nerves."

"Y'got hooked, huh?"

"Hooked?" I asked innocently, checking him out again.

"That's what they always say in detective stories," he said, flushing a nice plum color just over the top of his collar, "that's when you get, what do they call it . . . *addicted?*"

"Whatever it's called, it's not pleasant!"

"Oh?" he said eagerly, finishing his schooner and signalling Nick for two more, "Bad, huh?"

Tentatively, I added up all that conversation to mean that he was hooked, and was considering the cure, and that he'd sure like to know what he was letting himself in for.

"Not too bad. Mostly dull," I answered. "Didn't work too well on me though. But I can take it," I added, testing him a little further, "or leave it."

"Oh? You still on the . . . I mean," he corrected himself, ". . . you still have to use morphine?" There was an air of excitement

about his question that bled through the tone of innocent curiosity! "How do you get it around here?"

That did it! He's on the fix, too! Got to cut that line fast, (I'm not pushing the stuff and I don't intend to).

"Whenever I begin to ache real bad," I said, "I check in at the VA. They've got the records on my broken neck. I don't know what they give me, but it helps."

Disappointment was written all over his face; I'd led him right up a blind alley. For a second, I thought he was going to pack up and leave.

"That damned record of mine," I continued hurriedly, "that's what keeps me from going back to my first job."

He simmered down. "What job was that?" he asked, not much caring. I'd sure knocked the bloom off his interest when I slammed the door in his face. He'd begun again to look restlessly around the crowd.

"I was a Phys-Ed teacher at the University—that's where I met my wife."

"You married?" he asked, surprised.

"Not now, we only lasted long enough to have a baby—a girl."

"Where's she?"

"At a school in Kansas," I said, not mentioning the kind.

"Who supports her?"

"Friends," I said, not explaining that it was the friendly Government of the United States.

"What'ya been doin' since you shook the habit?"

"The habit? Oh, you mean the dope?"

I'd pushed the act just a little too far; he looked at me with a cold sneer, finished off his beer and ordered two more. "Look, kid," he began.

"Name's Mickey," I interrupted, "Mickey Ruark."

"Okay, Mickey . . . what I was goin' to say is let's can this innocent scab about the junk. I ain't no Fed. I ain't even a probation officer. You got a social problem, and y'might say I . . ." his eyes narrowed as he looked past my shoulder.

Without making too much of a fuss, I turned to see what had bugged him. It was Big Ed and Mac, the city detectives on their nightly round, spotting the strangers and whatever else it was they were looking for. Big Ed caught my eye and nodded a greeting.

"Know them?" my angel asked coldly.

"City dicks," I answered, "they know *me*; in my present state of economy, everyone knows me. They even buy me a meal now and then."

He barely heard the end of my sentence he was off for the rest-rooms that fast!

Big Ed and Mac sidled down the bar, greeting this one and looking over that one. "Got a live one, Mickey?" Big Ed murmured, letting one side of his lower lip sag for

the words to slide out, when he saw me backed up with two beers.

"He's a hot one, all right," I murmured back, hoping he wouldn't stop. Big Ed looked startled, but he moved on easily, and pretty soon he rounded up Mac and they left. After a while my angel found it convenient to come back.

"So, everyone knows ya, huh?" He gulped down his schooner. "Drink up," he said, "I thought you was thirsty." He signalled for Nick to bring two more while I guzzled the two in front of me. "If that's the level," he continued, "then *you* ought'a know everybody."

"Most everybody," I answered cagily, figuring correctly that this was the pitch for some information, "but I don't know you."

He looked at me with a hard, mean look. "Maybe I don't want to be known!" he snarled.

"Okay, mister," I said, brave-like, "have it your own way, but when anybody talks to me like you were talking before you lammed to the can, I like to know who I'm talking to. I may be on the skids, but I'm not a jerk!"

"Whad'ya mean, 'lammed to the can'?"

"When I mentioned *cops*," I snorted, "you moved like greased lightning!"

"Kidneys," he said, giving me a grin. He reached to an inside coat pocket and fished out a fancy card case. He grabbed out a card and shoved it under my nose.

Lucius B. Carter
Contractor New York

No address, no telephone number, nothing else, but it was engraved, and on the best quality stock.

"What do they call you, Lucy or Lucky?" I cracked.

Wrong question! Or was it? For a second I thought I was going to have trouble, but he didn't seem to mean it, it was an act—not a very convincing one, either. What did that mean?

"Just my warped sense of humor," I apologized, "Can't seem to keep it under control. That's another reason I don't work very often."

"Ferget it," he growled, "the gag's not very fresh. I'm used to it. Some people call me one, some the other." He returned the card to the case, I noticed, not letting me have it. "My friends call me Cartwheel."

"Cartwheel? That's an odd one." I thought about that a moment, then asked: "Because you're a wheeler and a dealer, or because of the connotation of silver dollars?"

"You and your fancy words!"

"Why not?" I countered, "I know what they mean."

"So do I, but in my business it pays not to use them."

I ignored the obvious question of what *was* his business; I figured he'd tell me if and when he felt like it. "You didn't answer my question," I prompted, "why, 'Cartwheel'? I'm curious."

"But smart enough not to be curious about my business," he said shrewdly. "Okay," he continued, "I'll tell you about the name. Y'were right about both the reasons, except, mostly, it's silver dollars." He pulled out the card case again and turned it over to show me the dollar mounted on its back. He dragged out a wallet decorated the same way. He indicated a tie clip I'd already noticed. He slid up the cuffs of his coat to display his cufflinks—great big, gaudy dollars, somehow too spectacular on a little guy like him. Then he eased out his bills, clipped with a double, dollar clip, and I had to wrench my yearning eyes with forced casualness away from the flash of numbers he riffled deliberately and carefully in front of me.

There were thousands, hundreds, fifties and twenties—nothing smaller!

"Gambler?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered with a long calculating look directly in my eyes, "but not the way you're thinkin'."

I looked him right back and finished off my schooner.

"What way, then?" I asked, coolly.

"Two more," he hollered at Nick and didn't say anything more until he'd decapitated the drink and dabbed at his lips with the handkerchief.

"Funny thing about words," he began, "even the simple ones . . . by the way, d'ya smoke cigars?"

I nodded, and he got six, fifty-centers, from Nick, gave me one, and then spent nearly a minute anointing one with his tongue and lips until he was satisfied with its appearance. He lit a match from a book, let the chemicals and even the wax burn away before he held the light for me. The match burned clear to his fingertips before my cigar was puffing, but it didn't faze him and I could see the two fingers had heavy, yellow callouses. He struck another match and lit his own cigar the same way. It was obvious that this was an act; a piece of ham he'd been slicing a long time.

He'd paid for the cigars with a twenty from the packet he'd shown me and, when Nick brought him the change, he put the smaller bills into a separate silver dollar clip from another pocket. Nick had seen the first roll, and now the second. A moment later when he glanced up from his work, he was in time to see the match trick. He looked at me quizzically, then moved on down the bar. As I said before, Nick and I had an understanding.

"Like I was sayin'," he continued single-mindedly, "words are screwy. Take *gamblin'*. What's it mean t'you?"

Perversely, I decided to spoil his fun. "To risk something of value," I said pedantically, "in the hope of winning or gaining something of value."

"You crud!" he exclaimed, with

rough and unexpected good nature. "No wonder y'cant hold a job. I bet y'always bite the hand that feeds you."

"Not with full fangs," I grinned.

"See that y'don't!" he said lightly, but with a tone like a piece of well dressed leather, sheathing a stiletto. "What I was gettin' at was—I don't gamble with money, least not straight out. I gamble with people."

"Like me?" I asked bluntly.

"Maybe like you," he said with a warning gentleness, "maybe not. I didn't think you were a gamble at first. Now, I'm not so sure."

"Don't worry," I said truthfully, "I won't try to roll you for your money, and if you left it here on the counter it would be safer than if you left it at the bank."

He laughed again, with that mercurial change to good nature. "Hell! I know that. I already gambled on that when I flashed my wad. I wouldn't gamble on your honesty, at least not that way."

"What way, then?" I asked, echoing my earlier question.

For an answer he brought out the clip with the big bills, peeled off a hundred and held it out to me. "D'ya want that?"

"What do you want in exchange for it?" I asked, looking him straight in the eye, ignoring the money.

He stared straight back and, where what had gone before had been a sort of game, I knew now this was deadly serious; he'd de-

cided to gamble. It scared me a little (I don't scare easy), but at the same time I was beginning to develop an almost sentimental empathy with Cartwheel's style. He didn't look it (nor, for that matter, did I), but underneath, I could see he was my kind of people.

"Y'didn't answer my question," he said evenly; "D'ya want that?"

"Sure I want it."

"It's yours," he said, putting it into my palm and closing my fingers around it. "Y'earned it."

"How?" I asked, smoothing the bill out in the slop on the bar, and leaving it there.

"Gamble," he said tersely, "y'won. No strings," he added.

Mentally, I sorted out the kind of gamble he must have made, and it didn't leave me feeling any easier. "Timber-r-r!" I shouted to Nick.

He came back to my place, glanced stoically at the bill on the bar and then began methodically to pass out drinks to everyone in the house. That's what I like about Nick—no lip. He saw the money, he knew as well as I did that I owed damned near everybody in the bar a drink (some, a hell of a lot more), and that was that.

"What's *his* name?" Cartwheel asked.

"Nick."

"Knows you pretty well, doesn't he?"

"As well as anybody."

"That's not much, I'll bet."

I didn't answer him.

He waited a few seconds then pulled out the bundle again. "Damn you!" he said pleasantly, peeling off a twenty this time, "Y'won again."

"What happens," I asked, adding the twenty to the hundred on the bar, "when I lose?"

"Y'don't get a cent. Like y'just lost a thousand for askin' that idiot's question."

He wasn't lying, I was sure of that!

Nick had finished setting them up. He came back to me. "And what for you gentlemen, please?"

"Two of your best brandies for Mr. Carter and me."

As Nick turned away to get them, Cartwheel glared at me angrily. I'd lost again, (I knew why I'd lost) but it couldn't be helped.

"How much did it cost me to tip your name?" I asked him as calmly as I could.

"Twenty," he said nastily.

"Then, you really didn't think I'd do it?"

"Why did you?"

The way I was beginning to feel about Cartwheel, I hated to lie to him. Nick saved me, for the moment, by coming back with the brandy. He picked up the twenty. "Sixteen-forty," he said, "and your bill brings it to eighteen-ninety . . . right?" I nodded, and he got me a dollar-ten change which he chucked on the counter in front of me and went on down the bar. He knew exactly the spot I was in.

"Y'plannin' on answering my question?" Cartwheel asked.

"Yeah," I said truthfully, "as soon as I can think of a good excuse. All the best!" I said, raising the brandy.

Suddenly the fun in him, burst through, and he was smiling again. "You're a devious bastard." He raised his glass; "All the best!"

We tossed off the drinks. "Now, who's making with the big words?" I asked.

He remained silent.

"How much did I lose for that remark?"

"No game," he said, "I thought I'd watch the play to see how the table's running."

"I've got a hundred," I began, "that says you'll . . ." I stopped short when I realized the trap I was setting for myself. I was trying to get him to stop his game and I wanted him to win back his hundred, but, if I bet him he'd keep on playing, he'd think I was trying to scare him off and he'd take the hundred and go right on, and I'd be right back where I started. If I bet the opposite way, he'd think I was greedy but he'd probably go on playing anyhow.

"Y'got a hundred says I'll what?" he demanded.

"I got a hundred says you can't tell me what bet I was just going to make."

"I'll take that," he said without hesitation, "y'were going to bet me I'd keep on playing."

I shoved the hundred over to him.

"Now then, I'll bet that hundred, to your dollar-ten," he said, almost wistfully, "that you'd have paid that bet, regardless of what I answered."

I planked the dollar-ten in front of him and headed for the rest room. When I got back, I found we were drinking brandy boilermakers with schooner helpers.

I hadn't paid too much attention to his looks before, because somehow people's physical appearance tends to make you draw conclusions about them which are usually ninety percent wrong, and then you waste a lot of time finding out what they're really like. Everybody wears a camouflage but, unless you know *why* they wear it, it doesn't mean a damned thing. I took a good look at him now.

He was about five-four; maybe twenty-five, maybe thirty years old; he'd have been roughly handsome if he hadn't been thirty, forty pounds overweight, which made him look soft. His clothes were deceptively expensive and, except for those ridiculous silver dollars, there wasn't anything flashy about him. He looked like he belonged to his clothes) it would have been hard to imagine him in any others. He had a slightly rowdy head of medium brown hair and neat eyebrows, with either dark brown or black eyes, I couldn't tell which in the dim light of the bar. Normally

his face was masked by a nearly blank expression that changed only when he was angry or amused. The anger showed only in the little wrinkles around his eyes and a tightening of the lips, but when he was amused, every muscle in his face seemed to come alive. When he *was* amused it made you feel good! His hands were good, strong ones, clean and manicured, but pudgy. He didn't wear any rings. He moved with an easy absence of mannerism.

I thought about that last fact for a moment—it definitely wasn't a characteristic of a dope addict, yet I'd pegged him that way from his reactions, and I don't usually go wrong about that sort of thing. The possible alternative to my first guess wasn't a pleasant one. I'd been right about one thing, though, he wasn't the sort to be sidetracked when he got something on his mind.

"Okay," he said, when I sat down again, "you've had plenty of time to think up an excuse why y'tipped off my name. Whyd'ya do it?"

Actually, I hadn't given it another thought. "Self protection," I answered, figuring that part of the truth would be safer than a lie, "I'm getting drunk and I'll probably get drunker," I said, polishing off the brandy and tamping it down with a cooling swallow of beer, "and I can depend on Nick to look after me if anything . . . goes wrong."

He tossed off his own brandy and followed it up with nearly half a schooner. I hadn't yet made up my mind whether he was boorishly gulping his brandy, because I was, or whether it was for the same reason, which was an entirely different thing.

He didn't look at me but turned to face the bar, digesting what I'd said. "Whad'ya mean, 'goes wrong'," he finally asked, "y'figurin' on something like that?"

"I've been known to attract trouble," I answered, understating the facts considerable.

"How?"

"By saying the wrong thing to another drunk with a quick temper."

"Y'think I got a quick temper?"

"Yes."

"Y'plannin on sayin' the wrong thing?"

"I don't plan on it, I just say what comes to mind. Sometimes that's wrong."

"Y'figure I'm not smart enough to understand what you say?"

"I figure you're too smart; you might understand what I *mean*."

"Don't y'say what y'mean?"

"Not always. Do you?"

"No," he said, exploding into that infectious grin. "Why," he asked, sobering again instantly, "did you refuse my money?"

"I didn't refuse it, I lost it."

"Then y'wouldn't object to tryin' for some more?" he asked slyly.

"Not if I work for it . . . a job.

I don't like gambling . . . your way."

"Proud?"

"Damned proud!"

"What of?" he said with a withering scorn, indicating my clothes and general appearance.

It was my turn to be amused. It was out of character for him to bait me that deliberately; a five year old could have recognized it. I laughed in his face and tapped my head with a finger, without saying a word.

He looked a little bit hurt over my laughing at him. "Think you're smart don't'ya?" he grumbled.

"Just often enough to give me a swell head," I said, "and too often to have any money in my pocket."

"All right," he said, accepting my lefthanded apology, "what kind of job d'ya have in mind?"

"What kind of a job do you want done?" I asked, finally pinning the whole conversation down to its essentials.

He hadn't expected to be closed in on that quickly.

"See what y'mean," he said vaguely, beckoning to Nick to bring us another round. He didn't say anything more for nearly five minutes, busy with his own thoughts, like a gambler who's just been raised for the fourth time. Finally he reached a decision. He looked around the bar carefully, examining everyone he could see.

"I will hire you," he said with crisp precision, "if you will tell me

everything without exception that you know about that man sitting facing us on the outside of the third booth."

The hair crawled on the back of my neck as I noticed the change in his speech; every trace of the slurred vowels and elided consonants was gone. Not only that, the man he'd intuitively picked was the nearest thing to a big time racketeer the city boasted. What I knew about him didn't bear repeating where it could be overheard, at least not if it was repeated by me, and I knew now just where I'd be if I attempted to lie to Cartwheel.

Cartwheel caught my panic and turned on that grin again, lapsing into his old speech pattern, "I was just kiddin'ya 'bout that fella, but if y'want the job, meet me here tomorrow at ten."

I didn't dare not agree, and we drank to it; I knew I'd better be here at ten, too.

Something nagged my mind . . . tomorrow at ten . . . Christ! It is tomorrow!

Michael (Mickey) Ruark pulled his wrist up where he could focus his eyes on his watch. Quarter to ten. With immense effort he pulled himself erect on the side of the bed and began to dress as rapidly as his fumbling fingers could move. He staggered to the wash basin, threw some water in his face and rubbed his hands back and forth over his ragged crewcut. He stumbled out

the door and down the stairs of the rooming house, almost running. He pulled in at Nick's with a few minutes to spare.

Something was wrong—Nick was back on duty!

Nick, when he saw Mickey enter, unhurriedly picked up the morning paper, drew a short beer and sat the beer and the paper in front of Mickey. The headline told the story.

DOPE PEDDLER DIES

Acting on an unidentified tip, local police raided a room of the Thunderbird Motel early this morning. A stranger to the area, tentatively identified as Lucius B. Carter, New York, was discovered dead in his bed, apparently the victim of a heart attack. Concealed among his effects, were found over half a million dollars worth of pure heroin, as well as a large, but unspecified, amount of money.

Internal Revenue agents, called to the scene, stated that the man had undoubtedly been sent into this locality to rebuild the dope ring which, early this past summer, was crushed with the arrest of over twenty individuals.

A security clampdown has cut off the release of any additional facts about the case. The body has been transferred to the Scranton Funeral Home.

Mickey sipped at his beer listlessly. Nick reached into a cubby-hole,

took out a plain envelope and handed it to him. "Big Ed," he said almost inaudibly. Mickey opened the envelope and fished out a single scrap of paper.

You were right, he was hot!

B.E.

P.S. In the pocket of his suit coat was a box with your name on it, with thirty silver dollars. I took the liberty of lifting it. I'll give it to you when I see you.

"So, he knew," Mickey thought with a sigh, and thought also of his daughter in prison . . . for selling dope. "I wonder if he planned on giving me the dollars before he killed me. I must have been fingered by someone; this's probably the end of the undercover racket for me."

"Hell!" he exclaimed, as much to himself as to Nick, "Why does it always have to be the ones you like?"

Nick picked up his empty glass, refilled it and sat it in front of him. "It doesn't," he said, "those are just the ones you remember—that's all." Nick went on back up the bar.

Mickey turned to look disconsolately out the window. "It's too beautiful a morning to be hungry," he thought. He turned back.

"Nick," he called, reverting to his normal caginess, "how about lending me a buck? I'll pay you back before the end of the week—I've got thirty dollars coming in."



ONE FINGERPRINT



BY

BOB RUSSELL

In the dim murky world of espionage a fingerprint can have many meanings . . . depending on your point of view.

THE man who was known as Harold Browne sauntered slowly along one of the several walkways which bisect Lafayette Park. He was distinguishable only by his leisurely pace from countless other men with briefcases on their way to bus or car pool. The man was obviously in his forties, and a casual observer would have considered small surgical scars on his face as merely lines of aging.

Browne paused and eased down on a bench facing the distant White House. He extended his legs and

let his briefcase slide flat beside him on the bench.

Across the walk a youngster attempted to feed peanuts to a squirrel, but gathering pigeons got most of them, and the squirrel retreated up a tree. The boy gave up and moved on, accompanied by some of the more persistent pigeons. Howard Browne watched and relaxed.

Evening breezes whipped the leaves overhead, but the restlessness was not conveyed to Browne. He crossed his arms and ankles, digging his heel into the bare dirt before the

bench. Across Pennsylvania Avenue in the gathering gloom a solitary picket marched with a huge sign. Browne strained his eyes but could not read the message.

Someone approached and sat down on the far end of the bench. Howard Browne refrained from looking sideways, but he sensed that it was a man. The newcomer leaned forward and retied a shoelace. The movement brought him into the edge of Browne's vision. His breath, suspended for a few seconds, began cautiously once more. His companion wore the cap of a sight-seeing director, one of those individuals who sell tickets to visitors in the White House area.

"Can I get a light, friend?" The voice was low but distinct and a trifle foreign in accent. The man slid toward Howard and held a stubby pipe.

"Sure," replied Browne, offering his Zippo. "It's a little low, but it should light another time or two."

"They don't hold up like they used to," observed the ticket seller as he drew the low flame into his pipe. He peered into Howard's face as he returned the lighter.

"I'm afraid I just neglected to fill it," said Howard Browne with a nervous smile.

The man moved closer and pointed with his pipe stem. "You have made a great change in appearance since you defected, Kopelov. I would not have known you from photographs alone!"

The remarks were made in the same low voice but now in Russian. Howard Browne had been looking to the front, and now it was several seconds before he slowly turned his head and looked into his accuser's eyes.

His reply was in a weary Russian voice. "Somehow I suppose I always knew you would come along. How did you find me?"

The ticket seller snorted. "It was really simple, Kopelov. Anyone can enter the State Department building. We studied those who came out of certain offices. I saw you several times. Last night while you were at the movie, we entered your apartment.

"You have been careful, Kopelov, but you made one glaring mistake in your quarters. We found *two* sets of fingerprints. Most of them belonged to an obscure clerk in the State Department, a Howard Browne, but we found one set on a waterglass which were those of Dimitri Kopelov. You have rubber gloves, perhaps, with false fingerprints on them, Kopelov?"

Howard Browne unconsciously rubbed his fingerprints with his thumbs. "They are realistic," he said ruefully, "but I couldn't wear them all the time."

"You could not hope to escape our thorough detection and identification methods by such childish actions," retorted the ticket man. "Now you must pay for the attempt."

"What can you do *here*?" asked Browne with new resolve in his voice. "What if I just get up and walk away right now?"

"I would merely walk away with you, shoot you at the first intersection, and melt away in the crowd. But we do not wish to do that, Kopelov, however easy it would be. You have a new life among the capitalists which you seem to like. We could allow you to continue to enjoy it in return for certain favors.

"Now, enough. My car will soon come along the avenue. Walk slowly with me to the curb if you wish to live beyond this minute!"

The ticket agent rose and, slowly, Howard Browne stood beside him. The two men cut across the lawn towards a street light on Pennsylvania Avenue. As they gained the sidewalk, a sedan swung from the flowing traffic and paused at the curb. Browne got in, followed by his captor.

From the front seat an expressionless set of eyes studied both passengers and, satisfied, turned back to the task of re-entering the traffic-stream.

Howard Browne felt his briefcase slip away and a practiced hand skim over his body.

"Kneel on the floor, Kopelov," commanded the man in the gloom beside him. "Even if we come to terms, you must not know where we are going."

Browne slid to the floor on his

knees and supported his lowered head on his fists. He tried to determine the destination of the automobile. At best he could only estimate from turns and speeds that the agents were taking him somewhere in Georgetown. The car came to a final stop, and a garage door closed behind it before he was allowed to rise.

Howard Browne was propelled through the darkened rear part of a house and into a dimly lighted study. Before him was a stocky and sour-visaged individual whom he recognized as the third secretary of the Soviet embassy. Besides his two original captors, there was one more man in the room, a slight thin-faced person who sat back from the desk light in the semi-darkness.

Mikielski, the diplomat behind the desk, slapped the blotter before him sharply and launched into Russian.

"Kopelov, you are a dead man. As far as the Soviet Government is concerned, you died when you went over to the Americans. If you are found in the Potomac tomorrow, your new bosses will not even admit your existence. They can't afford to.

"So what we have to offer is a chance to continue this miserable existence you have chosen for yourself, but at our pleasure. Now, even in your lowly and untrusted position you will occasionally come upon information desirable to our gov-

ernment. If you agree to seek and pass such data to us, we will release you near your apartment. If not, or if you do not satisfy us with your efforts, you will be eliminated at once.

"You have one minute to choose between your doorstep and the river. Which is it?"

Browne considered his words carefully. "If I produce information for the Soviet government, will credit be given to Dimitri Kopelov?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Mikielski.

"I mean simply, is there a chance for the name of Kopelov to be redeemed in Russia, or will credit for my information go to the third secretary of the embassy?"

Mikielski pounded the desk angrily. "You are in no position to bargain! I say—"

"One moment, comrade," interposed a soft voice from the shadows. "I believe we can reason on this."

The third secretary subsided with a glower at the prisoner. Howard Browne turned toward the shadowy figure in an overstuffed chair in the gloom.

"Kopelov, I can promise you this. Every scrap of information you can produce will be forwarded as 'Kopelov says.' It will not be trusted for you are not trustworthy, but it will be checked when possible for accuracy. In time, if your efforts have produced good information, it will be time to consider your standing. Is this what you want?"

"Indeed," replied Browne. "And you are able to convince the embassy officials of this?"

Even Mikielski smiled, and the slight figure in the darkness chuckled.

"Kopelov, I am certain I can. You will be dead or bound in an agreement enforced by threat of death when you leave here. Does the name Kusivok mean anything to you?"

Howard Browne's eyes widened. Fodor Kosivok headed Soviet counterintelligence for the western hemisphere. Here was the never-detected floating link which connected all Russian espionage agents in the West! Browne took a deep breath and expelled it slowly before answering.

"I am reassured, Comrade Kusivok, and I am overcome by the remote chance of redemption . . ."

He removed the handkerchief from his coat lapel pocket carefully, dabbed at his eyes, and blew his nose vigorously. He also blew a small metal cylinder in the hem of the handkerchief. The only audible result was a distant bark.

"Enough of this." Mikielski was determined to resume control of the meeting. "What do you know *now*, Kopelov? Surely in the past months you have acquired knowledge of some capitalist activities to make up for wasting our time this evening. Speak up!"

Howard Browne turned back to the desk. He hesitated, nervously

twisting the handkerchief in his hands.

"There is perhaps one thing of interest, comrade," he began. "During the last few months concern for information leaks has occupied several U.S. agencies. They have refrained from arresting or forcing recall of espionage agents until the proper moment. Even now they—"

At a sharp whistle from the outside, Browne fell, dragging the desk lamp with him to smash into full darkness. He twisted a capsule in the handkerchief and threw it away from him as he scrambled under the desk. In the hubbub of shouts and curses, he found an ankle he guessed to be Mikielski's and pulled, dumping the portly Russian and his chair with a crash. Other noises added to the confusion as outside doors were smashed and dogs barked with excitement.

Fodor Kusivok sat handcuffed on

the sofa in the brightly lit study. Mikielski, the ticket seller, and the driver had been escorted back to their embassy to await expulsion procedures, but there was no such immunity for the ace Soviet agent.

Howard Browne reentered the room, wiping his gas-reddened eyes. The Russian espionage chief slitted his own watery eyes. His voice hissed with bitter contempt.

"I can't believe the Fatherland spawned such a treacherous viper as you!"

Howard laughed. "Save your indignation, Kusivok. I'm no more Dimitri Kopelov than you are!"

"How could you not be? No one else was in your apartment, and we found one fingerprint of Kopelov when you left off the stupid gloves!"

"Wrong," said Howard Browne. "You found one Kopelov print when I left *on* the stupid gloves!"



DUDE SHERIFF

*Hank Douglas, the new sheriff, was half decoration
and half joke . . . until he discovered the body.*

BY RICHARD HILL WILKINSON

IF his horse hadn't shied Sheriff Hank Douglas would never have discovered the body. He had taken a short cut through Lobo Canyon in the hopes of reaching the Circle M ranch before noon, transacting his business there and returning to town before sundown. There was no trail in the canyon, just waist high greasewood. An automobile would have floundered here before it had traveled fifty yards.

At first Hank thought that his black gelding had gotten wind of a rattler. Then he saw the rounded mound of leaves and branches. He pulled up the gelding and stepped to the ground.

The mound had been hastily thrown together and was only a few hours old. Some of the leaves were still damp. Hank guessed what was beneath it even before he

removed the first layer of covering.

The man was lying face down. He was fully clothed, dressed in the jeans, high-heeled boots and plaid shirt of a working cow-boy.

Carefully Hank rolled him over and was not at all surprised to see the bullet hole near the right temple and a second hole above the left eye where the bullet had emerged. He was less surprised when he recognized the dead man as Barney Aaron.

Without further disturbing the leaves and branches or again touching the body, Hank hunkered down, shook a cigarette from a crumpled pack and set fire to it. Without half trying he could name a dozen men who would like to see Barney dead. No meaner, more arrogant, more sadistic hombre ever lived.

In fact, it was Barney with whom

Hank had had business at the Circle M. Two nights ago Barney, following the pattern of his usual Saturday night sprees, had gotten into a brawl at the Golden Nugget Saloon, broken the arm of the only man who had dared oppose him and then, in a fit of gleeful destruction, had hurled a bottle through the backbar mirror.

Chris Nelson, the Gold Nugget's proprietor, had registered a complaint and Hank had promised to either collect damages or arrest Barney on charges of destroying property.

Hank took a deep drag on his cigarette and blew smoke against the coal. Well, there'd be no arresting Barney now. Barney was dead. Murdered.

After awhile Hank crushed out his cigarette and then made a slow and careful search of the area near the body. He found where a horse had broken through the greasewood. There was a fairly well trampled area where the horse had waited for maybe ten minutes. But there were no footprints; these had been completely eradicated.

Hank went back to a spot near the mound and lighted another cigarette. He was a young man, this Hank Douglas, still in his twenties, but he had the slow, careful mind of a man twice his years. By profession he was a lawyer. His folks had sent him east to school, and he had returned to New Mexico four years later.

His boyhood friends were amused at the clothes he wore, at the cultivated manner he had acquired and the way he talked. They good naturedly called him "The Dude."

Hank didn't care, and when someone, more or less jokingly, suggested that he run for the office of sheriff, he agreed. He wanted some experience with the law and he couldn't think of a better way to get it.

Much to everyone's astonishment, he won the election. Hank wasn't surprised. He had campaigned diligently and there was a dignity and honesty about him that folks couldn't help but admire.

There were some things about the office that Hank didn't like—until Bailey Strannix explained them to him.

"Things have changed considerable around here since you've been away. We're a dude ranch country now. In fact, a lot of us ranchers depend on the tourist trade in order to make both ends meet. Folks who come out here expect to find an old time western atmosphere."

"So?" said Hank.

"So most of the cowboys we employ—the dude wranglers, that is, not the working cowboys—wear big hats and fancy shirts and tight pants, and they pack six guns. The dudes like it. Makes them feel they're back in the old west."

Hank regarded the ranch owner questioningly, and Strannix went on, "We'd like our sheriff to go

along with the gag. No harm in wearing a western get-up, packing a gun and getting to and from places aboard a horse rather than in a police car. Be good for business."

Hank thought about it. He half suspected that Strannix and the others didn't take the young sheriff as seriously as they might have, but what about it? He shrugged.

"Sure, Bailey, I'll go along with the gag if it will help our part of New Mexico to prosper."

Hank rose now and examined the body again, without touching it. For a long time he stared down at the cruel, beard-stubbed face. Well, this was it. This was the showdown. He wondered what the jokers who had elected him would think when they learned that he had a real, honest-to-goodness murder to solve.

Hank squinted up through the greasewood, pivoting on his heels. He saw nothing but more greasewood and patches of blue sky. There was no outcropping or ledge or hummock of ground behind which a man with a gun could lie in ambush and pick off a rider moving through the canyon.

So there was only one other answer. Barney had been shot somewhere else and his body brought here. Why? Again the answer was obvious. Practically nobody ever visited Lobo Canyon. So the murderer had left the body here, intending to return for it

later and dispose of it more permanently.

Hank turned the body back on its face and carefully piled the leaves and branches back into place. He could, he reasoned, make a cold camp nearby and wait for the killer to return. But that might not be for days or even weeks. Besides, it didn't fit in with the plan that was slowly taking form in Hank's mind.

He cut a greasewood branch and brushed out his own footprints. Then he rode the gelding a half mile down the canyon, returned on foot and carefully brushed out the hoofprints.

It was early afternoon when he finally headed again for the Circle M.

Two or three of the working punchers were hanging around when Hank rode into the ranch yard. A half dozen guests and a couple of the dude wranglers were congregated on the wide veranda. The young sheriff didn't know that they had all contrived to be here when he arrived. Word had reached them yesterday that the newly elected officer was coming out to the Circle M to make his first arrest. Barney Aaron had bellowed with laughter and announced that this was something he wanted to see. The Circle M punchers and the guests wanted to see it too.

Aware of his grinning and expectant audience, Hank rode up to

the ranch house and dismounted. The door at the top of the veranda steps opened and Bailey Strannix came out. Bailey owned the Circle M. He was a medium sized man, barrel-chested, deeply tanned, fifty years old or better. He reached the bottom of the steps before Hank could get started up.

"You looking for me, son?"

"Not exactly," said Hank. He didn't like being called "son," especially when there was a badge pinned to his shirt proclaiming his office. "It's Barney Aaron I want to talk to."

"He ain't here." Bailey reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. "How much does Chris Nelson claim his mirror is worth?"

This was something Hank hadn't expected and it stopped him for a minute. "Paying for the mirror won't exactly settle the matter. I think I'd better talk to Barney."

With a gesture of impatience Bailey extracted bills and shoved them at the officer. "This ought to cover the damage and to spare. If it don't, tell Nelson to send me a bill for the difference." Strannix returned the wallet to his pocket. "I guess that finishes your business here don't it, son?"

"No way near. I came out to talk to Barney; I'd better talk to him."

"Barney ain't here, I tell you. He might never be here again."

"I got plenty of time. Besides, I haven't eaten since morning."

Strannix couldn't very well ignore

that. "The cook'll feed you." The ranch owner hesitated, seemingly fighting his annoyance. After a moment he cast an uneasy glance at the dudes who were watching from the veranda, and lowered his voice. "Look here, son, I don't want any trouble on my ranch. It's bad for business. If you try to arrest Barney all hell will break loose. Someone'll get hurt, most likely you."

"This morning I had a talk with Barney. I told him I'd pay for the broken mirror. Then I gave him a choice: Either he could mend his ways or when he rode out after breakfast he needn't come back." Strannix took a deep breath. "I can't make up my mind whether I want him back or not. He's the best working puncher I ever knew, but he's a trouble maker."

"That's why I want to talk to him," said Hank. "If I handled every case by riding away from it, I wouldn't last long. Maybe it sounds kid-like, but I took an oath of office, Bailey, and I'm going to live up to it. Or at least try to. So I'm sticking around whether you like it or not."

Bailey Strannix's mouth began to twitch. Again he was fighting an outburst of anger. He started to speak, glanced again at the cluster of dudes on the veranda, clamped his mouth shut, turned abruptly and stalked back up the steps and disappeared inside the house.

Leading his black, Hank walked

down to the corral where he unsaddled the animal and turned it loose. He swung the saddle up onto the top rail and turned to find young Wes Victor at his elbow. It was Wes who had stood up to Barney in the Gold Nugget. The kid's arm was in a sling, and there was an intense burning hatred in his eyes.

"I hope you kill him," he said. "I hope you have to riddle him with bullets and then throw his carcass to the coyotes. You got a right to do it, Hank. You're the sheriff."

Hank was awe-struck by the intense, bitter emotion with which the youngster spoke. "Just why did Barney break your arm, Wes? Nobody seems to know exactly."

"He made some filthy remarks about Alice Mayberry. Alice and I are engaged. It burned me up. I almost went out of my mind. I jumped him. I had to." The kid's eyes looked out across the range land. "Sometime I'll kill him for what he said and did. I'll never stop wanting to kill him."

Hank waited a moment, studying the youthful face, and then asked, "Do you think Barney will be back, Wes? Bailey said he gave him a choice."

"He'll be back," Wes said bitterly. "Where else would he go? He's being paid more money than any of the other working punchers and he runs things to suit himself. He'll quiet down for awhile, but

it won't last. Everyone's afraid of him, even Bailey Strannix, and Barney knows it."

Walking back to the cook shanty Hank thought, "Somebody here on the Circle M shot Barney. One of these men know that his body's lying down there in Lobo Canyon under a pile of leaves. It's up to me to find out which one's guilty, and I'm beginning to think that it isn't going to be such a hard job after all."

The cook's name was Monty Ranger and like most ranch cooks he was surly and bitterly complaining. He set cold meat and potatoes and a pitcher of milk in front of Hank, then picked up a half filled sack of flour and headed for the pantry, talking incessantly about the lots of cooks and what a skunk Barney Aaron was and mentioning the fact that sooner or later someone would knock him off, preferably sooner.

It wasn't until cookie reached the pantry door that he discovered the flour sack contained a small hole and he had left a thin trail of white across his otherwise spotless floor. This was the final straw. He picked up what remained of the flour and with a savage oath hurled it against the wall. Then he turned and glared at Hank as though challenging the officer to laugh.

Hank didn't. He wanted to, but he didn't. He merely stared at the trail of white. He had too much on

his mind to risk arousing the ire of a cantankerous cook.

Mumbling, Monty Ranger started cleaning up the mess he'd made. Hank finished his meal and was lighting a cigaret when a tall, rangy cow puncher came into the cook shack. Hank had seen him once or twice with the Circle M. boys when they came to town. His name was Steve Seldon and if Barney Aaron had had a friend, Steve was it. Steve was the kind of man who could find something likeable about most everyone, which probably accounted for the fact that he got along with Barney.

Seldon came over to the table where Hank was sitting, pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I heard you were here, Hank. I got some information that might interest you."

"Maybe you know when Barney Aaron will be back."

"He won't be back." Seldon fished out a cigarette and lighted it. "Him and me rode out together this morning. We got up to the north pasture and Barney suddenly blew his stack. 'The hell with it,' he said. 'Old Man Strannix nor no one else ain't going to shove me around. I'm going to keep on riding and I ain't coming back.'" Seldon blew smoke at the ceiling. "Thought you might like to know."

"Thanks," said Hank. "Is that all?"

"Except for this." Seldon folded both arms on the table top, tilting

back his head so the smoke from his cigarette wouldn't go up his nose. "Barney heard you were riding out here to arrest him for what he called a little harmless fun at the Gold Nugget. He said that what happened to Wes Victor ain't nothing to what will happen to you if you try to arrest him." The tall man stood up and for a moment remained looking down at the officer. "I knew Barney pretty well. Once he made a threat, he was never one to forget it. Just thought you'd like to know."

After Seldon had gone, Hank crushed out his cigarette and then went out into the late afternoon sunlight. For a moment he stood idly watching Steve Seldon unsaddle his grey mare. Then he crossed to the bunkhouse and asked Wes Victor to show him an empty bunk where he could sleep that night.

At supper, with most of the Circle M personnel present, Hank listened to the conversation but said little. His mind was too occupied with his plans for the next day. No one wondered why Barney Aaron wasn't present; no one seemed to care. Yet Hank could sense the underlying feeling of uneasiness, as though they were waiting for and expecting something to happen without knowing what.

Darkness had come in full by the time supper was over. Hank strolled down to the corral. Inky, his black gelding, moved up to the bars and nuzzled his hand. Hank spoke to

him softly, feeding him a tidbit he'd brought from the table. After awhile the other horses in the corral quieted, which was the moment for which Hank had been waiting. He reached into his pocket for the tool he'd been carrying . . .

The door to the main ranch house opened and closed and Hank, about to return to the bunkhouse, hastily produced a cigarette and lighted it. He waited, the coal of his cigarette glowing redly in the darkness.

A figure materialized out of the gloom and stopped several paces away.

"That you, son?"

"Yes.

"It's me, Bailey."

"I want to talk to you."

"Thought you might." Hank could sense rather than see the surprise come into the rancher's face. There was a moment of silence and then Strannix said,

"Come on up to the house."

The ranch house living room was brightly lighted. An open fire crackled cheerfully on the hearth. A half dozen dudes were sitting around, playing cards or reading. They all glanced up curiously as Strannix and his companion came in, but the rancher paid them no attention. Instead, he led the way to his office and closed the door. He motioned Hank to a chair and sat down himself, pulling a cigar from his pocket.

"Steve Seldon, one of my riders was in awhile ago," he began. "He

says Barney made a threat to pin your ears back tomorrow."

"Steve told me."

"I know. He got the impression you didn't take him seriously. He thought I ought to talk to you."

Hank got out his pack of cigarettes. "Barney won't bother me tomorrow, Bailey. He's dead."

"He's *what*?"

"Dead. Murdered. I found his body lying under a pile of brush in Lobo Canyon. Tomorrow or tonight or the next day someone is going to sneak that body off to a more permanent resting place."

"What kind of a cock and bull story is that?" Strannix was on his feet, glaring down at the young officer. "If what you say is true why didn't you say so when you first got here?"

Hank took a drag on his cigarette. "Because I wanted to find out who the murderer is first. It took me almost an hour."

"Well, how do you like that!" Strannix paced across the room and back again. "Are you trying to tell me that one of my punchers murdered Barney?"

"I'll wait until I have the handcuffs on the man before making an accusation."

His mouth working in that nervous habit he had, a look of crafty cunning came into the rancher's eyes. "If you know who the killer is, why don't you arrest him?"

"Proof, Bailey. I haven't a shred of proof."

"Oh." Strannix slumped back into his chair. "So you've got to have proof, and you plan to get that proof by staking yourself out near where you found the body and waiting for the murderer to come along and pick him up."

"Not by a long shot." Hank jabbed out his cigarette in a tray on the rancher's desk. "If I did that, the guy could claim he just happened to stumble on the body the way I did."

"How else can you work it?"

"I've got a plan. Maybe it's no good, but it's worth trying. I've got to have a witness."

"A witness?"

"One of your punchers. Someone who knew Barney pretty well."

"The only one who knew him at all is Steve Seldon."

"Then he's my man." Hank stood up. "That all right with you?"

Bailey Strannix had no choice and he knew it. He had been asked for help by an officer of the law; it wouldn't set well with his guests if he refused.

"Okay," he said gruffly. "I think you're more than half bluffing, but I'll tell Steve to ride with you tomorrow."

Riding toward Lobo Canyon the next morning, Hank told Steve Seldon about finding Barney's body beneath the covering of brush. Steve jerked sideways in his saddle and stared wide-eyed.

"Holy goat! Then he must have

been shot right after he left me. That was around nine o'clock. What time did you find him?"

"Shortly after noon."

Steve narrowed his eyes, thinking. "We were way up on the north pasture when Barney and me parted. He headed for town, cutting across the pasture toward the bridge over Powder Creek. It's likely that it happened at the bridge, because there's no good cover in between."

Hank nodded. "And it's a good hour and a half ride from the bridge to Lobo, which would put the murderer burying Barney under the brush around about eleven o'clock."

"And an hour later you come along." Steve shot a glance at the officer. "And you didn't see anything?"

"In Lobo Canyon?" Hank grinned. "Wait'll we get there and you see how the greasewood's grown up. A man can't see more than ten feet ahead."

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Seldon seemed unable to digest the fact that Barney was really dead. Presently he remarked, "You think maybe the guy who shot Barney's coming back to get the body? He'd be a fool to do that if he knew someone had found it."

"How would he know? I haven't told anyone but you and Bailey."

They entered the canyon and Hank led the way to a spot fifty feet from where he'd found Barney Aaron's body. "We'd better wait

here. If our horses heard an approaching rider they might nicker."

They dismounted, and Steve said, "How do you know the body ain't already been taken away? Last night, maybe."

Hank considered this for a full minute. "It's an idea," he said at last. "Should have thought of it myself. Let's go ahead on foot and have a look."

They broke through the greasewood and at last stepped out into the tiny clearing where Hank had discovered the grave. Hank stared, a scowl to his face. "It's gone," he said bleakly, and swore under his breath. Steve came up and peered over his shoulder. The leaves and branches were scattered; the body had vanished.

"Tough," said Seldon. "Well, I guess that ends it, eh?"

"Not quite." Hank's face was grim. "Go back and get the horses. I'm going to look for signs."

By the time Steve got back there was a glint of hope in the sheriff's eyes. "I've found a trail," he said, swinging aboard the black. "Maybe we can follow it and maybe not."

Steve had an answer for that, but before he could speak Hank pushed ahead, his eyes glued to the ground, and Seldon had no choice but to follow.

An hour later, after several delays during which Hank crawled about on his hands and knees looking for tracks, they rode out of the canyon and started up a slope toward the

rim of the gorge through which Powder Creek plunged after leaving the high country. The trail here was plain, easy to follow, and the terrain was also wide enough for Seldon to ride up alongside. There were scratches on his face and his shirt was torn in two places.

"Look," he said, angrily wiping the sweat from his forehead, "what are you trying to prove? So we find where the body was dumped. You still ain't got your murderer."

"Finding the body is part of my job."

Seldon made an ejaculation of disgust. He would like to have pointed out a few other things regarding the futility of this venture, but Hank pushed his black ahead again and wouldn't listen.

They came to the rim of the gorge. Hank dismounted and leaned as far over as he could. Far, far below he could hear the rush of water over rocks. He turned, examining the ground for signs, and found plenty.

"I figured this would be where he'd dump it. Barney's body could stay down there forever without being discovered."

"Then let it," said Seldon testily. "Besides, if you knew this was where he'd take it, why'd you make us take that beating through the greasewood?"

Hank suddenly grinned. "You're a big help, Steve. No wonder you're a cowpoke instead of a dude."

"So what's wrong with being a

cowpoke?" Seldon began, but stopped as Hank removed the rope from his saddle and also the one from Steve's. "What in blazes are you going to do?"

"I'm going down and get Barney." Hank knotted one end of the spliced ropes to the pommel of his saddle. "When I yank on the rope, have Inky haul up the body. Then send the rope down after me."

Steve put his hands on his hips and wagged his head hopelessly. "By golly," he remarked. "And he still ain't got no proof."

The two riders were still a hundred yards away from the ranch house when Wes Victor sighted them and guessed what the bundle was lying across Hank's saddle. The kid let out a yell and came running toward them, his splintered arm jiggling in its sling.

"You done it, Hank! You killed him just like I said! Now feed his dirty carcass to the coyotes and everybody'll be happy."

Hank regarded the youngster soberly, and Steve Seldon said, "Take it easy, bub. Hank didn't shoot your boyfriend. We found his body at the bottom of Powder Creek gorge. He's been dead more'n twenty-four hours."

Men came running from the bunkhouse and up from the corral. Bailey Strannix stepped through his doorway and came halfway down the steps. Hank rode his black up to the foot of the steps and halted.

"Here's Barney Aaron. He's been shot. We found his body in Powder Creek gorge. Reckon I'll have to trouble you for a truck, Bailey, to get the corpse back to town." And, as an afterthought, he added, "I'll be sending a prisoner back too."

Bailey Strannix came down the few remaining steps, took a cigar from his pocket and clamped it between his teeth, but he didn't light it.

"Are you telling me you know who shot Barney?"

"I'm telling you," Hank said. He nodded to a couple of punchers and they eased Barney Aaron's body from in front of Hank and laid it on the ground. Hank knelt his black around so that he faced the group of upturned faces. He took out his gun, spun the cylinder, then replaced the weapon but kept his hand on the butt.

"It wasn't hard following the trail of the murderer," he said. "It was yesterday that he shot Barney and left the body in Lobo Canyon, covering it with leaves and branches. He planned to pick it up last night and drop it over the rim of Powder Creek gorge, which he did. The reason it was easy to follow his trail was because the off front shoe on his horse was broken. It wasn't any trick to follow a trail like that."

"Sure it wasn't," said Bailey Strannix, and there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Son, you

been looking at too much television. The trouble is, in real life we've got to face facts. And the fact is, we still don't know who was riding the horse with the broken shoe—if you want to stick to that cock-and-bull story of yours."

"I know who was riding the horse," said Hank calmly. "Yesterday I talked to you boys and I figured out which one shot Barney. So last night, when everyone was asleep, I picked up a file at the blacksmith shop and went down to the corral and filed off a hunk of iron from the shoe of the horse owned by the man who had murdered Barney. By doing that I'd know who I was following up to Powder Creek Gorge."

In the strained, electrified silence that followed Hank could hear someone nearby sucking in his breath noisily. Then a hoarse voice said, "Anyone could have been riding that horse. You still haven't any proof."

"Oh, yes I have," said Hank. "The man who owns the horse was with me all day. If someone will take a look at the front shoe of Steve's horse he'll find that a hunk of iron has been filed off."

Hank had been expecting Steve to pull his gun, but Steve knew that Hank expected it and so, instead, he drove his spurs hard into the mare's ribs and the startled animal lunged forward. Its shoulder sideswiped the black and threw Hank off balance. Before he could

recover, Steve scattered the on-foot spectators and was tearing out of the yard.

Hank recovered his equilibrium and calmly drew his rifle out of its scabbard. He stepped to the ground and dropped to one knee, getting Steve in his sights before the cowpuncher was fifty yards away. He hated to kill a man, especially on his first arrest, so he dropped the rifle barrel a fraction of an inch and pulled the trigger.

Steve's grey went down and rolled over and over. Steve landed on his hip, ten yards away. Without moving from his kneeling position, Hank lined up on the fallen man and spoke quietly to the men behind him.

"A couple of you go out there and get his gun. Stay clear of my line of fire."

"It was clever," Bailey Strannix was saying. "A smart operation. Maybe Steve can plead self defense and get off light. He claims he blasted Barney open for breaking young Wes Victor's arm and Barney jumped him. But be that as it may, what I want to know is, how'd you guess that Steve was your man?"

"I didn't guess," said Hank patiently. "I knew. A lawyer should always know before presenting his case. I talked to practically every puncher on the place, and then Steve came in to warn me about Barney's threat on my life. Only Steve said, 'I *knew* Barney pretty

well. Once he *made* a threat, he *was* never one to forget it.' See it, Bailey? Steve was talking in the past tense. He said he '*knew*' Barney, instead of '*I know*' Barney. He said '*once Barney made a threat*' instead of '*once Barney makes a threat.*' He was talking like he *kaew* Barney was already dead."

Bailey Strannix stood up and put his back to the fireplace. "We'll all be better off without

Barney Aaron around. I'm glad he's dead. We were all afraid of him, even me. I'm going to do everything I can to see that Steve gets off with a light sentence." He hesitated, cleared his throat, then reached into his pocket for a cigar. He held the cigar between his fingers for a moment, staring at it. Then he grinned and met Hank's eyes levelly. "*Sheriff,*" he said, "have a cigar."



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A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY DAVID CHANDLER

It's not always easy for a kid to live up to his parents' expectations. Sometimes it would be better if he didn't even try.



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MAMA told me to see Beaver but when I got to the toolshed I saw that someone had already tethered him, maybe the hired man from Ventura Father had sent away that morning after hardly a day with us. I went straight back to the house. I could hear them still talking in Father's room. A lot of it I couldn't understand but what they were saying about me I could figure out all right, and I stood by the door listening to them.

"You just haven't cared about trying to understand," Mama said. "Anything that isn't to your liking you won't hear about."

"Have it your way," Father said.

"I will not waste my time arguing with a woman or a boy."

"But this is like everything else in our life," Mama said. "You won't bend an inch for Tommy or for me. That's the way you run the ranch, that's the way you treat your family and your help. Why won't you leave even a little bit of what was once our marriage, Tom?"

There weren't any words for what seemed a long time. All I could hear was my breathing. Then there was a sound like a slap and Mama called out Father's name, "Thomas!" And it was awfully quiet in there again, not even anyone moving on the floor. When Mama

started to talk it sounded like her throat was drowned in tears. She said, "You're doing this because you know there's nothing I won't take on Tommy's account."

"Look," Father said, "we've been through all that before. If you get any fun grubbing around in dead ashes, keep yourself a diary. You know how I feel, I know how you feel. It's an old story and it always comes out the same, that if it wasn't for Tommy we wouldn't stay together an hour. All we can do is hate each other and wish to God one of us falls into a threshing machine or gets hit by a truck so Tommy need never know how it was with us. But while you're living here, on my ranch, mothering my son, we'll have no trouble so long as you understand what you're to do. I won't have you bringing up that boy a lacey-pants. He's my son and I'm not giving in to childish whims."

I could hear Mama clear her nose. "Thomas," she said in a voice that didn't sound like Mama, "I told you the boy doesn't want to go hunting with you. It's a simple thing. He loves you very much but he doesn't like to kill anything, even in sport."

"Kill!" Father exclaimed. "I've heard of men shamed by the soft eyes of deer, but coyotes!"

"It doesn't matter. Tommy doesn't like to kill anything."

"What kind of damned boy is that?" Father shouted. "I'd be the laughing stock of every rancher in the valley if they thought I had a

son too chintzy to kill a lousy coyote."

"He's a gentle boy, don't you see? Take him camping with you, sleep out on the range, shoot skeet, he likes that very much, but don't ask him to kill living things. Try to understand the boy, not for my sake, for his. He wants so to admire you."

"What do you mean, wants?" Father said, very loud. "Have you been turning him against me?"

"Please," Mama said, "don't shout. He's out with his pony and I'd die if he heard us. I haven't, Tom. I swear I haven't. I'm just trying to tell you he's the kind of boy who never even killed caterpillars out of curiosity."

"It's your doing!" Father exclaimed. "You're making a lousy flower-sniffer out of him. What you want me to do, go chasing with him, with a butterfly net? Is that your idea how a boy should be brought up? You've kept that boy choked tight to your apron and I'm damned glad I found out in time."

"What's the use?" Mama said. Her voice sounded tired. "You won't understand anybody but yourself."

"I'm not interested in your opinion of me. I'm telling you no son of mine is going out into the world afraid of a little blood, too good to do what killing's got to be done or to make a sport of a thing like thinning out the coyotes. Go tell him to get his shotgun. I'll be ready to leave in half an hour."

"Thomas," Mama pleaded. "Thomas, I'm begging you. I know the boy. He's only eleven years old. Maybe when he's older, if you don't force things, maybe he'll grow out of this."

"He's going with me," Father said, like he hadn't listened to anything after all. I was beginning to cry then and I was afraid they'd learn I'd been listening to everything they'd said, so I went to the outside door, stepping carefully so the floorboards wouldn't squeak and I ran away where I could cry without Father ever knowing about it.

She put her hand softly on my back and leaned forward to press her cheek on my cheek. She smelled clean and sweet and she picked up a straw and put it in my ear to tickle me when I wouldn't turn to look at her. If I hadn't heard what I did I would have thought it was like it had always been, but now I knew she was play-acting me and I couldn't look at her for wondering how long she had been play-acting me without my knowing it.

"Tommy," Mama said, "I couldn't imagine where you'd go. Until I remembered this place."

"Mama, please let me stay here awhile. I just want to think."

"Of course." Mama leaned down and kissed me. "I know how you like it here. I'll wait for you in the house. But don't be too long. Father's waiting for you to go hunting with him."

I stood up in the loft. "Mama, I don't want to, I don't!" Now I couldn't keep from showing her I had been crying and I ran to her and she put her arms around me and pressed me very close to her. "I hate it, Mama, I hate it!"

She held me close to her and let her fingers touch my face and my hair and then she said, "Sit down, Tommy," and we sat and she took my two hands in hers and looked right in my eyes and said, "Tommy, sometimes we have to do things we don't like doing. You can understand, can't you?"

"Yes, Mama," I said, "but I don't want to go hunting with Father."

"But it will be fun, Tommy. Just the two of you, when the desert floor is cooling and the colors are so nice in the sky. There'll be no one but you two. Think of the good time! I wish I were a boy so I could go along, too."

"I don't want to go," I said.

She pressed my hands very tight. "Tommy," she said, "even if we didn't like it, for the sake of the ranch, we might have to destroy coyotes. They kill things, you know."

"No, they don't, Mama," I said. "They're too timid. They only eat what others leave behind and what we throw away. They don't hurt anything."

"A boy must shoot, Tommy." Mama said it like she was a teacher telling me about fractions. "Even if you don't like it for sport, then for the ranch. Can you see that? Coy-

otes are disorderly. Do you remember when the vet said we'd have to inoculate the puppy because the coyotes might give him rabies?"

"Father's not doing it for that reason," I said. "He's doing it because he likes to kill things and he wants me to start to like killing things, too."

"What a thing to say!" Mama said. She let go of my hands and turned her head from me and when she talked again she sounded the way she had before when the tears were bubbling in her throat but she hadn't wanted to let on. "Father is only trying to bring you up so you can take your place next to him when you grow up."

Mama took my head in her hands and pressed it to her shoulder. "I wish you didn't have to go," she said. "I wish I could help you. But you must go if only because it'll be easier for you to go than not to go. It will please your father and you must do that. We must always do what Father wants us to do." She stroked my hair and I couldn't talk. I thought about everything and I tried to figure it all out.

We walked around the alfalfa, across the last irrigation ditch and over a little rise in the ground from which I could see the house. "Come along," Father said, "I never saw a boy walk so slow in all my days." Father was walking ahead of me, his shotgun slung easy across his two shoulders like a yoke. Father didn't

believe in going hunting with your gun broke in half. That's the way I liked to carry my gun. It seemed better balanced that way. But Father said if you carried it like that and saw something suddenly you wouldn't have time to fire, so the thing to do was to keep your gun loaded all the time.

We walked for a long time, not seeing anything, Father ahead of me turning around every now and then to hurry me up and me trying to do my best to keep up with him.

Suddenly, Father turned toward me and pointed off. "There!" he said. "Over there! Go on, boy. Shoot him!"

Just a few steps from him a big brown jack was bouncing up and down across the brush. He must have sensed something because he was going very fast.

"Let him have it!" Father cried. "Shoot him on the run!"

I looked at the rabbit and then at Father and then to where the rabbit had been, but he was gone.

Father came over and grabbed my arm right below the shoulder. He shook me hard. "You stupid little fool," he said. "When you see something, think and act quickly. Shoot! Don't go looking for any by-your-leave." He shook me again. "Why didn't you shoot?"

I couldn't talk. I turned my head from him.

"Why didn't you shoot? Why?"

"I forgot, I guess," I said. I wasn't telling the truth, but I knew

what would happen if I told him the truth. It would have sounded wrong to him to say I knew I could have got that jack but he looked so pretty bounding there among the sage, so I said I forgot.

He let my arm go with a push. "Next time I won't ask for explanations. I'm going to spank you, like a little boy. Understand? If you don't shoot first and think after, I'll thrash you."

He went away from me and motioned for me to come after him. I walked quickly, the gun in my hand at the side. Father turned to see how I was going. He came up to me again, swiftly, and pushed the gun to the ground. "Not like that, you fool!" he exclaimed. "You want it to go off and kill me?"

I bent down to pick up the gun. He put his foot over the barrel. "I said, do you want it to go off and kill me?" I looked at him. I didn't know what to say and I was afraid to say anything at all for he'd be able to tell I was trying to keep from crying. I bent down again, but Father seized my shirt and straightened me once more. "Do you?" he shouted. "Do you?"

I started to cry. "I want to go home, Father," I said, but I was crying so hard I think he didn't understand me.

"You stop that cry-baby stuff," he said. "Stop it, I tell you!"

He waited till I did what I was told. I rubbed the back of my hand across my eyes and my face and I

could taste the salt on my mouth.

"All right now, pick up that gun and watch it, you fool. You handle it carelessly, you'll blast your leg off."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Father looked at me. "Very well. We'll go on and forget the whole thing."

But I could see it wasn't the same. Father didn't turn to look at me the way he had before. I had displeased him again, the way I always did whenever we went out together and I wished I could tell him I was trying. But he was too far away and too angry at me, so I walked as fast as I could to keep up with him. Then I saw him, dead ahead, and he was resting on one knee and gesturing to me to come up to him fast. When I broke into a run, he put his finger to his mouth and made a face to tell me to be quiet. I walked softly to him and there, not far from us and straight ahead, was a coyote, the wind coming toward us so he didn't even know we were watching him, and he was eating something he was holding like a dog between his two paws.

"All right," Father whispered. "Now. Quickly."

I looked at Father, but he only tightened his mouth and repeated, "Now."

I brought my gun to my shoulder. I looked at Father again, and I could see him grow more furious at me. Then I looked at the coyote as best I could, my eyes suddenly

hazy, and I squeezed the trigger and there was a blast and I wasn't holding the gun properly, I guess, for it seemed to have an awful kick, hurting my shoulder. I could see the coyote fall over.

Father got up. "You didn't take proper aim," he said. He started to walk to the coyote who got hit in his side and who was trying to get up and run but couldn't. "You've only injured him, you damned fool. Now you've got to do it properly."

The way Father looked at me frightened me, so I started to run. Father caught me by the crook of the elbow and dragged me with him. "I don't want to!" I cried. "Papa! Papa!"

He squeezed my arm and pulled me with him. "That's what comes of being sentimental. Now he's bleeding to death out there and you're going to put him out of his pain." He let go of me. "Come on, we'll go on over to him and you can bash him over the head with your gunstock and end his misery. He isn't worth another shell."

"No, Father," I shouted.

He struck me across the face. "What the hell's the matter with you?" he said. He took hold of my shirt behind my neck and started to walk. We circled around the coyote who was still trying to get to his feet. His eyes were redshot

and his tongue was hanging out, gray foam flecking his mouth.

I turned to Father. "Let's take him home, Father. Let's make him well again."

"Kill him, you fool," Father said, hardly opening his mouth. "Kill him now."

We were standing over the coyote now, his eyes upturned to me.

"Put him out of his pain," Father said.

I lifted my gun in the air, looked at Father, and then let the stock crash into the coyote's head. I could feel the bones crush like dry adobe and the coyote let out a long little sigh that sounded like, "Oh," and his legs stiffened and he was dead.

Father had walked away from me. I stood over the dead coyote. "There," Father said, turning to me. "You've killed. You've learned to kill. The next time it won't be so hard. Put a shell in your barrel and come on."

I broke my gun and the spent shell popped out. I put a new one in.

I looked at Father. He was trying to smile. "See, now you've learned, it isn't so bad, is it?"

I was walking toward him when his eyes grew big and afraid. "I told you not to carry the gun that way, you fool." Then he tried to move away from me. "Don't carry it like that!" he shouted. "Don't! Don't!" he said. "*For God's sake, don't!*"

FRUSTRATION

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With psych-o-sis and neur-o-sis
And a husband all in a row.*

BY RUTH ALDRICH GRAY

MARY sat with tightly folded hands, quiet as a statue, as she waited for the doctor. The tests had been nerve-racking, the interviews with the psychiatrist wearisome and confusing. This should be the wind-up, the final verdict, she thought hopefully.

As she sat with half-closed eyes, alone in the waiting room, unanswered questions raced through her mind. Why was she here? What was wrong with her? The past ten years, since her marriage to Harold Ransom, passed in mental review.

Harold worked on a consulting basis as an efficiency expert—a man with a photographic memory, an obsession for perfection of details, and, she thought bitterly, a sense of

intellectual superiority. Common to men who are highly-educated, and whose specialty involves critical appraisals of men, materials, methods, his habit of looking for deficiencies had carried over into their home life.

She thought of him as he was in the weeks and months of easy companionship, after her first husband had died, and when she had desperate need of a strong arm to lean on, affection and understanding to replace what she had lost. He seemed more warmly human then, more perceptive of the little things which are important to women, and far more considerate of her.

Somewhere along the line, Harold had lost his sense of humor.

More than that, after years of decreasing marital intimacy, he seemed to her a masculine enigma. Was it her fault? She pondered the question, finally reassuring herself that no woman could have measured up to his perfectionist standards.

She felt proud of his success, of his standing in the business community, and, at the same time, resentful of the effect on his personality and on her peace of mind. Their home was comfortable, there were no financial worries, everything in the way of material needs, yet their relationship seemed cold, empty, a mockery of what she thought marriage should be, of what her first marriage had been. And that was the source of her frustrations, of self-doubts that tore at her inwardly, and which Harold constantly aggravated by his attitude of smug complacency.

The door to the doctor's office opened, and his nurse in crisply-starched uniform beckoned to her. "Doctor Bradford will see you now."

The psychiatrist glanced up quickly as she entered the room, then resumed his study of the open folder on his desk. "Please sit down, Mrs. Ransom."

She sank into the chair at his right, and fumbled in her handbag for a cigarette. Without looking up, the doctor reached for the silver container on his desk and held it out to her, then snapped his cigarette

lighter and waited for her to lean forward and draw on the tiny flame.

"I've been going over your medical record, Mrs. Ransom," he said, then paused as if for emphasis, while she waited for him to go on, hopeful that the ordeal of examination was finally over, yet fearful of what the diagnosis might be.

"The test findings are negative—such procedures as the encephalogram, angiogram, skull X-rays, and routine checks, like blood pressure, thyroid, and so on."

"Then there's nothing wrong with me, Doctor Bradford?"

His brows contracted in a frown, as he settled back in his chair and looked at her with appraising eyes. "I'm afraid that physical findings aren't the whole story. You have what we psychiatrists call a severe neurosis."

"What does that mean?"

He reached for a cigarette, lighted it, and settled back in his chair again, still pausing as if groping for the right words. "Well, it means a number of things. You are badly adjusted to your environment—and that includes relations with your husband. Your judgment is warped by an introverted viewpoint. You appear to be inwardly at war with yourself, groping for solutions to what you consider your inadequacies, confused to the point where you need professional guidance."

Mary felt a nerve tremor, as her heart pounded and her breath came in shorter gasps. "You mean I've

got to go to an institution? . . . Padded walls, and iron bars on the window—all that sort of thing?”

He smiled reassuringly. “Nothing like that, Mrs. Ransom. Modern psychiatric therapy is far removed from the so-called snake pits of years ago. Nowadays we use cheerful surroundings, appetizing foods, restful music, recreational facilities, and expert counseling to help patients to a better understanding of themselves, and, above all, give them peace of mind. There is no wall around the grounds of our sanitarium, no bars on the windows, not even locks on the doors.”

“Then how do you keep . . .?”

“Keep patients from leaving? By giving them a sense of security . . . making them want to stay there and be helped. You may find it hard to believe this, but some of the people we are treating like the place so much they regret being discharged.”

“How long, Doctor?”

He slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke, looking at the ceiling as he answered. “I don’t know—not yet. It isn’t a question of time, but of response to treatment. Some people are back to normal in weeks, others take months. You can be sure of this—we don’t want to keep you there a single day longer than we judge necessary.”

“When do you want me to go?”

“The sooner, the better. I would suggest that you go home now, pack your things, and I’ll have a car for you in about an hour.”

“Give me a little longer, Doctor Bradford—I have some things at home to attend to. I can be ready by four o’clock.”

He closed the folder, and rose to his feet. “Four o’clock it is. The car from the sanitarium will be there at that time.”

As Mary walked out the door and down the hall, she had no sensation of movement, no feeling of her feet touching the floor. It was as if she were walking in space, like the astronaut she had read about. Her brain seethed with a turmoil of worries and fears. Harold had sent her to the clinic. With his usual passion for efficiency in all things, his blind reliance on scientific methods, his computerized mental processes, he had finally engineered her into this bitter course of action from which she felt there was no escape.

She reflected, as she drove her car slowly homeward, of the many attempts she had made to express herself, to do something, be something. She had tried her hand at poetry, which didn’t sell, and at painting pictures which were judged amateurish. Harold had said that creative work which didn’t measure up to first class standards wasn’t worth monkeying with.

And Harold had insisted on her going through all this rigamarole of examinations and interviews. Cold anger swept through her, as she thought of the extent to which he had subdued her, made her feel inferior, smiled sardonically at her

attempts to escape from him physically, mentally, spiritually.

Would she, could she ever do anything to rise above mediocrity, to make people in general, and him in particular, look up to her?

The house was quiet, too quiet, as she entered the door and mounted the stairs to her room. Methodically, she began taking clothing from the hangers in the closet and packing the open suitcase. She gathered toilet articles from the bureau drawers and the cabinet in the bathroom, and stuffed them into her overnight case.

When she had finished, she sat on the edge of the bed and looked around. This was the last time she would be in this room for a while, perhaps never again. The thought was like a sliver of steel piercing her brain.

Slowly she began pacing from one end of the bedroom to the other, as she had so often done lately, during daylight hours when her mind raced with imaginings, at night when she couldn't sleep. Her steps quickened, seven paces one way, seven the other, until she approached a trotting cadence.

Then she stopped to examine her face in the mirror. Her features were thin, drawn, mouth tightly compressed, hair in disorder. Was it the face of a—of a crazy person? A hatred of Harold—all he stood for, all he had done to her, surged in a crescendo of rebellion.

If it hadn't been for him! . . .

her eye rested on the bedside table, the drawer where she knew he kept the revolver. He said a man must be prepared for anything. The loaded gun was always within reach.

Mary opened the drawer and took out the compact little automatic, turning it over in her hands, polishing the blue steel barrel on her coat sleeve. Then she slipped it into the pocket of her top coat, and walked slowly down the stairs, placing one foot carefully before the other, with the stately carriage of a woman meeting her destiny.

Harold would be in his study—he always seemed to be in that study, reading, writing, or just buried in his thoughts. She wondered if he had signed the commitment paper, the final seal of mental incompetence, the key that would turn the lock on her freedom.

He looked up from the sheet of notepaper on which he was writing as she entered the room. "Hi, Mary—what did you find out?" Then he hesitated as he saw the glazed expression in her eyes, and resumed with a nervous tremor in his voice, "What did the doctor say?"

Mary felt a deadly calm, a dispassionate feeling of seeing him for the first time as he really was. Objectivity is the word for it, she thought, as she said in a monotone, "Yes, I think I've learned how to cure myself forever of what's been eating at me for too long . . . something that will make me famous, maybe infamous."

She giggled fatuously, then reached for the gun, pointed it at his head, pulled the trigger.

He had started to rise from his chair, mouth open to say something. But the words never came. There was a dark spot above his right eye, a trickle of blood. His body collapsed over the desk.

Mary took out a filmy handkerchief, and wiped the handle of the revolver to remove fingerprints. Then she placed it on the carpet by his lifeless hand. She hummed a little tune, as she paused by the mirror to straighten her hair, powder her nose, and apply lipstick. "The reporters and photographers will be coming. I've simply got to look my best."

Then she spoke again as she hurried up the stairs for her things. "Car will be here at four . . . musn't keep the driver waiting."

Mary waited at the sanitarium that evening for reporters and photographers who never came.

Meanwhile, down at headquarters, Lieutenant James of the homicide detail was scrutinizing the note in longhand that lay on his desk, and comparing it with other samples of handwriting brought in by the two plain clothesmen who were waiting for his opinion.

He looked up. "It's Ransom's handwriting all right. Listen to this—Dear Mary—I am afraid you will never understand why I had to take this final step—why I cannot bear to be here when you come from seeing the doctor."

The letter was unfinished, unsigned. James took off his glasses, slowly polished the lenses with his handkerchief, and concluded, "Suicide note—just another clear case of a guy going off his rocker."



Blonde Bait

BY NORM KENT

There was something fishy about this fishing trip that had nothing to do with the fish.

THEY churned out into the choppy blueness of The Gulf from a Texas port and he still didn't know what the blonde wanted with him.

"Hooking into a twelve foot, eight hundred pound marlin is the easiest part," Paul Brennan said. He watched the girl's lusciously-distributed curves stretch up from the deck where she'd been sunning herself and rise gracefully into a cross-legged sitting position. "It's after one of them has gulped down the bait, when that long dorsal fin starts cutting the water at about forty miles an hour, that the real fishing begins."

She gave him another of those lazy, 'I-don't-give-a-damn' smiles with the salty mist being tossed into the sunlight by the sharply-slicing prow ruffling her golden hair.

"How far out are we, Paul?"

Even her soft, caressing voice was exciting. She was the most beautiful, provocative woman ever to cross his life line. The candy-striped knit blouse and fawn-colored stretch pants she wore created a lithe, girlish effect. Until a man saw how snugly those slacks pulled in around her strong young thighs and how that blouse was thrust out by unusually full, firm breasts.

"About six miles."

"On the course I gave you?"

He nodded. Her explicit directions were another item that bothered him. When she'd come down to the boat yesterday to see about hiring him, she'd made it clear when they were to leave and where she wanted him to take her. They'd embarked on schedule, chugging away from the dock about an hour before any of the other charter craft were ready to go out. Right after he'd made a phone call.

Her name was Teri Lawrence, she'd told him. She'd explained that her father had once gone out trolling for marlin. That he'd logged an entry in the diary she'd inherited along with the rest of what she'd termed a considerable estate. The entry had contained a definite time and place of departure and the course the boat her father had chartered. He'd landed a silver marlin out there in that specific area of the fishing banks. And that was where she wanted to duplicate her deceased father's catch.

A sort of sentimental journey. She'd labeled her rather unusual whim as that.

And, it could be. Paul Brennan stood relaxed and tall at the tiller. He watched the girl uncross those long, lovely legs and get up. His eyes followed the easy undulations of her backside as she moved towards the starboard railing and stared out across the Gulf of Mexico. But why him? His reputation was none too reputable.

Who was he to ask questions, anyway?

The five hundred bucks she'd promised in addition to his regular daily charter rate bought a lot of answers. All he had to do was see to it that she tied into one of those monstrous, long-snouted blue or silver devils. A strike. That was what she'd stipulated. Nothing had been said about landing the fish once it was hooked.

He'd known other women who had brought in marlin. A few of them had even accomplished the always-difficult laying aside so the marlin could be gaffed and hauled aboard right there on his boat.

But he couldn't see Teri Lawrence getting those soft, delicate hands scraped raw in the grueling process of battling with a lunging, plunging brute fish. Not her. She wasn't the outdoor sportswoman type.

An hour later, he flicked the controls on automatic and went forward to get the heavy-duty trolling gear baited and into the salt water.

She was at the stern with him, standing beside one of the two securely-anchored deck chairs rigged with a safety harness.

Paul lashed down the rod and stared out at the rapidly-unraveling line. He turned to his glamorous young employer.

"Want to use the head or have some coffee before I buckle you in, Miss Lawrence?"

Her green eyes swept up over his

frame and she smiled, shaking her head. "You make it sound as if I'll be tied in that chair for hours," she drawled. "No, I don't have to go to the john. I don't care for coffee right now, either. Perhaps later you can relieve me."

A mild but unexpected roll of the slow-cruising boat caught her off-balance and she stumbled against him, her arms quickly clinging to him for support.

Those soft red lips came up as she laughed softly. Before Paul could make up his mind whether to do anything about them or the taut contours punching into the front of his dark blue cotton shirt, she regained her stability and pushed away from him.

"It takes a while to get sea legs," Paul said, reconfirming an earlier decision. She was out of his class. He was just a hired hand. If he had tried anything, she could have reported him. He could lose his license. As he'd nearly had several times, already.

After she'd eased into one of the chairs, she looked up at him as he bent above her, beginning to shift the nylon belts of the safety harness in place around her.

"You're certain this is the exact area, Paul? I know you probably think I'm being eccentric to say the least but it is important to me. Very important."

He'd been staring at her breasts again. Quit that, he angrily commanded himself. He cinched the

buckle around her waist and straightened. Lorena was more his type. A man knew where he stood with Lorena.

"We're right where you wanted to come. Like I told you, though. This is about two miles beyond the fringe of the best fishing waters out here." He took out his smokes and offered her the pack.

She accepted a cigarette and waited for his light. She leaned back in the chair. "Everything's just like it was when my father caught his biggest fish. Even the time. According to his diary, he got his strike about two hours after they began trolling."

Paul wasn't looking at the comfortably-settled blonde just then. He was staring at what appeared to be a smaller craft bobbling dead in the choppy Gulf waters.

At that distance, he couldn't be sure. He turned and strode along the deck without offering Teri Lawrence any explanation for his sudden departure from her side.

He picked up the pair of binoculars dangling on a peg in the cockpit and hurriedly adjusted the glasses, swinging them to bear on the indistinct object.

It was a boat. A small launch riding high on the hazy blueness of the restless waves. Some sort of runabout with a stalled engine; a craft which had no business being out there, anyway. Whoever manned it should have known better.

"What is it, Paul?" queried the blonde.

He lowered the glasses. "A small boat in some sort of distress out there. Another tourist, probably. We'll have to suspend the fishing for a while. You can reel in while I swing over there."

Teri Lawrence obediently began winding in the trailing length of line. Paul opened the throttle, guiding the cruiser around in a careful turn.

As they drew nearer to the other craft, he could make out the form of a man seated in the cockpit, watching their approach. He throttled down and brought the larger boat alongside the idly-drifting runabout.

"I wasn't sure you'd spot me. This was a run of good luck for me," called the solitary occupant, grinning up at Paul. He was a fleshy, dark-haired guy in a plaid yachting jacket and expensive-looking charcoal slacks. His eyes were concealed behind sun glasses. He watched Paul Brennan lean out and snag the side of his craft with a boat hook, pulling the boats together.

"What's your trouble?" Paul asked.

The swarthy, black-haired male shrugged. "Clogged fuel line, maybe. I don't know much about these things."

"Where are you out from?" Paul didn't know why but he didn't like the situation. And he sensed that his

lovely passenger had crossed the deck to stand somewhere directly behind him. He scanned the other boat. There hadn't been any of the required identifying markings painted on the hull. He stared at the attache case propped beside the squat, casually well-dressed male in the cockpit. Except for that case, the rest of the boat was empty.

"I'd be obliged if you'd come aboard and take a look," said the other man. He gave no indication of having heard Paul's inquiry. "And, if you have any drinking water aboard, I'd be obliged for a chance to come over and stretch my legs, too."

"We have some hot coffee in the galley," Teri Lawrence said, her soft voice close to Paul's shoulder.

"Better yet," said the unknown guy. He picked up the brown attache case and stood up in the other cockpit while Paul used a length of line to lash the boats together.

"I'll fix a cup for all of us," Teri Lawrence said. She brushed against Paul to move past him towards the cabin.

"My name's Kuehni. Walt Kuehni," affably said the older man, stepping over to drop the attache case over the side of the higher deck. Then, he hoisted up and clambered awkwardly aboard the bigger craft.

Paul turned at the railing to face the bulky, rather sinister-looking character. "How long have you been out, Mr. Kuehni?" Paul

glanced down at the brown leather case. It had a lock. It was new or nearly new. And water-tight. He assumed it contained something of great value to Walter Kuehni.

"Oh, I don't know—not more'n a couple hours, I guess," carelessly replied the man standing beside the attache case.

Then, Paul Brennan knew why that piece of luggage interested him so much. It was an exact duplicate of the case Teri Lawrence had brought aboard earlier that morning.

"I suppose I can take a look," Paul finally said. "After I radio in and report to the Coast Guard."

"You don't have to do that, do you?" Walter Kuehni's thick lips parted in another cordial grin and he withdrew a wallet from his inside yachting jacket pocket. "It's worth twenty to me if you'll just see if you can get the engine going. Then, I'll be on my way."

"You might need a tow. That's part of the Coast Guard's job."

"See what you can do, first. You can always call in if you can't find the trouble."

Paul glanced back and saw the blonde busy in the open cabin. "Let's go aft and have some coffee," he said. "I'd still like to know which harbor you left from. It must have been in Mexico."

"It was. Matamoros," easily acknowledged the heavier male. He followed Paul back. He had that attache case with him.

Teri Lawrence shook back her golden mass of hair, flashing them a smile. "Well. This is turning into quite an adventure. You'll have to add your own cream or sugar."

Paul picked up one of the mugs filled with steaming black coffee. He moved around the blonde. He leaned against the cockpit. Where he could keep an eye on both passengers.

Walter Kuehni ladeled a generous quantity of sugar into the cup and stirred in a heaping teaspoonful of powdered cream.

"All the comforts of home," he murmured, his gaze flicking over the prettily wind-blown young blonde as he raised his coffee mug. "You have a nice way of life, Captain—?"

"Brennan. Why aren't there any markings on that runabout, Mr. Kuehni?"

The girl gave Paul a quick look, then slowly raised her own steaming mug and sipped gingerly at the biting hot black brew.

Walter Kuehni chuckled. "That's one reason I'm not too anxious to see the Coast Guard. Back where I'm from—where I bought the boat—they told me I'd have to register it when I got down here. But since my family and I will only be here a couple of days, I couldn't see any sense in having it all marked up. Why, I'd just have to pay out more good money to have it repainted when I lug it back to Nebraska, anyway."

"We're out here to catch fish—not to do the Coast Guard's work for them," Teri Lawrence said.

"This license I operate under is granted under some strict provisions," Paul said. "One of them says it's required that I notify the authorities of any unmarked and unregistered crafts I might encounter in these waters."

"You've broken regulations before," coldly said the girl. Her green eyes weren't taunting or provocative, now. "Do you want me to cite a few examples, Paul? I could, you know. Running wetbacks isn't exactly legal, is it?"

Paul Brennan met the blonde's faintly contemptuous stare. She was right. There were a few incidents in his background that could cost him more than his skipper's papers. Things he wasn't proud of. Things he'd done when his back had been to the wall several years ago, before the cruiser and all the costly gear and accessories necessary to outfit it as a charter fishing boat were paid for.

Walter Kuehni chuckled amiably, ambling over so that he stood closer beside the blonde. "Now, none of us want any unpleasantness."

Paul kept staring at the lush-bodied babe who'd hired him. "I'm sure you checked me very thoroughly before you tapped me as the guy you needed for this."

"Meaning?" she drawled. She sipped again at her coffee but her

guarded stare didn't leave his face.

"Meaning I know you expected to rendezvous out here with Kuehni—or whatever his real name might be. That runabout was recently painted. My guess is that it was done to cover up the name of whatever ship it belongs to."

Walter Kuehni had stiffened. He gave a forced, nervous laugh. "My! My! What am I being accused of, Captain Brennan? Oh, I admit that I wish now I had complied with those stupid port regulations but if you think I'm involved in any sort of a—"

"It's no use, Dad. He's been staring at that case you brought aboard. I knew he didn't believe that 'sentimental journey' routine I fed him when I chartered this boat of his." Teri Lawrence walked over and took the coffee mug from Paul's hand. She swayed inwards so that the tips of her breasts rubbed lightly across his chest. She gave him a mocking smile. "All you have to do is play chauffeur and collect that five hundred I mentioned."

"What if I don't feel like playing? What if I radioed in and let the Coast Guard do the chauffeuring?"

She carried their cups back to the galley. After she put them down, she swung lazily around and gestured negligently towards the short, heavy-bodied man.

"He used to be a lawyer. Let him tell you how many years you could get for smuggling in Mexican aliens while I attend to an errand." She

stepped back and took the attache case from the man she'd identified as her father. "How many others were there besides those relatives of that black-haired girl named Lorena you sleep with sometimes?"

"We could submit proof of your, uh, former activities if you refuse to cooperate," said Walter Kuehni. By then, his sensationally-curved daughter had disappeared down the ladder into the cabin below the deck. He sighed, shaking his head. "It was my oversight about the unmarked boat. Although I imagine if it hadn't been that it would have been something else. You have far more intelligence than we credited you with, Captain Brennan."

"Now that we're getting some of the cards on the table, that runabout is a launch off some ship, isn't it?"

"Yes. Off my yacht, to be precise about it."

"What's in that attache case she took below with her? She's going to switch them. Isn't that the idea?"

Again, the older man nodded. "You're very perceptive. I'm quite sure that five hundred dollars my daughter referred to a few moments ago represents a fair day's pay to you."

"For a fair day's work? I like to know the kind of work I'm doing. Do you want me to keep on guessing? All this was so elaborately staged to smuggle something into the states. It could be diamonds." Paul watched the other man's face. He wished Walter Kuehni wasn't

wearing those sunglasses. He saw no visible reaction to his query.

Teri Lawrence was returning to the deck. The brown leather case in her left hand was an exact replica of the other attache case.

"Are we ready to proceed?" She stood near the railing, staring from her father to Paul.

"Unless our curious young friend is adverse to complying with what remains of our arrangements," Walter Kuehni said. He set down his coffee mug and dabbed daintily at his lips with a monogrammed handkerchief he'd taken from his jacket pocket.

It was the other jacket pocket Paul Brennan noticed, though. The pocket bulged by what could have been and almost certainly was a gun.

He took his time about lighting a cigarette, taking care also not to make any sudden movements. Because the chunky, black-haired guy's right hand was casually shoved into that other pocket. His fingers must have been touching the butt of the gun.

Teri Lawrence said, "What would it buy you to blow the whistle on us, darling? And, just to make your decision easier for you, your radio isn't working."

"That still doesn't stop me from turning you in as soon as we reach port."

She laughed. "We'll thrash this out on the way back in. I'm sure we can arrive at a mutually satisfactory

agreement. Dad, hadn't you better take this and get underway? Every minute out in the open like this does carry with it a certain amount of risk."

Walter Kuehni backed out of the galley and reached for the attache case with his left hand. His right hand remained tucked in the jacket pocket. He beamed from Paul Brennan to the blonde standing at the railing next to him.

"Yes, I'm sure you and our undecided young captain can come to some acceptable arrangement. Thank you, my dear. We couldn't have brought this off without you. Your real rewards will come later. Goodbye until then."

With watchful caution, the bulky, florid-faced male stepped over the railing and down into the smaller boat. He put down the attache case and jerked at the knot Paul had tied, lashing the boats together.

There was a .30-30 carbine clamped to the cockpit partition. Paul Brennan suddenly lunged forward and grabbed for it.

Before he could bring it up, the golden-haired doll hurled herself at him, knocking him violently back against the paneled enclosure.

One of her knees pumped savagely up, aimed at his groin. Paul managed to spin away as the rifle clattered to the cockpit floorboards. He gasped in mingled pain and rage as her flailing fingernails clawed at him, trying to gouge his eyes.

A short left took the snarling, panting tigress in the stomach. The breath whooshed from her heaving lungs and she tried desperately to butt him even as his chopping right fist smacked into her chin.

She wilted but continued to hug him, using her thrusting weight to pin him against the partition while the powerful twin outboards mounted at the stern of the runabout coughed, then roared into steady, swiftly-propelling throbs.

Paul's hands ripped at the moaning blonde's shoulders, wrenching her frantically-clinging form away from him and tearing her candy-striped knit blouse. He gave her a hard shove, then dived for the .30-30.

The man in the fleeing runabout emptied the magazine of the snub-nosed automatic he gripped. Bullets snarled across the deck and one shot ricocheted off the railing. Paul Brennan leveled the carbine and squeezed the trigger 7 times in rapid succession.

He hadn't fired at the wildly-cringing hulk who'd uttered a hoarse cry, dropping the useless automatic. His slugs had done their intended work; one or more of them had seared through each outboard and the smaller craft was again coasting dead on the sultry waters of the Gulf.

The sobbing, disheveled blonde was just hauling herself up in the cockpit when Paul walked back and opened one of the drawers to

take out a replacement clip for the carbine.

"Ohhh, y-you—bastard! You cheap, stupid fool!" She made no effort to cover the area of rounded, pink-tipped flesh from which her blouse and bra had been so rudely torn during their struggle.

He stepped towards the somewhat battered babe who'd called herself Teri Lawrence. Sudden fear leapt into those flickering green eyes. He grabbed her arm, roughly showing her out of the cockpit.

"Tell him to toss that gun of his over the side."

"Go to hell!"

"Okay, we can do it another way, then. He won't be going anywhere. We'll run back to the nearest port and the Coast Guard can come out after him."

She stared at him. She wasn't beautiful. Not then. Not with the murderous hate distorting her features and seething in her eyes.

Then, almost as if she'd flicked an invisible switch, those harsh, reviling lines softened. She glanced down at her nude breast. Then, smiling across the deck at Paul Brennan, she casually reached up and pulled down the other side of the tattered striped cotton knit blouse.

"It doesn't have to be five hundred. Paul. Five thousand. And other jobs that will pay even better. Plus me. That's the package deal. And don't lie. Don't tell me you don't want what you see."

While she talked to him, her fingers went lazily to the side zipper of her fawn-colored slacks. She moved deliberately forward, her expression that of a luscious, wanton seductress intent only on arousing, then pleasing her man.

He watched those expensive pants slither down her naked thighs. Stared at the breathtaking hint of paradise concealed only by sheer white briefs.

And then paradise was a golden reality.

His vocal chords didn't work the first time he tried to speak. He couldn't have stopped staring if a whole herd of Walter Kuehnis had clambered over the railing with nasty little automatics zeroing in on him.

"You're offering too much," he growled, his low voice thick and strange amid the howling whispers of lust throbbing at his senses. "Too much but not enough, baby. Stay put. I'm not buying a deal."

"You don't even know what I've got to deal with," purred the sensational blonde. She continued rolling in towards where he stood braced in the cockpit with the carbine tightly gripped in both hands. "Why not give us all a break, darling? You don't need that gun. Not with me."

He quickly shifted the carbine. The blonde froze in mid-stride as the gaping bore centered on her cutely-exposed navel.

"No deals. I can see I was wrong

about you. As wrong as you and that lumpy Daddy of yours were when you picked me for this charter job. You're more vicious and tough than any marlin. I'd rather keep taking my chances with them. I have a hunch I'll live longer that way," he told her.

As it turned out, they didn't have to head in for the nearest port. Paul looked far across the Gulf at the oncoming Coast Guard patrol boat. The blonde cursed him and hurriedly got into her clothes again.

It wasn't until early that evening that Paul Brennan was permitted to walk out of the building where he'd been detained for intensive questions.

They'd believed him but they'd really sweated him, made him work for their grudging acceptance of the official statement he'd signed.

No, he hadn't known that the attache case the blonde had taken aboard his boat had contained a quarter million dollars. The reason he'd notified the harbormaster of what his fishing position would be that morning was because he just hadn't been at ease in his mind about the blonde who'd approached him about that charter job.

He hadn't suspected the matching brown leather case brought aboard his boat by the babe's father had been packed with uncut opium, either.

All of that was being handled, now.

Paul lit a cigarette, standing on the darkened pier, looking at his boat where he'd moored it.

Maybe, he'd lose his license. If he did, he had it coming. And the untold misery that would be spared now that the raw packets of opium had been seized made it seem trivial.

And he could come out okay. They hadn't been making him any promises. Still, they'd grinned and shaken his hand. They hadn't asked for his license. Not yet, anyway.

Too bad about that blonde. What a waste of high-voltage sex.

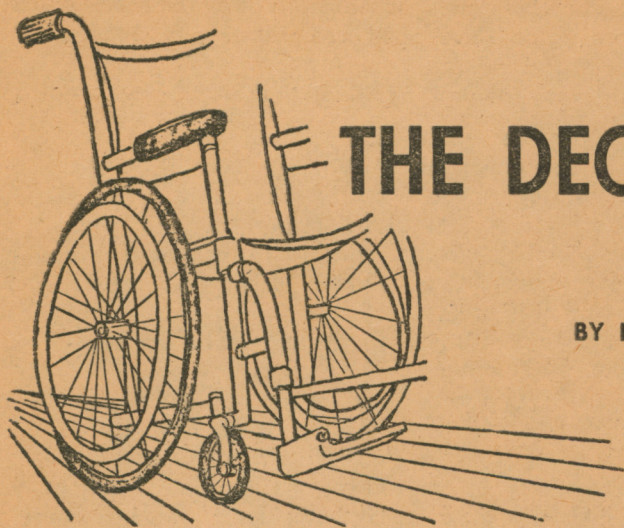
"Paul? Ees that you, Paul?" softly called a girl from somewhere in the shadows behind him.

He turned and peered into those shadows as a young, dark-haired girl in a full, pleated skirt and a white blouse stepped uncertainly toward him.

A slow, tired grin came to his face and he walked off the pier. Yeah, he was tired, all right. But not *that* tired. Never too tired for Lorena.



*Her husband was a handsome man with a roving eye . . . but
Laura held a sturdy leash.*



THE DECEIVER

BY LAWRENCE ORIN

Laura Jamison lay in bed, impatiently waiting for her husband to go to work. Above the pelting of the rain against her windowpane, she heard the sputtering of his car's engine as he backed out of the driveway in the chilly autumn night. At last he was gone, not to return until morning.

Except for the misty glow from a nearby street lamp, her room was dark. Silhouetted against the glass panels of a pair of French doors was the skeleton framework of her wheel chair, a geometric pattern of thin spokes and narrow, arched, rubber-tired rims. On the opposite wall its shadow danced wildly, in time with the swaying light outside.

Laura gave Don another five

minutes, a chance to be well on his way, before throwing back the covers and struggling to her feet. For a moment she stood gaining her balance, a frail figure with long, dark hair framing the pallor of her thin face. She took a couple of turns around the room, her legs feeling stronger with every step. With growing confidence, she ventured out into the long, narrow hallway, parading up and down a half-dozen times. Then, tired from her exercise, she crawled back into bed.

A wry smile played on Laura's bloodless lips as she thought how astonished Don would be if he knew she could walk again. Someday, of course, she'd have to tell him, but not for awhile. She wasn't

through making her husband pay for his infidelity, nor for the auto crash which had crippled her. So far, she'd managed to dupe him completely. Although he lifted her into and out of the wheel chair a score of times each day, he hadn't discovered she was gaining weight, or that her legs were growing rounder and firmer.

The hands on her bedside clock were closing on twelve, and Don would be just arriving at his bench in the plant where he worked from midnight until eight in the morning. It was Laura's idea, having him work the graveyard shift. Directly following the accident he'd asked to be transferred from his position in the office. Now he could be home during the daylight hours, when she needed him the most.

The past year had been a difficult one for her tall, handsome, curly-headed husband: working five nights a week, his days full of household chores, and attending his crippled wife. He'd aged in these few months. He was losing some of his good looks, and with them Laura hoped, a little of his appeal to other women. Now there were no more nights out with the "boys," at their alleged poker parties and bowling tournaments. No more anxious hours for her, fretting at home, wondering what Don really was doing until almost dawn. Once in a while, of late, she'd noticed a glint of the old wanderlust in his blue eyes, but she had a powerful weapon now, her helplessness.

Outside, the rain had become a deluge. It gurgled madly through the downspouts and overflowed the roof gutters. Laura lay wide-eyed, listening to its fury, and recalling how it had been with Don and her before the accident.

A dozen months ago she'd been on the point of losing her husband. She wasn't sure to whom, but probably to that sultry brunette, Evelyn Mallory, who worked in his office. Then, on that fateful Sunday, they'd attended a company picnic. The Mallory woman had been there, and on the way home there'd been a bitter quarrel. The unfamiliar road was narrow and winding, and Don's reactions slowed by too much beer. Suddenly, a sharp curve, a huge, unyielding tree; and when the last tinkle of shattered glass had subsided, Laura lay on the roadside, paralyzed from her waist to the tips of her toes.

Insurance had covered most of their bills, and Don's new job paid nearly as well as his old position. There'd been few financial sacrifices; they'd even managed to keep up the payments on their mountain cabin. Laura soon came to look on the little isolated cabin as her own private heaven, a place she could be truly alone with Don.

Each Saturday morning, since Laura had felt up to the trip, Don would ease her into the front seat of the station wagon, load the wheel chair in the back, and drive the ninety-odd miles to their hide-away

in the hills. There, he'd leave her on the sun-drenched porch while he slept, or fished a turbulent stream that flowed at the bottom of a deep, craggy ravine nearby. From its depths he couldn't see her when she emerged from her chair to take some exercise. She was always careful to be sitting quietly, patiently awaiting his return when he came puffing up the steep slope, usually with their supper in his creel.

Now it was midnight, and time for the news. Laura clicked on the radio by her elbow. The announcer's well-modulated voice droned in her ear, summing up the day's happenings. She'd almost dropped off, when one item erased the sleep from her eyes.

A rapist-murderer, who'd been active throughout the residential areas, had struck again. This time very close—only a few blocks from where Laura lay. The fiend, obviously a madman, attacked only lone women—always seeming to know when they were unprotected in the night. The police had no description of the killer, for the simple reason he'd never left a victim alive. There was little they could do, except advise all doors and windows be securely locked, and suspicious characters reported.

A chill of apprehension crept along Laura's spine. Her bedroom window, one overlooking the back yard, was slightly ajar. At her request, Don always left it open for ventilation. She considered locking it. But if

Don happened to return before she awakened; how could she explain?

The news broadcast ended, replaced by a program of old-fashioned waltz tunes. "Music to go to sleep by," the announcer called them. Laura scolded herself for being nervous, adjusted the automatic timer to turn off the radio in thirty minutes, and snuggled down in her bed. Before the half-hour passed, the soft music and the drumming of rain on the roof, had lulled her to sleep.

Then, suddenly, she was awake! The storm was over, and a pale moon riding a sea of scurrying clouds cast a faint, ghostly glow on the window panes. Then she saw him! There was a dark shape, vague, but unmistakably the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders outlined in the opening. Slowly, ever so slowly, the sash was being inched up. She heard a faint scrape as it slid in its frame—the sound that had aroused her.

Laura bit into the back of her hand to keep from screaming. Quickly, she slid out of bed. Her bare feet were silent on the carpeted floor as she crossed the room. A weapon! She must find something to defend herself. Then she remembered—Don's bowling trophies. Several were gathering dust on top of the chiffonier at the far wall.

Her fingers closed around a heavy, brass-and-wood statue. She sidled toward the open window. By now the trespasser was lifting one knee to

the sill, his head well within the room. With both hands, Laura brought the makeshift cudgel down with all her strength.

The blow caught the intruder squarely on top of his skull. With a grunt of surprise, he tumbled backward, and Laura heard a soft thud as he struck the rain-soaked ground. She raised her club again, but he didn't reappear. A long minute went by, and finally she closed the sash and turned the lock.

Back on her bed, she was trembling so hard she could hardly rotate the dial on the telephone. An eternity passed before the operator answered.

"Get me the police, and please hurry!"

After two rings came the gruff voice of a policeman. "Fourth Precinct Police Station, Sergeant Ford speaking."

Laura fought to remain clam. "Sergeant," she said, "this is Mrs. Jamison, Mrs. Donald Jamison, at 1921 Libby Avenue."

"Yes, Mrs. Jamison. What can we do for you?"

"I want to report a prowler."

"A prowler?"

"Yes. Out in my back yard, just a few minutes ago."

"Did you get a look at him, Mrs. Jamison?"

Laura hesitated. "No," she replied, "I just heard him. I'm a cripple, and have no use of my legs. But someone was there, I heard him at the back of the house."

"Are you alone?" The sergeant's voice had a worried intonation.

"Yes I am. My husband works at night."

"Well, don't get upset, Mrs. Jamison. We'll have our men keep an eye on your place. That was 1921 Libby, you said. Right?"

"That's right, and thank you very much."

Laura slept no more this night. At frequent intervals she heard a car in the alley, the occupants criss-crossing the yard and windows with their spot lights. The police were doing their job.

She was still awake at six-thirty, when the first fingers of dawn chased the shadows from the room. Feeling safe enough now, she opened the window, being careful to leave it where Don had left it the night before. In two hours he would be home to lift her from her bed. She wished he would hurry. Today was Saturday, and she was anxious to get away from this awful room.

Don was visibly shaken when she told him about the prowler. He checked with the police, but they'd seen nothing out of the way while making their patrols. Hoping to find some clues himself, he searched the yard for footprints, but drew a blank, and came back in the house shaking his head.

With the delays, it was later than usual when they got away on their week-end jaunt to the cabin. By eleven, they'd left the main highway and were on a secondary road

winding up into the foothills. Beyond, high in the cloud-shrouded mountains, was their destination.

Don turned on the car heater. The cozy warmth, the steady hum of the engine, and lack of sleep made Laura drowsy. She looked out of the corner of her heavy-lidded eyes at Don. He sat, grim-faced and silent, obviously concerned about the ordeal she'd been through. He really had been sweet, and was ruggedly handsome this morning in his plaid shirt, windbreaker jacket, and corduroy trousers. She placed her sleepy head on his shoulder. He was her own good-looking, curly-headed husband! His favorite, "good luck," fishing hat, worn jauntily on the back of his head, failed to restrain several locks of unruly hair which dangled over his forehead.

Laura cuddled closer. Perhaps she'd punished him enough. Maybe today she'd tell him she'd started to have some feeling in her feet and ankles. How nice it would be to have him hold her in his big, husky arms and teach her to walk all over again.

Higher they climbed, and found themselves in the clouds. There was no traffic here, no need for Don to sound the horn as they negotiated the steep, tortuous grades which led to the isolated valley and their cabin site. Finally, they were there. Don backed the Pontiac up close to the front porch.

Laura sat contentedly, while her

husband slipped from behind the wheel and came around to lift her from her seat. She felt light as a feather cradled in his arms. Yes, definitely this was the day she'd tell Don the good news, and she nestled her head on his chest.

Suddenly she had an impulsive urge to run her hand through his thick, black hair—something she hadn't done since their honeymoon days.

She slipped her fingers up the nape of his neck, up under that silly looking hat. Then, surprised, her eyes opened wide and she stiffened in his arms. There was no mistaking what she felt—an egg-sized lump, still crusted with a bloody scab, and not more than twelve hours old.

"So, now you know." Don's voice was as cold as ice.

"You!" Laura gasped. "It was you at the window last night!"

"You bet it was. I was going to make it look like our much-publicized friend on the radio had made a call. The only thing I was worried about was how I'd explain not being at work last night." Don started to walk, but not toward the house. "But you took care of that, you little sneak."

Laura struggled, biting and scratching, and flailing the thin air with her legs.

"This is a much better idea. They'll find you, and your wheel chair, at the bottom of the cliff. Just an unfortunate accident. You should have been more careful."

BIG score

*They were an odd-ball pair.
For their own safety . . . they
were better off in jail.*

BY
DON LOWRY

SIM NETTERS had missed the boat so often in his criminal career that he had been tagged, "Miss" by his fellow yardbirds. "Probably the worst that can be said of this defendant," a sentencing judge sighed from his bench, "is that he is as unsuccessful as he is determined a criminal. It's the determination rather than the lack of success that forces me to impose a five year sentence in this case—to be served in a federal penitentiary the location of which will be determined by the Bureau of Prisons . . ."

Sim Netters' offense had been the inter-state transportation of a stolen automobile and he didn't even realize that he had crossed a

state line—from Kansas to Missouri in Kansas City. "One block, one silly block!" he had exclaimed to fellow prisoners in the K.C. tank, "got me on a federal beef. I'm blessed with bad luck!"

He recalled the night of his arrest. He had needed four new tires for his four-year-old Chev and had an idea down "real pat"—pick up a reconditioned '61 Chev on a used car lot over in Prairie Village—move it a few blocks—switch wheels with those on his own '61 Chev—then move the stolen car back to the lot before it was missed. At first everything went perfectly; then everything went horribly wrong. Sim Netters picked a lot behind a bar to switch wheels. After the first wheel he was thirsty. It was a hot night. He went in the back door of the bar for a beer. After the second wheel switch, he went back in for another beer. He had a couple that time. After the third wheel, he sat around the bar and sucked up half a dozen beers. That was when he spotted the strawberry blonde at the far end of the bar.

"Give her one of what she's drinking on me," he told the bartender. The bartender obliged and Sim moved down the bar in answer to her come-on smile. "Live around around here, honey?" Sim asked the barfly.

She lapped up her third screwdriver and purred, "Over in Prairie Village — alone."

That reminded Sim about his

fourth, unswitched wheel out in back of the bar. "You drive?"

"Sure."

"I've got some work to do out back and a car to drop off in Prairie Village. Suppose you drive my car over there and I'll drive the one I have to drop off. OK?"

"Anything's OK, darling. Get a crock of this Vodka to take with you. Or do you want your beer?"

"All I want is you," Sim laughed. "Be back in a couple minutes."

He never did get to play bedroom games with the strawberry blonde. She drove his car from the bar and Sim drove the hot one. He was picked up half a block away from the bar at a stop light when a cruiser noticed the hot Chev had no plates on it. As Sim explained his fate to fellow prisoners in the K.C. tank, "I missed the boat with the strawberry blonde and drew five years in the Leavenworth Big Top."

Hot summers, cold winters, high walls and tough detention cells left Sim Netters bitterly determined to succeed in his chosen antisocial version. "I've fallen half a dozen times for chicken beefs and got nothing to show for all that time," he confessed to his cell partner. "This time I'll get a bankroll or I'll get a pile of time. But if I do fall, it'll be worthwhile. I'm fed up coming to stir for petty larceny and doing life on the installment plan."

Sim's cell partner was sympathetic

and impressionable. Franklyn Horace Brooks had never been out of the Ozark hills until revenue agents objected to his graduating from the retailing to wholesaling of moonshine and convinced a federal D.A. that he should cool off in Leavenworth for five years. When Sim Netters revealed his knowledge of urban crime to the hillbilly moonshiner — "All you need to heist a bank is a sawed-off scatter gun!" — the moron moonshiner became his devoted disciple. He acquired delusions of unrestricted big city grandeur. Sims began to educate him, starting the first night Brooks stumbled into B Cellhouse loaded with a newcomer's blanket roll, by explaining the mysteries of running water and indoor plumbing. At the end of the month he had initiated Brooks into the mysteries of stir slang and stir conduct. "Just keep your mouth shut and listen. Don't talk," Sim concluded. Netters and Brooks, regarded as an oddball pair among prisoners and guards, spent their five-year sentences plotting the crime which Netters guaranteed would send Brooks back to the hills with a gold-plated Cadillac.

On the day of their release, the two plotters purchased their arsenal in a Kansas City second hand store — two more-than-used shot guns. Four doors away Sims purchased a dozen hack saw blades while across the street Franklyn Horace Brooks, on Netters' instructions, purchased three wide rolls of ad-

hesive tape. He bought the economy brand. They worked 'til midnight sawing off barrels and stocks of the twelve gauge scatter guns.

"You wait here," Sims ordered his new partner. "Watch for me out the window. When I pull up, come down fast. I'll have a hot heap and the entire success of this caper depends on speed. We'll have the swag and be back here before the car's missed. And don't forget to keep those scatter guns covered. We don't want the landlady spotting you running down the stairs with that artillery."

"Don't worry about me, Sim. Just get the heap. I'll be waiting."

The Wyandotte Street bank was held up at opening time by two men whose heads were covered with pillow cases.

When Sims announced in a roaring yell, "This's a holdup," two early customers who had followed him and Brooks into the bank, promptly agreed that it was indeed. At Netters' command to "lay down on the floor!" they obediently hit the terrazzo. With three years of rehearsing his role behind him, Brooks swiftly bound their hands, wrists and ankles with the adhesive tape. Netters locked the front door and moved threateningly to the three-employee bank staff. "Get down and stay down!" He screamed. He rifled the teller's cage while Brooks bound the employees with the last of his tape. He moved to the vault.

"Hurry!" Brooks whispered.

"We come for it all!" Netters shot back at him as he disappeared into the vault.

Brooks heard the sirens and panicked. He bolted out the bank's rear door and fled down an alley, screaming over his shoulder at Netters, "It's the law! Com'on!"

But when Netters left the vault, he saw no sign of police officers. He had to make two trips to the hot car parked in front of the bank in order to carry out two shopping bags of currency and a corrugated cardboard carton containing the bank's reserve currency from the vault. By the time he made his second exit, one of the customers had worked himself loose from the Brooks' binding job. He tripped Netters and lunged at the stumbling bandit.

"Herol!" Netters screamed. He pulled the double triggers of the twelve gauge. The only sound was a *click* from the unloaded gun. He and Brooks had forgotten to buy shells. He hurled the carton and the useless gun at the customer. It was an unnecessary gesture and a complete waste of the carton of currency—the customer had fainted when Netters aimed the gun and began to pull its triggers. Netters didn't wait to witness the fainting spell. He leaped into the parked car and roared away. He had no time to wonder what had happened to Brooks. In three minutes he was back at the boarding house and up

its stairs. There he found Brooks—hiding under the bed.

"Where'd you go to, you silly bastard?"

"I heard the law coming!"

"There wasn't any law. I got out the front door!"

"Hell, man, I heard sirens. I took out the back and ran here."

"We got no time now to argue. I gotta get rid of that heap downstairs." He crammed the two shopping bags, overflowing on the bedspread with currency into a closet. "Stay here. I'll be back. And don't run this time."

"Anybody come barging in here, I'll blast 'em," Brooks snorted with a degree of his former bravado returning.

Netters pulled casually away from in front of the boarding house and abandoned the stolen car two blocks away in an alley. He began to breathe normally for the first time since entering the bank. He wiped perspiration slippery hands on the sides of his suit coat. He saw the bar and entered for "one fast beer."

While he was having that "one fast beer", Brooks faced results of the criminal comedy of errors back at the boarding house.

When the knock came at his room door, Brooks knelt to peek through the key-hole. He saw the red-striped trouser leg and tip-toed with fright to the window overlooking the street. From there he saw the flasher of the police car. He grabbed the sawed-off shot gun from

the closet; eased quietly back to the bedroom door. Just as the second knock came he jerked the door open and roared, "OK, coppers, you asked for it!" He encountered the same frustrating *click* that Netters had met back in the bank.

The police officer didn't faint but swiftly covered Brooks with his service pistol and ordered him to spread-eagle his arms and legs. As Brooks leaned against the hallway wall, the officer frisked him. Brooks began to talk. He was still talking when he was handcuffed.

"I didn't do it. It wasn't me. I was here in the room all the time Sim was at the bank. I wasn't even near the bank. He'll be back in a few minutes," Brooks spoke in a shaky voice. "You'll see. He'll go right to the closet where the money is. He brought it back himself and put it there. It wasn't me. I didn't have anything to do with that bank robbery!"

The surprised officer listened and looked. "Where's the phone?"

"At the end of the hall," Brooks cooperatively explained. "Here's a dime. It's a pay phone, sir." Brooks was still shaking. He listened as the police officer called into his precinct.

"I've got some kind of a nut here," the officer continued after he had identified himself. "I stopped in here to check on a complaint of some guy beating his wife; must have got the wrong room; this character met me at the door and let go at me with a sawed-off shot

gun . . . Hell no, it didn't go off! It wasn't loaded. Now he's running down a bank score to me . . . OK, I'll hang on." He hung up and turned to Brooks. "Come on, mister; back to your room; the holdup squad is already looking for you and your partner!"

"He wasn't my partner . . ."

"Just be quiet. You can tell the holdup squad officers all about it. You're too much for me, mister. I like nice clean criminals like burglars and wife beaters. I'm not the gumshoe type." He shut the bedroom door. "Sit down in that chair and keep real quiet. If the headquarters holdup men don't get here first, your partner might have shells in his gun."

"Like I told you . . ." Brooks began to sing again.

"Shut up, mister. Just sit quiet." He emphasized his order with the service pistol. Brooks sobbed quietly.

A plainclothesman moved the marked police car from in front of the boarding house as soon as his partner signalled from the bedroom that Netters had not arrived. Before he finished drinking his third "fast beer" in the bar, the house was efficiently staked out.

Netters came up the side street whistling, "Happy Days Are Here Again!" His happy, deluded moment ended as soon as he entered the boarding house. Police officers swarmed on to him. He was handcuffed before he knew what had

happened. He cursed Brooks soundly on the way to headquarters as Franklyn Horace Brooks continued to sing in a stool pigeon high C. Before they were booked, Brooks had covered even the planning days of the goofed-up crime.

Investigation and interrogation were brief. A detective lieutenant laughed at Netters. "You never were much of a criminal brain yourself, Sim. But you never were a canary. How did you get mixed-up with this oddball from the hills?"

Sims told him. "We don't pick our cell partners in the Big Top, lieutenant."

"We'd have picked you up anyway, Sim. A report came in from the Public Works Department while we were at the bank. The barrels and stocks of those guns were found at the construction site next door to the house in which you were living. Brooks' fingerprints were all over those metal adhesive tape containers that he left at the bank. That adhesive tape Brooks used was so old and inferior that your victims were loose before you were a block away. Brooks dropped his pillow case with its two holes cut for eye-openings in the alley. You left your own pillow case mask in the stolen car. Both cases had your landlady's laundry marks on them. When Brooks bolted from the bank he was seen by half the fire department. Its trucks were answering an alarm at a grocery store three doors away. It was fire truck sirens that

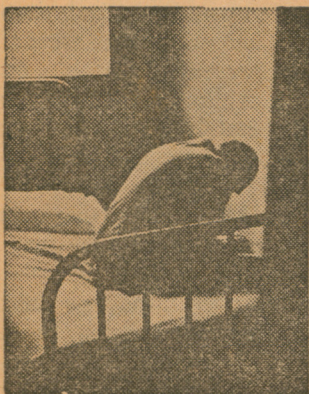
Brooks heard. That fifty dollar bill you used in the bar was marked. It made the bar owner suspicious and he called his bank. *His* bank was the one you had just robbed. You and Brooks left so many clues behind you that, even without Brooks turning stool pigeon, you were certain to be arrested."

"Guess I missed the boat again," Netters shrugged.

"I don't like to second guess,"

the lieutenant quipped, "but I sort of think you and Brooks are due for a long trip this time. That was a federal rap. When the F.B.I. people get through with you and Brooks, you'll both be on a twenty-five year trip."

"I hope," Netters growled, "they put me and that canary Brooks in the same cell again this time—just for one night. I sure won't *miss* him."



Convict?

No. This man is a patient in a mental hospital. Held prisoner by a tortured mind. Psychiatric drugs and other treatments help some of the mentally ill, but for many forms of mental illness no effective treatment has yet been found. The answer is research. Your financial help is needed.

Give to the National Association for Mental Health through your local chapter.



"Everyone in Vegas spits on the shill. But the main thing is, he spits on himself . . . because nobody hates himself as much as a shill does."

the hard way

BY C. DURBIN

I WAS a land developer in those days in the County and City of Los Angeles. I manufactured—that's the word—finished lots out of raw land, complete with sewers, curbs and utility connections. These, I sold to smaller builders who could not or would not do their own developing—hopefully—at a profit. In this connection, I had business at the City Planning Commission two or three times a week, sometimes oftener. I could go off on a tangent and tell you about my frustrating collisions with officialdom, but that would be a chapter in itself and has nothing to do with my present story. In retrospect, all the people I knew there have since blended into a single composite civil service employee, a kind of bland human

penguin, complete with short-sleeved white shirt and narrow dark tie. There were headaches; of course there were; and certain sacred procedures also. One had to slow down to a stately pace and keep company with the bureaucratic beast's sluggish humor. One of the first things I learned was that resentment or impatience was the surest way to an ulcer or a nervous breakdown.

Be that as it may, on the particular day I have in mind, I was unable to escape from the precincts of the City Planning Commission until five. You don't dare keep those boys a moment over time, and I say it with all good will. I took the elevator down to the Broadway level, went over toward First Street and started walking. I never parked

my car near City Hall. Like too many Angelenos, I spent so much time behind a steering wheel that I never had a chance to walk. The doctor had warned me a few times. As well as trying to diet, I made a point of parking south and east of City Hall, on the other side of Little Tokyo, about two miles away. Then I realized that I had not taken time out for lunch and was hungry. I moved along through the Japanese section, debating the question of food. My wife would be away that evening at her bi-weekly bridge game and I was planning to dine out alone anyhow. So I made a decision and headed for a nearby place I knew of, the Kobe House.

Within two blocks of the restaurant, I noticed a man loitering near the curb. I speculated on the odds that he would try to panhandle me. As I approached, he stepped forward, saying, though without too much interest,

"Excuse me, but would you be able to help me out?"

It was hardly an original pitch. On the contrary, the thought struck me that it was calculatedly general; he might have been asking me for the price of a meal or for a fifty thousand dollar loan. The man was hatless. He wore, what shall I say?—nonedescript clothes, pants, a jacket that did not match, and a kind of dark plaid sports shirt, open at the throat. Not fancy; not dirty either; just any worker on his way home from the job. He was tall,

strapping and gray-haired. Perhaps he was prematurely gray. His face was tanned and he did not need a shave. He was beginning to run to fat a little, but might originally have been an outdoor man. I have—at least, I think I have—an eye for these types, since I employ them constantly as laborers and as operators of earth-moving machinery—graders, scrapers, bulldozers, and so forth. I wondered what his story would be. Perhaps I was in a receptive mood because it appeared as though the City were finally removing all the perverse roadblocks they had been putting in my way.

"You want some dinner?" I asked.

"Anything," he replied.

"Tell you what," I said, "I'm heading for the Kobe House around the corner. You want to join me?"

"Glad to," he said.

"Now, you don't go picking bums off the street and inviting them to have dinner with you; not ordinarily. But my hobby happens to be finding human junk, repairing and utilizing it. I don't think of myself as a social worker or an amateur humanitarian, merely a business man after a profit. I did get a charge, however out of tinkering and experimenting, as I say, with people who've stopped ticking, to see what would happen, just as others play golf, or bridge, or join lodges. You have to be cautious about tinkering recklessly or probing too deeply; that is dangerous and

presumptuous. But a certain amount of it can be instructive and enlightening.

So we walked over to the Kobe House and settled in to one of the booths. It isn't much of a place, no atmosphere or bobbing costumed waitresses for the tourists. It's hash-house American, in fact, with a tile floor lightly sprinkled with sawdust and not as clean as it should be. It has a long tile counter with stools and about a dozen booths with dark wooden tables and black naugahyde-covered settees. Elwood Fujishima, the owner (that's right, his first name is Elwood), came over. After we exchanged greetings, I told him we were hungry and would eat whatever they had prepared. I didn't want to see a menu and left it to him to put a dinner together. Since he has a small bar in the rear of the restaurant, I told him to bring us a couple of double bourbons and a quart of hot saki. If it wasn't for the bar business, I sometimes wonder how Elwood would keep the place open. The tourists just don't favor him.

"Bourbon alright with you?" I asked my guest. "I don't know your name."

"Taggart," he said, "and bourbon's okay. I drink it when I can afford it."

"Mine's Costello," I said.

"Glad to meet you," he said easily and we shook hands over the table.

Elwood returned with the bour-

bons and saki. I filled two tumblers of saki and lifted my jigger saying, "Cheers."

"Bottoms up," replied Taggart and we threw it down and chased it with saki, a potent combination which sharpened my appetite.

To put the man at ease, or, more accurately, to make him drop his guard, I began to talk about the Kobe House and its owner. I had known Elwood Fujishima a long time. The nearest he has ever been to Japan is Hilo, Hawaii, where he was born. Some Methodist missionaries had gotten to Elwood's father and so the boy was saddled with a baptismal name which was as mid-Western and Rotarian as Waukegan, Illinois. Elwood worked behind the counter and, when it was busy, which was seldom, he took on some temporary help. His mother-in-law ran the kitchen and I've seen his wife, Nancy, whom I've known since high school days, pinch-hitting all over the place. Elwood himself always wore a white shirt and a clip-on polka dot bow tie—about the only man left I know of who wears one—and a long white apron wrapped three times around his middle. But don't let the looks of the place fool you. Elwood's mother-in-law makes some of the best Japanese food in town. She cooks as she'd cook at home, slowly, and she puts in all the ingredients at the right time, in the right order, and takes her time about it. Don't get me wrong; I'm not that crazy about

Japanese food; it doesn't even begin to compare to French or Italian cooking and is a little too austere and Spartan for a steady diet. Like many of their other customs, it has a low pleasure-quotient. One of the drawbacks of their culture is a talent for doing things the hard way. Life was never easy on those islands and what they built up there is too spare and simplistic to suit me. But, on occasion, I do go for Japanese food, especially on this evening when I was hungry enough to eat just about anything.

Well, these were the things I rattled on about and Taggart listened and nodded and sipped his saki. Then he suddenly asked,

"Just what do you do for a living?"

I took his directness as a compliment to my ability to loosen people up.

"I develop raw land mostly, I said. "Once in a while, I'll put up a factory or warehouse building for a special customer. Things like that." Then I threw the ball back to him. "Ever driven trucks or operated construction machinery? You look like you might have done it one time or another."

"Some," he said. "I've jockeyed diesel trucks and ran a big cat once on a job for the power company up near Eureka. Why? Do you have a job for me?"

"I might," I said, "if you're on the level, and have some kind of work record."

"Most of mine is alright," said Taggart. "If you want to, you can check me out first, then take it or leave it."

"Fair enough," I said. "I may just take a chance. My batting average is pretty good, although I've been stuck a few times by hopeless luses."

"I like liquor as well as the next man," said Taggart, "and when I'm working I can even do without it. Right now, I'm trying to get back on the track from something worse."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like gambling," he replied. "I was really hooked for a while."

Elwood came along at this point and placed a tureen of fish chowder between us. I wouldn't know how Japanese it was, but it was good. Soon after, he brought us steak terayaki and plenty of sukiyaki and rice. We dug in and Taggart began to thaw out a little as the food and the drinks had their way with him. I had plenty of time and no special plans for the evening, so I settled back, gave him his head and waited. As I thought he would, he gradually began to talk. You know the old chestnut that people will tell their stories most readily to a stranger in order to relieve themselves and shift some of the load. It's true. Taggart went all the way back and said he had started out as a pro baseball player. A scout for the Detroit club picked him up right after high school. They kept

him under wraps for two years, developed him into a good hitter and gradually eased him into the first team. He stayed with Detroit for two seasons after that and then the Pittsburgh Pirates bought him for a stiff price. What followed was more of the same, and monotonous, as far as I'm concerned. He mentioned that he had played in two World Series and had been a top hitter in the major leagues for three seasons running. I seemed to recall his name now, but only vaguely, since I had never been much of a baseball follower.

The gambling bug hit him when he was still in the major leagues. He was making plenty of money and the horses became his thing. Then something else happened. Isn't it always so? He learned that his wife was seeing another man during his absences. That started him drinking a little and he stepped up his track betting. "I probably would have continued throwing it away at the track even if my wife had played it straight," he said. "In a way, I can't blame her. I was away much of the time. You know the ballplayer's routine. I was playing around a little myself. She must have found out about it."

Taggart helped himself to some of the steak and continued.

"After that, my game and performance started to slide badly. The next season my club wouldn't pick up my option and neither would anyone else. I did get some

offers from the minors but figured I was too good for them. I decided to quit baseball and see what I could find on the West Coast. But you'd be surprised how little there is for an ex-ball player, especially for one who has loused himself up. Meanwhile my wife and I were divorced. I drifted around a while, then went up to Northern California where I was taken on as a dozer operator on that project I mentioned before. It was a tunnel-and-viaduct job. My coordination was good and I caught on quickly. That got me into the union local and the pay was high. I began to follow the construction game and finally wound up in southern Nevada where there was a lot of building activity. I'd go into Vegas weekends and that's where I got hooked solid—on dice."

"It got to be a fever in the blood. I couldn't wait till paynight so I could make the hundred mile run to Vegas and hit the crap tables. With overtime, I was pulling down two fifty, three hundred a week and blowing it all in on dice. The first time I went there I came away with four hundred bucks. The second time I carried off twenty-five hundred in loot and felt like a hero. But that didn't last long. Pretty soon I was falling behind and borrowing and getting pay-advances. The bosses took notice and didn't like it one bit. And because my mind was in Vegas, I began to get careless on the job. We were work-

ing in rough country, real rough. When you're running a cat or a crane and somebody else's life depends on how you handle it, there are no second chances. I had a couple of near misses and was called in on the carpet and warned. Well, what they were afraid of finally happened. I goofed once in lowering a big precast concrete pylon into place. It was bad timing in a spot where you had to handle that boom as if you were threading a needle. Three guys were brushed off the wall into the rapids two hundred feet below. They never found them again. The union made a stab at going to bat for me, but I really had no case and they privately admitted the contractors were right in firing me. Mister, I was cooking myself slowly and doing a thorough job of it. When I went to get something else, I found I'd been blackballed from both ends. The word spread. The companies wouldn't have me and the union looked the other way. Well, I still wasn't worried at this point. I finally landed in Vegas. Naturally. Where else? I shackled up with a cocktail waitress there who worked at the Dunes. Even with all my overtime, she was making more money in the pit than I ever could. We had gotten friendly sometime before that. She went for me, maybe because I had always been an easy guy with a buck when she'd bring me drinks at the crap table. I began shooting craps again and

had a run of luck for a couple of months. I moved in with her, bought a new Buick and began living it up. Then it turned around and my dough melted till I was broke again. The broad said, 'don't worry; you just be good in bed and I'll make enough for both of us'. But it doesn't work out that way. She bankrolled me at the tables and that seemed to put a further crimp in my luck. When you start losing, you're under increasing pressure. Your judgement weakens and you lose some more. The more you lose, the more you worry. Each new belt in the mouth pushes your morale lower. That's what was happening to me. I got so depressed I couldn't get it up in bed and that's when the broad began to fidget and tote up all the money she was wasting on me. She had been around Vegas long enough to spot the markings of a loser. I was unlucky from head to toe and, like everyone else in Vegas, she was superstitious. I don't blame her."

"I take it she gave you the heave-ho," I said.

"Yessir," said Taggart. "One fine morning it was all over between us and I had lost about thirty-eight hundred bucks of her money. She didn't care about the money so much; oh, she did in a way; but it was easy come, easy go, and, as long as she smiled and put out for the right guys and stayed in good with the pit bosses, she was good for the job."

"Things really went into reverse after that. I moved from the carpet joints on the Strip to the sawdust joints on Fremont Street. Nothing helped, and one morning I woke up flat broke and had to go to work for a living. I got a job alright, the the lowest job in the world, as a shill at Gully's on Fremont Street. Seven bucks a day. Just enough to keep you floating; not enough for a comeback. For a few months there, I lived on the narrow edge in a flophouse with a lot of other shills."

Taggart was managing to talk and eat at the same time and I just listened and helped him put it away. A few minutes after we polished off the sukiyaki, Elwood came along with a new dish loaded with shrimps and lobster meat which tasted fine. You can't do much to shrimp and lobster to make it taste bad, especially since we re-ordered bourbon and kept at the saki. As I say, there isn't much to Japanese food that I can see; it's too delicate, like their painting and furniture arrangements, so you have to pack in a lot of it to make it go the distance.

Taggart finally took a breather. He lit a cigarette, inhaled and scowled into a cloud of smoke.

"About this time," he continued, "I teamed up with a man by the name of O'Connell. Maybe it was his real name, maybe it wasn't. It's not important. He was also a shill at Gully's. No one knew too much

about him and no one asked questions. When you've hit the bottom of the elevator shaft, what you were before doesn't matter. O'Connell must have had a much longer fall than myself. I heard a couple of rumors how he had dropped over two hundred and fifty grand at the Sands in three nights. No one knew just when that was supposed to have happened. Maybe it was one of those stories that keep growing like a rolling snowball. He kept pretty much to himself but, behind it, you could see he had plenty of class and brains. He must have been a big wheel once. You know, wife, kids, college degrees, the works. Maybe he had been in the film business, but I really didn't know, only what I'd heard around. But there he was rotting in the Vegas skidrow with the rest of the shills and trying to hit the comeback trail. It's a fact that a shill is the lowest, crummiest thing in the world. An ordinary bum is a self-respecting citizen by comparison. Everyone in Vegas spits on the shill, but the main thing is that he spits on himself because he can't break away and can't accept himself for what he is. Nobody hates himself as much as a shill does."

Taggart looked up at me and said:

"Even I got so I couldn't stand myself and I'm pretty thick-skinned. I know how to roll with the punches. Can you imagine what it did to guys like O'Connell? Some corner

of him must have been crazy-wild just waiting to break out. After I got closer to him I could see he was working on something, or something was working on him. It's like a con's escape plan eating him like a slow acid as he waits and the days drag by. Like everyone else there, O'Connell was chasing a stake so he could hit the tables again. But scraping fifty or a hundred bucks together is slow painful work. He had done it three times already and each time he had been busted and fallen back into the hole. A shill trying to break out is like a cockroach with a broken back trying to crawl out of a steep slimy sewer. He reaches the rim, then he weakens and slides back to the bottom."

I interrupted saying: "Nothing was keeping any of you there by force. You weren't prisoners."

"You're so right," said Taggart. "You've got the key to the handcuffs in your pocket all the time and you won't use it. That's why you hate yourself so much." He paused, opened and shut his big hands and examined them. "But O'Connell finally used the key. A few days after the last time he had gone busted, he was away all night. Next morning we both stopped for some coffee on the way to Gully's and O'Connell said to me: 'I think I'm going to make it this time', and he pulled a roll of bills from his pocket. 'Three hundred dollars,' he said. 'I'm going to shoot this roll at

the Silver Dollar and I have a feeling in my bones I'll break out this time. I slugged and rolled a drunk about three this morning. The first time and the last time'."

"I asked O'Connell what made him so sure and he said: 'I have a feeling. When you get desperate enough, things begin to happen.'"

"Then he changed his mind and said we'd go to the Silver Dollar when we finished at Gully's. We did just that. O'Connell walked up to the first crap layout as if he had it all planned out and threw his roll down and picked up the dice. I guess it didn't take him ten minutes, less than ten minutes, and he ran that three hundred into fifteen hundred dollars. He was just like a dead man, dead-panned and cold and he cashed the chips and we walked out and that's all there was to it."

"I've sawed through the first bar," said O'Connell as we went back to the flophouse, "and I'm getting out of Vegas. If you want to join me, you're welcome'."

"He knew I'd take him up on it and he wanted me to go along and that was his way of making a soft pitch."

"Since a shill gets paid off every day, we had no reason for returning to Gully's. Next morning we packed the little gear we had and headed for a used car dealer. Those thieves, together with the hock shops, make out very well in Vegas; people sell them cars way below

value and don't argue because they're in a big hurry to get out of town or back to the tables. We looked around a bit and O'Connell bought an old Mercury for three hundred that was worth every bit of two hundred, but it ran and we took off for L. A. We put up at a kind of furnished apartment place somewhere off Eighth Street, downtown, a fairly clean little fleabag. Then we settled down to get the shill smell out of our bones. O'Connell didn't say much all this time and was sort of going about things like a man with a master plan and a schedule. First thing, we bought some clothes, cheap, but new and clean, and began to look like taxpayers instead of bums."

"I didn't see much of O'Connell for the next few days after that and didn't ask him his business. He might have been spending his time in the public library for all I know. He was a great reader, as I say, one of those educated guys. It wasn't that he knowingly showed it. I could tell from the way he spoke and from a reference he'd drop here or there, naturally, without his being aware of it. He knew. He knew plenty."

"Myself, I got inspired. Stayed off liquor for four days and even went out and got some temporary labor jobs. But my good intentions didn't last longer than a week. I did get one crack at a permanent job, but what do you think? You guessed it—I got myself liquored

up quietly the night before and missed the appointment for the job, and the job itself. O'Connell said nothing about it and never beefed about having to stake me."

At this point, Taggart fell silent.

As I sat there listening to him, I felt a momentary twinge of pessimism. It wasn't going to be easy to haul him back into the drying-pen of normal society, which is the whole object of the game. It's a toss-up which is the trickier problem, the compulsive drinker or the compulsive gambler. I was inclined to be more skeptical about drinkers. Thinking back on my own experience, I had lost out whenever I put a chronic alcoholic on the payroll. I knew I would be taking a chance with Taggart. But, then, my business is about the most speculative there is, and I was willing to take that chance. Developing land in Southern California is about as close as you can come to outright crap-shooting.

Then Taggart started talking again.

"One night," he said, "O'Connell came back to the apartment late. He unwrapped a package and tossed a bowie knife on the table. It must have had a seven inch blade and was broader than any ordinary hunting knife. Then he unwrapped a longer package which he had tucked under his arm. It was a Japanese sword in a black-and-red lacquered sheath, inlaid with stones and bits of ivory. It must have been

a real museum piece, though I really wouldn't know. It's a whole study, I hear. O'Connell pulled the sword out of the sheath and the blade had a nice line but it was dark and pitted and dull-looking. O'Connell tested the edge of the blade and said, 'Do me a favor, Taggart. Go out tomorrow and get a coarse stone and a fine stone and a real razor strop and keep working on this cutlery till you can shave your beard with either of them. They're both good steel. You'll be able to tell when they're ready.' "

"We knew each other well enough by this time so that I didn't have to ask him any questions if he wasn't going to speak first. So I just said 'Okay.' The next morning I started to work on the knife and sword. It took me about three days, working slow and patient to hone both blades down razor-fine. I don't know anything about Japanese swords, or any kind of swords, but, maybe, because I had once been a hitter and used to swing bats, I could feel that this antique had a good balance. After I got it sharpened up, I took it in both hands and swished it through the air, trying to regain that old rhythm I used to have when I could crack out a triple each time I got up to the plate."

"What was your friend O'Connell, doing all this time?" I asked.

Taggart shrugged. "I didn't ask him. He'd never talked much when

we were back in Vegas, and after we got to L.A., he talked even less. As I say, he was going around like a man with big heavy plans on his mind who knew exactly where he was headed. Me? I guess I was just content to drift along."

"Well, what happened then?" I prodded him.

"Well," said Taggart, "a couple of days after that, I hadn't seen O'Connell all day and went out to eat alone. When I came back to the apartment, O'Connell was already there, pacing and smoking and thinking hard. 'Sit down,' he said, 'I want to talk with you. I got you out of Vegas and we've been going fifty-fifty. Is that right, Taggart?'"

"I just nodded and O'Connell said: 'Well, it's time now for you to return the favor.' And I answered him: 'Anything you say.'"

"'I'll tell you when the time comes,' said O'Connell. 'Right now, we're driving to Amboy.'"

"'Well, if you've got business in Amboy and want me along,' I said, 'it's okay with me. I'm ready.'"

"'Good,' said O'Connell. He tossed the knife and the Japanese sword on the blanket on his bed. He rolled them up in the blanket and tucked the roll under his arm. We went out of the apartment and over across Eighth Street where we kept the Mercury in a parking lot. O'Connell opened the trunk of the car and tossed the blanket roll into the trunk and said to me: 'You drive.'"

"I got on to the San Bernardino Freeway and started tooling eastward at a steady clip. For a while I thought O'Connell was really heading back to Vegas. But he said 'Amboy'. I wouldn't have gone along if I thought it was Vegas."

"We got to Amboy, it must have been about three in the morning or thereabouts, and we stopped at the only restaurant in town. You must know Amboy if you've ever driven through to Needles. It's nothing but a desert whistle stop for the Santa Fe. We stopped at this all-night place, a combination beanery and gas station, a kind of headquarters for the Santa Fe brakemen and the road division crews. O'Connell said: 'Let's get some breakfast. We've work to do and this is the last chance I'll have to eat.'"

"So we ate breakfast and then sat around, not talking, and smoking a cigarette. I looked at the wall clock and it was getting on to four in the morning. All this time I was trying to figure out what O'Connell had in mind but I was damned if I was going to ask him. On the other hand, I didn't think twice about what he had just said and read nothing into it. I was thinking of all the stories I had heard around Vegas about O'Connell, about the woman he had been married to and the three kids he had with her, about how the woman had divorced him and nicked him for plenty. That must have been after he started losing."

"Then O'Connell got up and said: 'Let's go', and we went out and he took the wheel saying: 'Not much longer now'."

"We drove along Highway 66 heading toward Needles for about twenty miles. Then we turned off left on a northbound narrow dirt road. O'Connell stayed on this road about an hour, driving steadily north, deeper and deeper into the desert. It was starting to turn gray in front of our headlights, or, at least, a lighter black. We finally came to a spot beside some big boulders on the other side of a line of low hills. Further north a range of mountains loomed up and you could just see them outlined against the sky if you squinted. East and west between the hills and the mountains, the desert stretched out, all brush-studded, to the horizon. It's a mean-looking, stony-hearted country."

"We pulled up alongside the boulders near the road-track and got out of the car. O'Connell opened the trunk and brought out the blanket. He spread it on the ground and laid the cutlery on it. Then he went back to the trunk and brought out two long-handled shovels. He tossed one to me and said: 'Start digging.' 'What for?', I said, 'what is this?' 'A grave,' he said. 'For who?' I asked. 'For me,' he said. I said to him: 'Is this a gag?' 'It's no gag,' said O'Connell, 'it's the payoff. I'm cashing in my chips.'"

"I started to get sore at what looked like a grandstand play on O'Connell's part. 'You sound like a grade B Western that didn't quite make it,' I said. 'Is this what you hauled us both out into the desert for? You really want to kill yourself? Okay, but what do you need me along for? Why don't you just buy a gun and stick it in your mouth and pull the trigger?'"

"'I have to do it the hard way,' said O'Connell. 'Even a lousy shill should have the privilege of choosing his own method. Right? What's a friend for, if not to go along? Why should it be any skin off your nose?'"

"I could see he was feeling so sorry for himself that he was just blind to everything, so I played along to gain time. 'Well,' I said, 'if you put it that way—maybe—but why don't you give me the rest of the pitch?'"

"'Just keep digging,' said O'Connell.

"There was no point in arguing just then, so I kept on shovelling sand alongside of him till we had scooped out a trench or grave, if you want to call it that, about four feet deep. Then O'Connell said: 'That's deep enough.'"

"He got out of the grave and dragged the blanket to the edge of it. I leaned against the car and lit a cigarette and looked around. The sky in the east was starting to turn pink and light green. O'Connell sat down on the ground and lit a ciga-

rette. 'Now here it is,' he said looking at me. 'I'm going to kneel on the edge of that blanket and stick that knife into my mid-section on the left side. Then I'm going to pull it across all the way to the right side. When I've done that, I'll put out my left hand. Your job is to stand behind me with the sword and cut off my head when I give you the signal. You used to be a champion hitter once. Try it out a few times on those gorse bushes if you want to, but do a good clean job. Do you think you can?'"

"'That's a helluva thing to ask me to do,' I said.

"'It's a good thing,' said O'Connell. 'I'm asking as I'd ask you to be best man at my wedding. I brought you away from Vegas and now you're going to bring me away from here. That's what friends are for.'"

"The way he said it made it sound alright. He had himself convinced but I just couldn't buy it. I couldn't think of any arguments and watched the sun getting ready to rise from behind the eastern rim of the desert. The face of the mountains was beginning to flush and the chill was still in the air. I finally said: 'I still think this is a foolish way of doing it if you must take the Dutch route, when there are so many easier ways.'"

"'I always made my points at the crap table the hard way,' said O'Connell, 'and I have to do this the hard way.'"

"The sun was beginning to peep over the edge of the desert and O'Connell said: 'It's going to be a hot clear day. Maybe about eighty. A really nice day.'"

"'What's the rush then?' I said. 'Stick around. Tomorrow is another day.'"

"But he just tossed away his cigarette butt and stood up. He took off his jacket and tossed it on the ground. Then he took off his tie and stripped off his shirt. I remember it was a new white one, and then his Tee shirt. Then he got out of his pants next and took off his socks and shoes. So there he stood on the blanket in a pair of white shorts.

"'See these shorts?' he said. 'Brand new. I paid five dollars for them. Pure white broadcloth. That's what I always wore.' He kicked the clothes beside him on the sand and said: 'Take that stuff back to town and burn it. I don't want any shill suit in my grave.'"

"We were talking free, easy and natural. You'd think we were talking about baseball and the weather. But what was eating this man was now coming through to me clear and loud. He was going to get even with the world which had given him a raw deal."

"'That's a pretty shallow grave,' I said. 'Maybe we ought to make it deeper. The sand will blow away and the coyotes will dig you up and the buzzards will get at you.'"

"'Coyotes and buzzards have

their legitimate place in the scheme of things,' said O'Connell, 'and I'll have no objection if they do. After you've done your job, throw the sword into the grave. I'm taking it with me.'"

"'Where?' I said.

"'Wherever it is I'm going,' he said, 'and don't leave any marker on the grave.'"

"Then he knelt on the blanket and settled back on his heels, Japanese style, in front of the grave and faced the rising sun. He picked up the knife and tested the point and put it down again. 'Get behind me on the left,' he said."

"'I'm a leftie,' I said. 'I'll have to stand on your right.'"

"He laughed at that and it was the first time I ever heard him laugh. 'Okay,' he said, 'but make it a good swing with plenty of follow-through. This is like a World Series only more important. Do your best.'"

"'You sure you don't want to reconsider?' I asked him."

"'That's behind me now,' said O'Connell, staring east. 'Watch my left hand for the signal.'"

"I said: 'Hell, you're just prejudiced against yourself,' but O'Connell answered never another word and picked up the knife from the blanket about the same time that I put a stranglehold around his neck from behind and hit him a terrific clip behind the ear. The knife slipped out of his fingers and he keeled over. He was out cold."

"I pushed him off the blanket and rolled up the shovels and the cutlery into it and threw everything into the trunk of the car."

"By this time O'Connell was coming to and I slapped his face a couple of times. He groaned and struggled up into a sitting position and rubbed the side of his head."

"How do you feel?" I said."

"You hit pretty hard," he said."

"I had to," I said. "You were just about to stick that knife into your guts. Were you really going through with it?"

"He didn't answer, just rubbed his jaw and ear and stood up and started getting into his clothes."

"I got behind the wheel and got the car turned around and we started back toward Highway 66. On the way back to L. A., O'Connell didn't say anything at all and I wasn't talking either. Then, about the time we got back on the San Bernardino Freeway, O'Connell finally said: 'Maybe you were right.' 'Sure I was right,' I said. 'How can you be so sure?' he said. 'Because this is the hard way,' I said. 'If you're one of those people who want to take it out of his hide, and I think you are, stick around and stay alive. That's doing it the hard way. That hara-kiri you was going to put on back there—is that what you call it?—that was only show business. This is for real, without medals and without Jap swords. You agree with me?'"

"He took it hard, real hard. He

just hated to give up and let go and it was just like he was tearing it out of his guts. He finally nodded and said: 'You're right. This is the hard way.'"

Taggart fell silent at this point and sipped some of the green tea which was cold by now.

"That was quite an admission for O'Connell to make," I said to Taggart.

"He must have felt like a fool," said Taggart, "and there's nothing worse than to be shown up for a fool after you've gotten yourself convinced that you're a hero. But he did admit it and I give him credit for that much. He was quite a character."

"What happened after that?" I asked Taggart.

"Oh, we got back to L. A. and the apartment alright," he said. "O'Connell said he was pulling out and I didn't ask him where he was going or what he was going to do. He still had four hundred left of the original stake and offered me half of it. I turned him down and he kept insisting and I turned him down again."

"You were setting him a good example," I said.

"Maybe," said Taggart. "I don't know what it was. But I felt stronger than he was so I couldn't take any crutches from him. You think I did right?"

I thought about that for a while and finally said:

"Taking one thing with another,

I think you did right. I would say you handled the whole matter the right way. What do you say we get started?"

We got up and I paid Elwood the bill and we said good night to him and walked out into the street. I took out two twenty dollar bills and a business card and gave them to Taggart.

"You get out to my field office

tomorrow," I said. "It's out in Newhall. There's the address and a bus goes out there. You get out there and I'll put you on the payroll. This is an advance on your pay."

"I'll be there," said Taggart.

"See you tomorrow," I said, and he turned away.

I crossed the street and headed for the lot where my car was parked.



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