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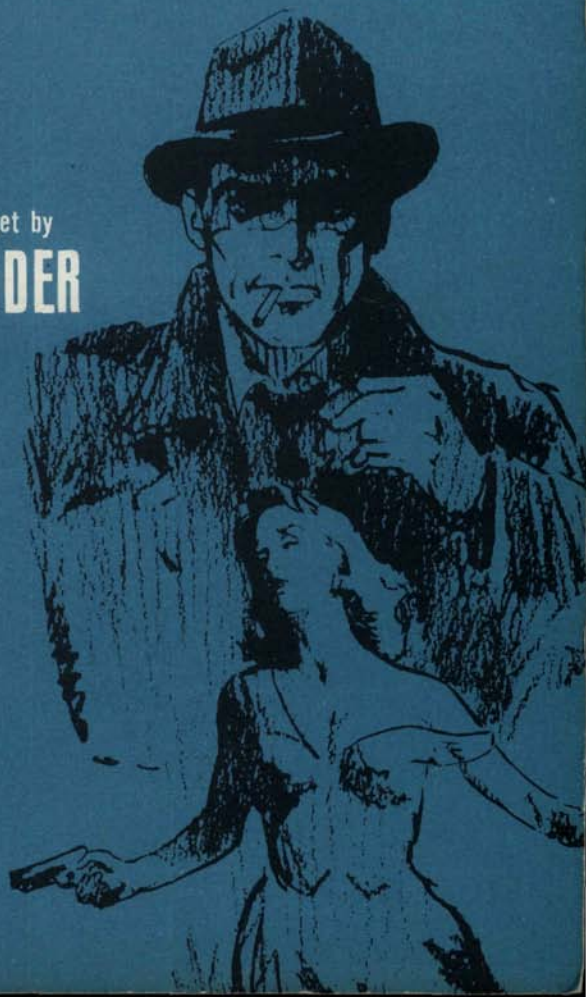
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

THE UTTERLY IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

A Short SPY Novel You'll never forget by

ROBERT W. ALEXANDER

BRETT HALLIDAY
JONATHAN CRAIG
FLETCHER FLORA
NORMAN DANIELS
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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1967

VOL. 21, NO. 6

TWO NEW SHORT NOVELS

THE UTTERLY IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

by **ROBERT W. ALEXANDER**

They're together again, Sergeant Rodale and Professor Charles Kovac, in a case so savagely top secret that the word was: "Take that elevator, mister. Go up. Don't come down—or you will be shot!"

..... 2 to 47

THE FINAL PAYOFF

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

Staring into the sightless eyes of the dead tinhorn gambler, Mike Shayne suddenly knew that this could be his last case. Because if he didn't crack it before the dawn, he too would be dead!

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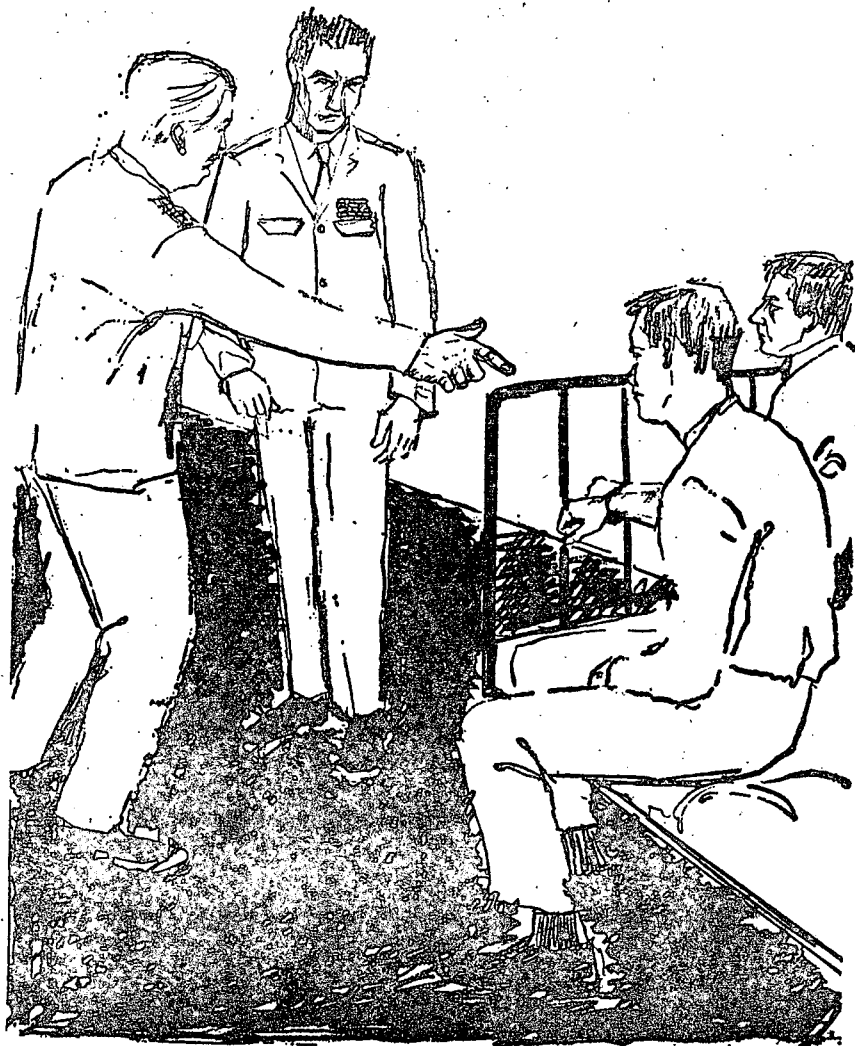
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A SHORT SPY NOVEL YOU'LL NEVER FORGET



THE UTTERLY IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

He was a good man, but this job must be his last. They had sent him to a place where only dead men came back!

by **ROBERT W. ALEXANDER**



IT WAS NEARLY ten in the morning when the maid perfunctorily wheeled the linen cart to the door of room 516. She knocked twice with no reply before inserting the pass key and opening the door.

The maid did not scream, she gasped. The man sprawled in the doorway to the bath, clad in the bottom half of pajamas as though surprised while shaving. He was obviously dead. He had been shot through the head and the emerging bullet had left a gaping hole that destroyed the bridge of his nose and both eyes.

The assistant manager of the hotel immediately called the police. The detective sent from homicide, Sergeant Merle Rodale, expected another routine murder investigation, until, when he stooped

beside the coroner, he thought he recognized the victim.

Sergeant Rodale clenched a fist as he stood up. The laboratory men he had arrived with were busily going over the room; the photographer was shooting pictures.

"Obviously shot," the coroner said drily. "Death came about two hours ago. Check with me later. It's all I can say now."

"Don't remove the body yet," Merle Rodale said, striding towards the door.

He had a quick decision to make, but he decided nothing would be lost by letting the lab boys continue. However, he felt sure any investigation would be taken out of the Los Angeles police hands. He asked the nervous

assistant manager for the nearest phone he could use in private.

Merle Rodale dialed the State Department. After identifying himself, he asked for Stanley Renton. From the clicking in his ear he guessed he was transferred to a private line on the other end. Moments later Stanley Renton, whose voice he recognized, answered.

Rodale was brief. "I've got a dead man here, sir. Murdered! I knew him as Vern Carlton. Was he still with intelligence?"

"Good Lord, yes!" Renton exclaimed. "Lieutenant—I mean, Sergeant Rodale, I'll have men there immediately. Proceed with what you have to do, but if it is Captain Carlton forget an investigation. We'll take over."

"Yes, sir."

Agents Bird and Wing, both large young men in their middle thirties, arrived at room 516 before the lab men had finished. They asked for Sergeant Rodale at the door. Rodale quickly ushered them in.

Agent Bird kneeled beside the body. He glanced at his companion and turned to Merle Rodale.

"It's him, Sergeant," he said getting up. "Might as well have the body taken to the morgue. Come up to room 607 as soon as you can." Agent Bird nodded at the other man and they left.

Stanley Renton, of the State Department, opened the door when Rodale knocked at room 607. He

motioned Sergeant Merle Rodale inside.

"Outside of his body, you found nothing?" His steel-gray eyes were serious. He was a tall, raw boned man in his early fifties.

"Nothing," Rodale admitted. "He was killed about eight this morning. A stranger to everyone, from the little time I've had to ask. But in a hotel this size, everybody's a stranger. It's my guess the killer got in with a pass key. It'll be the only thing we have to go on—"

"Don't bother," Renton cut him off. He motioned towards a chair. "Sit down. This is plenty serious. Rodale, would you consider coming back into the service—Intelligence—to help us?"

Merle Rodale rubbed at his closely cut blond hair. "To learn who killed Captain Carlton? I can work on it with discretion, with the police. Homicide assigned it to me."

"No, not for that." Renton shook his head. He extracted a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. His physical movement was as deliberate and precise as his quick mind. "In all probability the assassin is a thousand miles from here. Remember, Lieutenant—" He referred to Merle Rodale's rank while in the service ten years before—"this is war. Even in a cold war it's a waste of time to attempt learning which soldier on the other side killed one of our men. Captain Carlton was our courier be-

tween Operation Pratfall and here. You're one of the few who knows the State Department here is a cover for my activities."

"Yes, Colonel, but—"

"Another man who I'm certain suspects my capacity is your best friend, Professor Charles Kovac."

Rodale nodded. Charles Kovac was a criminologist at the university. Rodale had studied under the comparatively young professor, who, at thirty-nine was only seven years older than himself. Charles Kovac had helped Merle Rodale solve many murders, particularly one where Stanley Renton and the State Department were involved in counter espionage.

"You can trust him," Rodale defended.

"Yes. I'm sure." Renton smiled.

"But I want his help. Yours, too."

"To be couriers?"

"I haven't thought it out completely. It boils down to this—a double problem. *Why* Captain Carlton was killed is more important than who did it. Then," he said, pausing to light his cigarette, "there's another murder. By a spy inside of Operation Pratfall. One of our agents was murdered right inside the building, which supposedly has total security. This climaxes a decision to send in an outside man to Germany!"

"Everybody in Intelligence on both sides of the ocean is under suspicion. The enemy has filtered in and we have to root them out.

We must have a detective; preferably with a special talent, and someone we can trust."

"I see." Rodale nodded, thinking the special talent Renton referred to was Professor Kovac's unusual way of disregarding facts. As far as he was concerned, Charles Kovac operated with ESP.

"His talent," Renton smiled, "is the fact he speaks Russian. But we've the counter agent pinned down in the building. Believe me, it is vital to learn who he is. With Captain Carlton murdered, we can speculate the Russians are on to the fact that Operation Pratfall exists. They don't know how it operates or they'd put a stop to it.

"Colonel Van Zukor, the commander of Pratfall there, has isolated everyone under his command. If the spy could get out of the building, Operation Pratfall would fold up. Do you think the professor will help us?"

Merle Rodale grinned. "I'm sure he will. Any challenge bugs him. I'll go see him tonight."

"No. We'll have to be devious. I don't want you to leave this room. We'll have to act on the assumption that our every move is observed by the other side. You can phone him tomorrow that we are sending someone for him. Don't reveal anything more."

PROFESSOR CHARLES KOVAC was looking forward to his last day of school as he made breakfast. His

students would scatter for the summer and he had scheduled a vacation where a bachelor could be as irresponsible as he wished without the department demanded of a teacher.

Kovac's phone rang as he was sipping his first coffee.

"Chuck, you have classes today?" he was asked.

Charles Kovac recognized Merle Rodale's voice. "Just until noon. Then I have reservation on a plane to Hawaii. You'll have to solve your own murders, young man. Until I get back."

"I will," Rodale retorted. "Sorry to wreck your plans, buddy! But you'll be contacted today. Can't tell you the details, except it's vital you accept an invitation. See you later—"

"Now wait!" Charles Kovac protested. He held the phone away from his ear and grimaced. Rodale had hung up on him. He pressed the phone button and called the police station. They informed him Sergeant Merle Rodale was on vacation. He then dialed Rodale's home without an answer. He was vexed, let it ring a long time.

At noon Kovac was alone in his class room. Merle Rodale's vagueness on the phone was irritating. He knew he wouldn't be able to catch the plane until he talked with Rodale.

Charles Kovac closed his desk. He didn't have any more classes to dismiss for the summer. He stood

up just as a young lady entered the room.

"Professor Kovac?" she asked, not certain the youthful appearing Kovac could be the professor. Kovac's crew-cut dark hair and wiry build belied his age.

"Yes?" Kovac admitted. The young lady had an abundance of nicely sculptured red hair. She also had an excellent figure that, Kovac decided, she was well aware of, and she had green eyes that matched her dress. She could be twenty-nine, Kovac speculated.

"I'm glad I caught you," she said. "Sergeant Rodale said I'd find you here."

Charles Kovac smiled. He had guessed that Merle Rodale had sent her. He stopped smiling when he reflected that his vacation was taking wings without him. He wouldn't be able to refuse if the girl requested his help.

"Are you in trouble?" he asked.

She smiled. "Not unless I can't persuade you."

"I'm easily persuaded. How can I help?"

"By coming with me."

"By any chance," Kovacs said, "are you flying to Hawaii?"

"No. I'm Christiana Walters. I'm Mr. Stanley Renton's secretary."

"I see," Charles Kovac nodded thoughtfully. He had never met Stanley Renton personally, though he had talked to the man on the phone. Stanley Renton was with

the State Department, which Kovac knew, since the end of World War II, had established strict secrecy concerning its operation; supposedly to integrate foreign policy.

"You helped Mr. Renton before. I typed several of the letters on the case for the files. You will come with me?"

"There seems little choice. Where are we going?"

"To a hotel. We'll register as man and wife. There's a reservation for a Mr. and Mrs. Charles Tilden. That's us."

CHRISTIANA WALTERS, who requested that Kovac call her Chris, had arrived by taxi. Kovac drove her to the giant hotel on North Figueroa in his Volkswagen. Chris was a gay companion on the way, but refused to answer his questions.

"Honestly, I don't know what it's about," she said.

When they walked through the lobby she easily held to his arm. Kovac felt conspicuous but no one seemed to stare at them.

It was finally their turn before the busy desk clerk who ran his finger down a long list of names he had before him.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Tilden, your luggage arrived," he said. "If you'll sign the register for you and the wife, your room is ready. 603."

On the way to the elevator, when the bellhop could not over-



hear, Kovac said, "As simple as that?"

"Scandalous, isn't it?"

"It could be, if I'm recognized."

"Poof! Your hand was steady for a bachelor signing Mr. and Mrs. I'd say you had practice."

Charles Kovac grinned. "No comment."

They were ushered into the room by the bellhop who, after drawing the window curtains, left with a dollar in his hand. As Kovac replaced his wallet Chris rapped on a connecting door centered on the side wall. It was opened immediately by Merle Rodale.

"Thanks for coming, Chuck," he said, then winked at Chris. "Though he's predictable as crime."

"I can still catch my plane," Charles Kovac threatened.

"Not a chance," Rodale said, waving him to come into the ad-

joining room. "Come in here. You'll excuse us, won't you, Christiana?"

"Of course," she said and turned to the dresser mirror to fuss with her flawless hairdo.

Stanley Renton was in the next room at a desk. He got up and offered his hand as Merle Rodale introduced them.

"Nice of you to come, Professor," Renton said.

"My pleasure," Kovac said. "Though, if you had phoned, this devious method wouldn't—"

"It was necessary to establish Christiana as your wife, should you join us."

As they seated themselves Charles Kovac pulled out his pipe. He packed it as Merle Rodale told him, "I'm temporarily back in the service. You knew I was once with Intelligence?"

Charles Kovac nodded. Merle Rodale sat forward on the edge of his chair.

"Chuck, an agent of Mr. Renton's was murdered in the hotel yesterday," Rodale said. "He was a courier between Germany and here. Another man was killed in Germany; right inside espionage headquarters. Mr. Renton wants you to help on this. You have the qualification, believe me. If you haven't guessed, Mr. Renton is an Intelligence agent. He has a clearance on you, if you want to take the risk."

Kovac looked at Stanley Ren-

ton. "You feel there is a risk to learn who killed your agent?"

Renton shook his head. "No. Who killed the man is immaterial. In all probability the murderer is on his way back to Russia. We would like to know why he was killed. Professor, Operation Prاتفall, in West Berlin, is vital to us. Three quarters of what we learn about what's going on behind the Iron Curtain comes through Operation Prاتفall."

"I see," Charles Kovac answered mechanically, then shook his head. "This is out of my field. My specialty is the logic to employ in apprehending criminals."

Merle Rodale grunted amusement. "Ha! Your logic is to disregard facts. You've got extrasensory perceptual powers you're not even aware of."

"I'm inclined to agree," Renton said, lighting a cigarette. He snapped his butane lighter shut. "It was Major Blatten who was killed in Germany. We can understand his death. He undoubtedly discovered a counter espionage agent in Operation Prاتفall, who then killed him.

"But Captain Carlton is another thing. He had delivered his briefcase to the State Department last night. It wouldn't have mattered if it had been taken from him—it was in stiff code it would take them time to break—and they'd only learn their own secrets. Another thing, Professor—"

"Please call me Charles. I'm on vacation."

"Yes, Charles. Captain Carlton, our courier who was killed here, did not know how Operation Pratfall gains its information. It is, I'll confess, so unorthodox it's past believing. I am the only man in the States who knows. You'll learn when you get over there."

Kovac pulled his pipe from his mouth. "There? You want me to go there?"

"Yes! To uncover the spy there. That's what is important. Captain Carlton's death was so senseless it leaves us in a quandary. We're not sure what to think. Suspecting the worst, Captain Carlton could have been a double agent. He could have been killed for reasons we don't know, by his own side. It's not impossible. However, it is more likely he stumbled onto the identity of a spy on this side of the ocean trying to crack Pratfall's method. Can you speculate any other reason?"

Charles Kovac tapped his pipe on the ash tray. "May I ask: Does the information from Pratfall stay in Los Angeles?"

"No. Pertinent items are forward to Washington. That part is total security, foolproof."

Charles Kovac absently started repacking his pipe. He looked at Renton's alert gray eyes. "Could the deceased courier have learned how Operation Pratfall got its information?"

"I doubt it, for two reasons. A courier does not want to know any more than he has to: it further hurts his survival chances. Both sides keep their couriers ignorant. That way, there's no use to torture them if they're taken. Another thing, both Major Blatten and Colonel Van Zukor saw to it that Captain Carlton spoke to them only when he was in West Berlin. So we wind up with a blind end: Why was our courier killed?"

Kovac lit his pipe and slowly shook out the match. "You credit me with ability I don't possess. My experience is the use of deductive logic after post mortem, to apprehend a criminal. But to ferret out a spy whose motive is his allegiance to a country constitutes a difference, a vast difference. I've never encountered the breed."

"It's not so different, Chuck," Merle Rodale protested.

Kovac lifted his pipe towards Rodale. "It definitely is, Merle. Good Grief!" he exclaimed, waving his pipe. "I can't think of any reason why your courier was killed!"

He paused to find both men staring at him anxiously. "Well," he hedged. "Not unless they wanted him replaced with a courier who is a spy!"

Stanley Renton quickly jerked the cigarette away from his lips as Rodale's mouth opened in surprise. Rodale grinned as Renton looked at him. "I told you," he

said to Renton. "Chuck is blessed with ESP."

Rodale turned back to Kovac. "You're right, Chuck," he said. "Colonel Renton has two standby couriers here, in case something happened to Carlton."

"Yes," Renton said glumly. "Both of them my top trusted men. In fact they decode everything we get from Operation Pratfall." He snuffed his cigarette out in the ash tray. "Well, we'll change plans accordingly. I don't think either of my men are counter agents; they've been with me for years. Still, a dedicated spy will spend his whole life seeming to work for the other side, just for the chance to sabotage a major operation. And Pratfall's that important!"

Rodale motioned with his thumb towards the connecting door to room 607.

"And they're in there," he said to Kovac. "They know Colonel Renton called you and me in, that we were going to Germany as detectives."

"I still want you to go," Renton said, drumming his fingers thoughtfully. "Lieutenant, you'll go as the courier. And Charles, I'll send you as an Intelligence agent, as though you're assigned to work in Operation Pratfall. You speak Russian."

Kovac removed his pipe from his mouth and nodded. "Yes, though I'm hardly fluent with the language."

Renton smiled. "We know more

about you than you'd guess. You descended from English, Irish, French, Austrian, Swiss and Swedes. Your father was killed fighting for the Allies in World War I. In college your roommate was a Russian boy. You learned the language from him, though you later took two semesters in your junior year for added credits.

"We'll make you an officer over night and get you there. Only the commander, Colonel Van Zukor, will be informed why you are sent to Operation Pratfall." Renton turned to Rodale. "You'll go by military jet late tonight. Charles can take the commercial flight tomorrow under the guise of a married man. Miss Walters will fly with him."

"May I suggest," Kovac said, "that Colonel Van Zukor not be informed of my identity. Let me reveal it to him when it seems to advantage."

Renton smiled. "As you say, though you'll find yourself assigned to the work. It's anything but pleasant." He shrugged. "We have another problem, now. My agents next door are waiting to huddle with us to plan strategy. Let's confront them with our suspicions. It's impossible for both of them to be counter agents, and in any event there is no way for them to warn the spy in Operation Pratfall that you're being sent to find him."

Stanley Renton had Rodale call

the two agents from the other room. He introduced them to Charles Kovac by their code names: Agent Redbird and Agent Bluewing. "Mr. Bird and Mr. Wing, Charles."

They shook hands. Mr. Bird was fullback size with a massive jaw and serious brown eyes. He studied Kovac as Charles shook hands with Mr. Wing, who was only slightly smaller than his fellow agent. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed.

Charles Kovac surmised, from the set of Mr. Wing's eyes and his complexion, that the man had Eurasian ancestors in his blood line. Stanley Renton immediately took over the second the formality of meeting had finished.

"Charles has agreed to help us." He turned to Kovac. "They are aware you have helped the State Department before."

Renton sat on the edge of the desk as the others took chairs. He addressed his men. "We are sending him as an Intelligence officer assigned to Pratzfall. However, Lieutenant Rodale will be the courier."

Kovac saw a flash of surprise in both men's eyes. Renton was quick to explain: "You see, gentlemen, Charles has pointed out that Carlton was killed so he would be replaced." His men caught the inference.

"Good logic," Wing nodded.

"Yeah, great," Bird grimaced.

He thrust a pointing thumb at Wing. "Now I can't trust him and he can't trust me. You'll have to vindicate us both, Professor."

Charles Kovac said: "I didn't know you men were the replacement couriers."

"Forget it," Wing said, and smiled. "Bird and I hold no resentment. But Colonel Renton is right not to send either of us. Just in case! Each side places double agents—spies, in with the other side."

"The cold war is no joke," Renton said, "even though it will seem ludicrous at times. The antics employed by both sides almost borders on insanity. But make no mistake. It is war. Men are killed whose deaths never make the papers. Impossible as it is, Charles, if either Bird or Wing were enemy agents, they'd kill you if you were close to learning their identity. The same will be true in Berlin." Renton turned to Bird and Wing. "How about some pinochle while Lieutenant Rodale takes Charles home to pack?" he said. "They can slip out the back as arranged."

"What about Miss Walters?" Kovac asked, realizing that Renton meant to hold Bird and Wing in the hotel until he was on his way to Germany.

"Don't worry about her." Rodale grinned. "She is packed and ready. Christiana Walters is also an Intelligence agent. You'll have

an intimate dinner with her tonight for appearances."

MERLE RODALE guided Charles Kovac to the service elevators at the rear of the hotel. "Renton keeps the three rooms on the sixth floor. Many of his agents can't be seen at the State Department."

The elevator stopped at the balcony and Charles Kovac followed his husky blond friend across the thick carpet to a side door. Rodale was nonchalant but his eyes surveyed everybody in view as they walked down the rear steps to the parking lot.

"I used valet parking," Kovac said. "My car's in the garage under the hotel."

"Renton gave me the keys to an old Ford. It's parked against the North wall. There it is over there. The dark blue one."

They got into it and Rodale spun the automobile down Figueroa to the Sixth Street onramp to the Harbor freeway. Seconds later they were cruising down the freeway in the warm afternoon sun. The traffic was still light, not yet filled with the hordes heading home bumper to bumper.

"A professional agent is a thankless task," Merle Rodale said. "That's why Helen wanted me out of it." He referred to his wife, whom he had sent to live with a friend until he was back with the police department. "You know why we didn't take your car

or mine? Just in case someone rigged a bomb in it. They'll have to be checked when this is over."

"Hmmm," Kovac reflected. "I wished you'd be more discreet who you recommend my services to. I'd be in Hawaii with a hula shirt— Have I missed something about that rearview mirror? I mean you are going sixty-five miles an hour; and there is traffic ahead."

"We're being tailed, Chuck!" Rodale said ominously.

"Good Grief!" Kovac groaned. "I told you this isn't my game! What do you want me to do?"

Merle Rodale, taking quick turns in looking ahead to guide the car and checking his mirror, pulled out his holster gun and handed it to Kovac. He knew Kovac was deadly accurate with a revolver.

"What do you want me to do with this?" Kovac said.

"I'm staying in the fast lane. If they want to come up, they're coming up on your side!"

"Thanks a lot. What'll I do? Shoot the driver? Don't you think we ought to turn off. After all, there are a *lot* of cars following us."

"Yeah, but this one came out of the hotel garage. I raced onto the freeway. I've been watching for that car. It's a black Buick. It came hi-balling until they saw us. Now they're back there a few lengths, deciding what to do."

"Let's call the police," Kovac said drily.

Rodale took a fraction of a sec-



"They're gaining on us!" Rodale warned. "Now they know we're wise to 'em."

"Either that, or it's some idiots who think we are racing them."

"You're hard to convince," Rodale growled. "Chuck, you must shoot first. Pile in back and try to get a tire."

"They'll kill somebody else, Merle. Take an off ramp. I'll get in back. If they pull up to us, I'll shoot!"

"Don't forget—first!"

Charles Kovac rolled himself over into the back seat, rested the gun on the deck beneath the rear window, where it could be seen. Rodale braked the car, screeching the tires as he swung towards the off ramp to his right. Kovac saw the nose of the dark Buick bow down as its driver also skidded the car. Rodale had swung into the off ramp corner as fast as the Ford could make it without turning over.

The driver of the Buick saw that his own car would roll if he continued to brake while turning. He suddenly gave the Buick gas and straightened it from the precarious slide he was in.

"Back on the freeway!" Kovac yelled.

There was still time for Rodale to cut the Ford into the cloverleaf and take them back onto the freeway. He cut the wheels and the Ford lurched the other way.

"Now we're behind them," Kovac said, piling over to the front

ond to grin at him. "These guys aren't going to play fair, Chuck. Not if they are out to get us. They'll throw a hand grenade or pull along side with a machine-gun. Any suggestions?"

Kovac hefted the gun in his hand. "I've never shot anybody."

"Fine opportunity."

"Give it the gas. See how fast this thing will go. Maybe we can get a ticket?"

"Hang on." Rodale accelerated the car until the speedometer was balancing above the hundred mark. He changed lanes several times to avoid the slower drivers they flashed by.

seat with Rodale. "They definitely had a gun. I saw a machine-gun barrel. Let's get up to them."

Rodale needed no urging. He was sure the occupants of the dark Buick were responsible for killing Captain Carlton. He drove fast. They traveled several miles on the nearly open freeway and there was still no sign of the Buick.

"Must have taken the first off ramp," Rodale growled.

"They'll probably find us. Again! And soon."

"How do you figure?" Rodale asked.

"I think this car is emitting a signal. You said the Buick came from the garage. The way we went out of the hotel, there wasn't time for anyone to go down to the basement garage and get a car to follow us. They must have been in the Buick, watching my Volkswagen. Where did you park your car, Merle?"

"At the station house. I arrived at the hotel in a patrol car yesterday and stayed there."

"Then they were watching my car."

"Yes. And only someone on the in with the State Department would know what transportation cars Colonel Renton has staked out in the parking lot."

Rodale turned off the freeway and drove to the first place he could park on the street. He opened his door. "I'll check the car for a transmitter." He was

looking through the trunk when Charles Kovac called to him.

"It's in here," Kovac said as Rodale came up. "The radio doesn't work. But there is a small box under the dash attached to the radio's antenna."

"Don't touch it," Rodale warned. He raced around to his side and got in the car. Jamming the automatic into drive, he floored the gas pedal; the tires squealed protest as the Ford accelerated down the street.

"Want to play decoy?" Rodale asked, as though Kovac had a choice:

"You'll guarantee safety?" Charles Kovac pretended to hesitate.

"Natch! If they get you, I'll apologize." More seriously he said: "We got a gas station on stakeout near here. Robbed four times, the last attendant killed. I'll park you in there. You can loiter around the Ford until the Buick finds us."

Merle Rodale wheeled the Ford into the gas station drive way and cut the wheels. The Ford fishtailed and skidded to a stop barely past the middle gasoline pump. The way the Ford came into the station, the attendant didn't wait to see who was driving.

He ran around the side of the station before Rodale could get out. Two plainclothes officers with guns stepped out and covered Rodale. They relaxed when they recognized him and ran up.

Merle Rodale looked at the Ford's antenna as he whipped off his coat. The antenna was clear of the canopy; the hidden transmitter would still radiate a signal. Rodale quickly explained to the police officers, then ducked around the side of the station. The attendant had locked himself in the restroom.

Rodale jogged back, wearing his cap and jacket. One officer hid near the grease rack. The other stayed out of sight inside the station. Rodale motioned Kovac to stand under the canopy, where he could be seen.

"When I yell you roll under the Ford," he said.

"I'll mess up my suit," Kovac retorted.

"You'll get holes in it if you don't!"

Rodale pretended to be putting gasoline into the Ford. He stood there holding the hose as Kovac lingered out in the open where he could be seen, but close to the Ford he intended to dive under.

The officer inside the station whispered, "You want to take 'em alive?"

"Wish we could," Rodale said from the side of his mouth. "Can't take the chance, though. These guys are liable to come in and throw a grenade. When I yell, let 'em have it!"

Five minutes passed. Kovac smiled at the serious set to Rodale's face. Rodale warned him not to light the pipe he pulled from his

pocket. Another two minutes passed. It began to look as though the assassins had given them up. Then Rodale caught sight of a black Buick down the block coming towards the station.

Charles Kovac kept his back turned and Rodale pretended to be pumping gasoline. The Buick entered the gas station.

"Now!" Merle Rodale yelled as he dropped the hose.

Three guns opened fire on the Buick as the barrel of a rifle protruded from the Buick's window. Charles Kovac scrambled under the Ford. There were two men inside the Buick that lurched to a halt. Their surprise was short-lived.

The man with the rifle fired only once, a wild shot that shattered the glass of the gas station office. Both would-be killers died instantly.

As Charles Kovac climbed from under the Ford, Rodale checked the dead men with the officers. "Doug, get to Captain Homan on this. Have him call the chief. We've got to beat it."

Kovac was already in the Ford when Rodale ran back. Rodale disconnected the transmitter under the dash, then drove out of the station as people came running. Kovac hurriedly lit his pipe as Rodale turned a corner and joined a line of slow traffic. Rodale grinned as they glanced at each other. Both of them were panting.

"You're pretty spry for an old man," Rodale said.

Charles Kovac grunted. "You'd move, too, if someone were pot shooting at you, and if you were trusting an irresponsible detective who—"

"Says you!" Merle Rodale lit a cigarette, surprised to find that his hand wasn't quite as steady as it could be.

BY THE TIME Charles Kovac and Merle Rodale arrived at room 605 at the hotel, Stanley Renton had been informed of the attack. Agents Bird and Wing, and Chris Walters were with him. After Rodale told Renton the details, Renton nodded.

"One man was an ex-convict. The other we haven't a line on as yet. No doubt an alien, probably in the country illegally. A lot of them cross in from Mexico at Tijuana." He puffed on his cigarette and blew smoke. "What matters is, they have more agents on this than we suspected. They're wise we're using the hotel."

He turned to Bird. "We'll have to change location."

Agent Wing said, "I'm wondering if it was the professor, or Lieutenant Rodale, they were after."

"I'd say both!" Chris speculated, smiling at Kovac.

"That's my guess," Bird agreed. "If they were in the garage watching his car—"

"Or were they?" Kovac asked. "Your department might have automobiles in the garage, too."

Renton nodded solemnly. "We do. Yes, they could have been watching me. They know I have to appoint another courier. Someone on my staff is tipping them. Nobody in this room, thank God."

He looked at Merle. "Rodale, you must have been their target. Nobody can tie Professor Kovac to us, just because he shares a room with Miss Walters next door."

"Perhaps they're tailing Miss Walters," Rodale guessed.

"Not a chance." Renton shook his head. "We've never been seen together. She has a seemingly routine secretarial position in the department. Even a different floor than mine. No, they've connected me to Operation Pratfall by watching captain Carlton. Which means," he said to Bird and Wing, "they know about you too. Luckily, the men who were killed in the gas station did not have a transmitter in their car. We can chance they couldn't have warned anyone about Professor Kovac."

Renton shook his head. "It still puzzles me why they are attacking Pratfall from this end. After all," he said, looking directly at Kovac, "not one of us know how Operation Pratfall gets its information. That's what they are really after."

Charles Kovac didn't let on that Renton had previously admitted he knew how Pratfall functioned.

He lifted his pipe as though he agreed. "Like I said, espionage isn't my cup of tea. I'd think you'd have to use another courier other than Merle, now."

"No, because it is only speculation on our part. We can't be sure what they're planning. Lieutenant Rodale will take the military plane as scheduled." He nodded at Rodale. "An Army escort will pick you up shortly."

Renton leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and then waggled a finger at Kovac. "You'll have a busy night. After you have an intimate dinner with Miss Walters, champagne and all, we're going to drag you back in here and teach the protocol of an Army officer; enough to get by."

Christiana Walters laughed at Kovac's dubious face. "Anything you'd prefer besides steak?" she asked. "I've already ordered the dinner to be served in our room. Was medium all right?"

"Excellent guess." Kovac smiled back.

"Too bad we can't eat it," she said, fixing a pout to her pretty face. Her green eyes twinkled. "We can sample the champagne, though. It's bottled."

"Yes," Renton agreed. "Can't chance having you poisoned, in case you and Miss Walters are known to them. Bird and Wing are going out to check all our vehicles. They'll bring back sandwiches and coffee with them. But we'll keep up

a front here, anyway. Make it look like you ate dinner."

PROFESSOR CHARLES KOVAC, aboard the plane as Mr. Charles Tilden, was able to sleep on the polar flight from the Los Angeles International airport. He finally blinked one eye open. He was lying back in a reclining seat. He turned his head slightly towards the seat next to him by the window to glance at the girl.

Mrs. Charles Tilden was back in her seat with her eyes closed. Her profile showed a turned up nose, a full cheek, nicely shaped lips and one arched brow. Her deepish-red hair was nicely fluffed in place. She looked very innocent. Kovac sighed. She hadn't looked so innocent last night.

Kovac tried to remember last night. It was all vividly clear except for the horrendous amount of information all four of them had tried to cram into him after Merle Rodale left.

Charles Kovac decided, after further study, that Christiana Walters, if that was her name, was exceptionally beautiful. Last night she had been most enchanting, when they had dinner alone as far as the room service waiters were concerned. One of the younger waiters eyes had bugged when he saw Chris in her brief dressing gown. As a matter of fact, Kovac happily recalled, his own eyes had blinked when he saw the daring

peignoir Christiana Walters wore to make it look like a clandestine rendezvous.

It might have been a most entertaining evening if Colonel Renton and company had been summoned elsewhere.

Charles Kovac looked down the aisle of the giant plane. There wasn't a vacant seat. He looked back to Chris. There was a mysterious poignancy about a beautiful woman asleep.

"Would you care for a drink, sir?" interrupted Charles Kovac's concentration. It was the stewardess, who had seen his eyes were open.

"Please." Kovac smiled up. "Coffee."

"I'd like a cup, too, please," Chris said from his side. She worked the lever that raised her seat. "I didn't know you were awake," she said, "You missed our stop at Greenland."

"Hmmm. I meant to get off there. I thought maybe we could rent an igloo."

Christiana's eyes twinkled. "I particularly watched who got *on* there." Kovac raised his brows. "No one did. The same passengers who got off to rubber-neck, got back on," she finished.

"You could keep track of so many people?"

"Easy. The plane is full. The stewardess didn't check any new tickets." Chris sighed. "It was a relief, anyway. Flying around with

you VIP's, I never know when someone will plant a bomb."

Kovac felt for his tobacco pouch. "Mind if I ask you a personal question? Is it a common occurrence in your work to resort with strangers?"

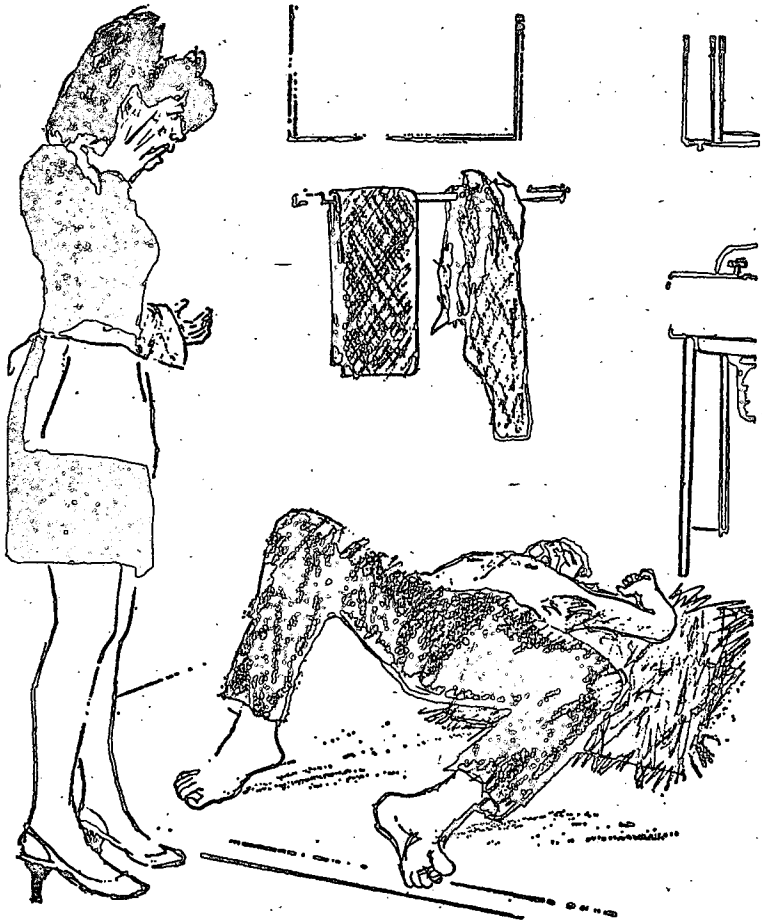
Chris leaned towards him. "I'm the official shacker-upper. Whenever a devious ploy is on, I'm the female used. The enemy, or enemies—the Russians aren't the only ones with espionage agents here—seem to understand it. They think I'm a State Department prostitute—either that, or I'm a hopeless nymphomaniac. Anyway, when I'm registered with a dignitary it's assumed they think the cloak and dagger activities have stopped for the night."

"If I live through this, I'd like to meet you socially." Kovac watched her study his face.

"I'll look forward to it, Prof . . . Charles!" She grimaced. "Leave us not forget I'm your wife." She patted his hand on the rest between them in a wifely manner. She moved her head closer to his. "Do you think it's possible to find the spy in Operation Pratifall?"

Kovac shrugged. "Frankly, I'm wondering if I can even find it, with you leaving me when we land."

"You'll be met. Lieutenant Rodale carries the information you're coming. Standard procedure. I mean, for someone to even get into Pratifall. But I don't see how you



can find who murdered Major Blatten without learning how Operation Pratfall functions.”

“I told Colonel Renton the same thing. But he still wanted me to try.”

“Oh. Well, from what I’ve heard about you, I’ll bet on you. Matter of fact, I’ll bet you learn

how Pratfall functions in spite of their precautions.”

“I have the hunch I’ll be isolated from the method end of the operation. Which is all right with me. I don’t want to learn! In fact, I’m going to take pains to make it clear to Colonel Van Zukor. Imagine coming back to the States as

the only man who knows how Operation Pratfall gets its information. I'd never get back! If I did, I'd be kidnaped and tortured the first night home. No thanks!"

Chris had listened to him with her green eyes solemn. She nodded agreement. "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." She smiled. "A whole bunch is fatal." Her smile was suddenly directed past him. The stewardess had arrived with their coffee.

Charles Kovac handed Chris her cup. "Cream? Sugar?"

"No, honey," Chris said as she beamed at him. She waited until the stewardess left. "What are you? The absent minded professor?" she scolded. She rolled her eyes, then lifted in her chair to see the waitress at the end of the airplane. "Fine agent you are. Since when does a husband have to ask what his wife uses in her coffee? Charles, I'm going to worry about you."

Charles Kovac grinned. "I haven't had training. I'm a bachelor."

She finally smiled. "I'm sorry."

"Not at all," Kovac placated. "I stand corrected." He toasted her with his coffee cup. "How could a stewardess be a spy?"

She shrugged. "It's the little things that kill you. Let me tell you what happened to one agent—" She grimaced and took a sip of coffee. "Forget it," she said. Her smile was gone. She looked suddenly tired.

Though the plane tickets were under the names, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Tilden, it had been decided that Kovac should enter Operation Pratfall as Captain Charles Kovac, an officer temporarily detached from the Internal Branch of State Department Intelligence.

There was landscape below the plane; they had been in a glide path for ten minutes, dropping down from the high altitude. Chris had her things ready as pre-arranged. As soon as the plane had taxied to a stop and the light to unfasten seat belts came on, she bounced from her seat. She threw her coat over her arm and leaned over Charles Kovac.

"I'll be at Aunt Bertha's, honey," she said, leaning down to give Kovac a peck of a kiss on his cheek. "Get your business done and hurry over."

Chris raced down the aisle to the exit. She was one of the first passengers to leave the plane. Kovac fumbled his coat on and rechecked senseless papers from his pocket. As instructed, he was the last passenger to get off the plane in West Berlin, though he had to stall because a woman ran frantically back to fetch her forgotten purse.

"Excuse me," she said, pushing past as Kovac stopped to light his pipe at the bottom stair down from the giant plane. He obligingly stood aside, congratulated the smiling stewardesses on a nice flight, and then followed the other passengers.

Kovac walked with a pretended nonchalance he didn't feel. He was supposed to be intercepted before he reached customs, but there was no one but the other passengers, ahead of him.

He trailed the passengers towards the corridor to customs that most of them had entered. He walked past the gate of the chain link fence that sealed off the landing field. The only place he could go was into the corridor to customs! He was supposed to have been met before this. Had things gone wrong? Had either Redbird or Bluewing—agents Bird and Wing, Renton called them—had they gotten word to Germany?

Maybe the traitor was Chris Walters? Or was Colonel Stanley Renton the master spy? Charles Kovac puzzled the possibilities. There didn't seem strong enough reason for anyone to want him eliminated. Not before he learned what it was about.

The frenetic whine of a siren startled most of the passengers ahead of him. Some of them rushed to the corridor windows to gawk outside. Kovac deliberately stalled and leaned against the wall. He shuffled the papers from his pocket, not approving the subterfuge. If things had gone wrong, he would be easy to spot. He took the pipe from his mouth.

Some way the precision timing he'd been promised had missed. He didn't have a passport to bluff

his way through customs. Running steps, coming from the corridor entrance, caused Kovac to turn. Guards! He sighed.

It was two American soldiers, both young and in a hurry, who were running towards him. Their eyes were on him and when they reached him they stopped, a man on each side. They both looked him up and down.

"Sorry," the more militant of the two panted. "A flat tire. We made it on the siren."

He motioned for Charles Kovac to walk towards customs. Kovac lengthened his stride to keep pace between them. They had recognized him by his purposely arranged attire, most likely his yellow striped tie. But that wasn't all. He was supposed to give them a code.

"You know my mother?" Kovac asked.

"Of course," the same soldier grinned. "How is the dear lady?" Kovac smiled back. He'd received the right answer.

They avoided an inspection, undoubtedly, Kovac assumed, with prearranged consent. They took a side door past a nodding guard and marched down another corridor leading to the landing field. An Army sedan was there with a third soldier behind the wheel. They were passed through the airport gates, where two more Army vehicles waited for them. One automobile led the way to Operation Prate-

fall's building on Kurfürstendamm Street as the armed jeep followed close behind.

They stopped at a huge multi-storied building that had the name *Brissel* over the archway entrance. It seemed to be common knowledge that the former hotel now housed American Intelligence. The soldier beside Charles Kovac confirmed the fact.

"We're in transportation assigned to Intelligence, sir. We'd appreciate it if you don't have to report we nearly missed you. We'd lose our stripes."

"No sweat," Kovac replied, hoping he sounded military.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The lobby of the *Brissel* building was packed with busy, well armed soldiers. His escort had marched him into the building as though he were a prisoner. Two white-helmeted guards took Kovac to the uniformed captain at the front desk. The alert officer took Kovac's papers and pointed at a chair.

"Over there, Captain," he said, after reading his rank.

Charles Kovac sat in the hard chair under the close surveillance of the two guards. He had the suspicion, from the serious expressions around him, that if he got out of the chair he would be shot.

"Captain Kovac!" the officer at the desk finally called to him. Kovac quickly stepped to the desk. "You're cleared. Take these pa-

pers and go through that gate over there."

Kovac walked to the heavy chain-link fence that separated the elevators from the rest of the lobby. The lieutenant in charge of the gate motioned for the guards to unlock the gate. He glanced briefly at Kovac's pass and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Everyone gets the same orders, Captain. Don't speak once you are inside the gate. The elevator is automatic. Press the third floor button. That's the *third* floor button—don't make a mistake! And don't come down again for any reason. If you do, you'll be shot, sir."

"I understand, Lieutenant," Charles Kovac said.

The elevator was open. He walked inside, poked the button marked, three, and watched the doors closed. Before they came together he saw the stairway across the lobby; it too was sealed with a chain-link fence and guards.

As the elevator cage took him up Kovac tried to recall how to recognize rank. One bar, a lieutenant; two a captain. But the oak clusters? Gold and silver? One was a major and the other a lieutenant colonel. Which? Agent Wing had drilled him on that, but he had been more interested in Wing's manner of speech, than what he said.

The elevator cage abruptly stopped. Kovac was forced to balance himself. A clanging bell

nearly deafened him. There was more than one bell, inside and outside the elevator. The doors remained closed and there was no way to open them.

As quickly as the ringing started it stopped as the doors in front of him parted. They swept rapidly back. Two soldiers, both sergeants, stood with rifles pointed at him.

"No alarm, sir," one said. "You're expected."

"That's nice to know," Kovac exhaled. He was conducted down the hall by the two guards. The stench of a disinfectant was heavy and it didn't lessen inside the office they escorted him to. A lieutenant took his papers.

"Go inside, sir," he said. "Colonel Van Zukor has been expecting you."

Charles Kovac nodded. The young lieutenant had an open collar without tie or coat. The bars on his shirt were the only indication he was an officer. Kovac opened the door to the private office.

Colonel Van Zukor was seated behind his desk. He was a raw-boned man whose unlined face didn't look his fifty years. Kovac's first impression was that the colonel was a tough, unrelenting man who demanded perfection from everyone including himself.

He too was in shirt sleeves with silver eagles pinned on his open collar. His heavy, brown hair was cut close at the temples and combed straight back from his

forehead. He held his hand out for Kovac's papers.

"You don't look like a Russian," he growled.

"A compliment?"

"An observation. Welcome to Pratfall, Captain."

"Thank you, Colonel."

"What do you know about Operation Pratfall?"

"Its top priority. I've been working on the other end for Colonel Renton."

"Decoding?"

"Security."

Colonel Van Zukor offered Kovac a cigarette. When Kovac refused he motioned for him to sit down. "You won't be in security here. We're up to our eyeballs with guards. We haven't any leaks. It's total security. But there is—" he cursed fluently—"a counter agent among us."

"I know Major Blatten was killed. Have you learned why?"

"Why? Damn it, it's obvious. He was security officer. He discovered there was a communist agent among us, and was killed. A judo chop broke his neck."

The colonel whipped his cigarette to his mouth and inhaled. "I'll tell you frankly, Captain," he said, blowing smoke, "I don't trust any man who is familiar with Russian!"

"Do you speak Russian, Colonel?" Kovac asked innocently.

Colonel Van Zukor's face darkened as he glared. "Surprisingly, I

don't. I speak six languages, but not Russian. What I'd like to do, is execute all my Russian speaking officers, start with a fresh crew. That way I'd get the communist agent."

"Sounds to me like communist philosophy."

"Right! But means to an end works, you know. The information coming out of Pratfall holds this world together. You can bet your last buck they think we've got agents sitting in on their every move. They're afraid to open new offensives—that's what they'd do, you know. Vietnam was only a starter until Pratfall pulled their reins. Hell, every agent they've got is trying to figure how we do it."

Charles Kovac nodded. "We discovered that."

"Yeah," Colonel Van Zukor agreed. He ground his cigarette out. "Well, it's total security here. We got a traitor, but, by God, he can't get out to tell how we do it. No one can."

"Except the courier."

"Except the courier," the Colonel repeated. He leaned back in his chair and eyed Kovac closely. "Lieutenant Rodale spoke well of you. He was on my staff ten years ago. He said you suspected the standby couriers."

Charles Kovac shrugged. "It seemed the only way of explaining why Captain Carlton was killed."

"How come Renton sent you here?"

"He said you were desperate for men who could read Russian."

Colonel Van Zukor rubbed his palm against the side of his strong jaw. "Yeah, I've been hounding him," he admitted. "We have damn few officers who speak Russian. You're needed here." He snapped his intercom on. "Tell Malvitch to get down here."

He clicked it off and looked at Kovac. "The lieutenant will start you off. You can have Blatten's room."

LIEUTENANT MALVITCH was a burly young man with blond hair and a round face. He had buttoned his shirt to enter the colonel's office, but didn't wear a tie. Charles Kovac shook hands with him and they left the office.

In the hall Malvitch said, "Welcome to the ghetto, Captain. Now you're in, you'll never get out. Not unless the Commies crack Pratfall. We're cheering for them."

"You're joking?"

"Then why ain't I laughing? You'll see. You go stir crazy after a time. Mostly, it's the work. The colonel tell you about the work?" Kovac shook his head. Malvitch laughed without humor. "He never does. By the way, what's your psycho level?"

"Average, I suppose."

"Tough," Malvitch lamented as they walked upstairs. He opened

the door to room 427. "This used to be Major Blatten's room. He found a way out, if you haven't heard."

"I heard." Kovac looked around. A dresser, a good sized bed, private bath, desk, chairs and lamps; actually furnished nicer than he expected. He walked to the large window. The view was the other side of the Brissel building: it was horseshoe shape.

"Major Blatten was killed right in his room. Lock your door at nights. Say! You didn't let Colonel Sourpuss get you down? He merely detests American Russians. His real hate is American Germans. It's rumored a Russian ran off with his wife and a German brought her back.

"Actually, the colonel's a shock case from World War II. His doctors are afraid of him. They won't turn him in." Malvitch paused to look around the room. "Your stuff isn't here yet. They X-ray it before it's brought up. Come on down to our working office. It's at the end of the hall."

The room they entered appeared to be a laboratory. There was a long metal table and stacked wire baskets containing countless torn and stained pieces of paper. The fumes of unmistakable pure alcohol swamped the room. Kovac nearly coughed.

A wiry, young man with dark hair was vigorously scrubbing his shirtless body with a towel. The



towel was saturated with alcohol. He waved the towel in greeting. Malvitch waved an arm at Kovac.

"Our newest recruit," Malvitch said. "Captain Kovac. Captain, meet Lieutenant Fertig."

"It's a stinking assignment," Fertig greeted Kovac.

"He doesn't know yet!" Malvitch sighed.

Fertig's eyes lighted. "We look forward to this, Captain. But, first! What about females? Women! Are they still out there, Captain? Describe with details the last time you—"

"Knock it off!" Malvitch warned. "Krylov said these labs are bugged. The colonel holds everything you say against you. You'll never get out."

Fertig strode forward. "Captain Kovac," he said seriously, "are you aware the Russians only issue toilet paper to their officers?"

Charles Kovac smiled, puzzled. "Frankly, no."

"It's true. Unbearably true. The Russian soldier has to use scrap paper from waste baskets. All the papers conservatively gathered from communist offices, from tribunals, praesidiums, command posts and headquarters. They don't waste a scrap. And thereby hangs our tale. We work the dirtiest crossword puzzles ever conceived for intelligent intelligence officers. Are you beginning to catch on?"

Kovac glanced to find Malvitch smiling, and nodding. "I must be dense," he answered. "How is it possible?"

"The East Berliners are eager for the American buck, the same as everybody. There's plenty of them over there that don't salute any flag. Enterprising boys. They wait until the communists abandon a latrine, then they dig it up. They cart it over to us."

"How do they get it across?" Charles Kovac asked.

"I don't know?" Malvitch confessed. "Though who's going to question a truck full of fertilizer? It's taken someplace and made into fertilizer. Only, we get all the paper. It arrives here sterilized—thousands of torn pieces."

"It'll drive you out of your mind, sorting them." Fertig grimaced.

Kovac shook his head. "If you're not pulling my leg, this proves an American will buy anything."

Fertig looked sadly at the bas-

kets of paper on the metal bench. He unbuttoned his shirt. "Hell, I'm going to shower. Wait for me. I'll go to chow with you."

"He has to see Dietch first," Malvitch said.

Major Karl Dietch was a man in his early forties. He had Nordic features: blond hair, blue eyes and an elongated head. He wore glasses to read with, and he had the nervous habit of taking them on and off as he talked.

As Charles Kovac sat in his office, Major Dietch briefed him on the work without resorting to euphemism in describing what the papers were stained with.

"That's what you'll do: read what they say. Most of it's routine, but sometimes we strike gold. You'll find a list of names whose correspondence we watch."

He reached to a file cabinet next to him and pulled out a drawer. It was filled with torn letters that been pieced and pasted on cardboard. "Here's two months of letters from the Ministry of the Interior to Mikalos Vostok, who happens to head Soviet Intelligence. He's in East Berlin to find the leak in their security. He was in Thailand, trying to stop them from becoming the sixth fighting ally of the United States in Viet Nam. Heads are falling on their side. They're desperate. They don't know if it's the British or us that's got to them."

Kovac nodded. The importance

that Operation Pratfall continue to function was obvious. But, his own part was to uncover the spy. Kovac lit his pipe as Major Dietch informed him bluntly that no one inside the building was permitted to correspond in any way with the outside or leave the building.

"Total security here," Dietch said. "There's only one phone above the first floor. Colonel Van Zukor's. It's only connected to the security guard downstairs."

"I understand I have Major Blatten's former room?"

"Yes. We're not hiding the fact there's a counter agent in our group. Watch yourself. We work in threes, now. Double checking everything read. You'll work with Fertig and Malvitch. Tomorrow's soon enough. Get some sleep."

Kovac lifted his pipe. "I don't wish to seem unduly curious, Major, but I was with security on the other end. What efforts have been made to find this spy?"

Major Dietch shrugged. "Everything possible. Everybody's record has been thoroughly gone over for the umpteenth time—"

"What about from the point of opportunity of murder? Who could have killed him?"

"Any of us. That is, any of the twenty-six officers assigned to this; or one of the eight enlisted men on guard up with us. There are other enlisted men and officers on the floors above us. But they're barred from this area. They operate the

mess hall, laundry, things like that."

"Our group never mixes with them?"

"Only on the roof. The recreation area. When Pratfall first started the men upstairs knew about it. But, they're isolated, too. No one gets out! Still, Major Blatten was killed early in the morning. Medical Officer Douthitt came down. Only someone from the third or fourth floor could have murdered him. No one was seen entering Blatten's room. Believe me, all of us turned detective, even the murderer. Well, I don't have to tell you how clever a counter agent is—has to be!"

Kovac nodded agreement. "Major, it's my nature to be curious. I'm going to try and sniff out the spy."

Major Dietch grunted as he put his glasses back on. "Do that. Come to me or the colonel if you stumble onto anything. Work along with the other men, but watch yourself at all times."

CHARLES KOVAC returned to room 427, formerly belonging to Major Blatten, on the pretense that he needed sleep. Major Dietch had given him the facts of Blatten's murder. The major had been killed by a judo chop to the back of his neck. It had happened between six and seven in the morning, before the major had had breakfast. Kovac searched the room thoroughly. There were no personal effects of the major to be found.

Kovac lit his pipe. The body had been found near the window that looked across to the other side of the horseshoe Brissel building. Windows in the gray stone walls was all he could see. Here and there, on the floors above, the enlisted men had hung laundry on the balcony railings. Nothing of suspect to be seen, even though Colonel Van Zukor's office window, one story below and in room 327, had the same view.

Charles Kovac backed to the upholstered chair and lowered himself thoughtfully into it. He debated which line of reasoning to use first. The murder had happened a week ago. Detection by clues was out of the question. So would be questioning twenty-six officers and eight enlisted men. No chance of finding a flaw in their stories of being in their rooms.

Undoubtedly, all of them were. Except one! The killer.

Kovac worked that morning in the laboratory with Fertig and Malvitch. They didn't accomplish much. Fertig and Malvitch laughed a good deal of the time. Fertig claimed rubber gloves were the best thing to wear when handling the papers. Malvitch insisted rubber was porous and plastic gloves were the only thing. Fertig demonstrated how easily plastic gloves tore.

Then they began throwing the papers at each other; finally ending hostilities by both of them tak-

ing a shower. By the time they came back Kovac had discovered one-third of a letter from a Soviet Tribunal.

"Gold!" Fertig shouted.

"Yeah," Malvitch agreed. "Now we search for the other pieces. If we don't have them, we pass it to the next lab."

They searched without success.

It was after lunch that Kovac walked unchallenged downstairs and directly to Colonel Van Zukor's office. The colonel saw him right away.

"What are you on to?" he asked the second Kovac closed his door.

"Major Dietch told me you knew. I suppose I should have let Colonel Renton inform you why he sent me."

"So?"

"Tell me about Major Blatten. What kind of a security officer was he?"

Colonel Van Zukor leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands in back of his head. "Inquisitive. Scrutinizing, prying and nosy. He butted in everywhere. He noticed everything. A mouse couldn't get a piece of cheese without him knowing it.

"He was the best security man I've seen. And the most repulsive man to be around I've ever known. He built a case on a bent match, or the way someone blew his nose."

"Hmm, Kovac grunted thoughtfully. "Now if there was just some-

thing unusual planned for the day he was killed?"

Van Zukor shook his head. "Only routine."

Kovac pulled out his tobacco pouch. "Was your courier here? Captain Carlton?"

"No. Carlton flew in at noon that day."

"Was he expected?"

"Yes? It's a clockwork schedule. Only thing varied is the way of travel. Sometimes military jets, sometimes commercial."

Kovac filled his pipe hastily and placed it in his mouth. "Then I must know: where do you meet your courier? Where does he stay? Who talks to him?"

Colonel Van Zukor hesitated. He withdrew a cigarette and pointed it at the wall beside him. "He comes here, stays in the room next door. No one but me talks to him. Major Blatten would meet him, in case something happened to me. Like Major Dietch met Lieutenant Rodale."

Van Zukor lit his cigarette as Kovac struck a match to his pipe. Van Zukor blew smoke. "I'm going to tell you something else, against my better judgment. There's a look in your eye you're on to something?"

"Just a remote possibility. Please go on."

"The courier doesn't arrive by the front gate nor leave that way. He comes up a service elevator in a box. Yes, that's right. He's trucked here from where he goes after he

leaves the airport. I meet the elevator and take him in here without him being seen by anyone. He sleeps over night next door. His meals are delivered to me in here. Total security, Captain Kovac, or whatever your name is. Does that throw you off the track?"

"Not at all." Kovac nodded genially. "I just need to know one thing. When is the courier, Lieutenant Rodale, due back?"

Van Zukor grimaced. "You're asking a lot. But no matter. You couldn't get the word out if you were the master spy, Mike Vostok, himself. Rodale, barring accidents, will be here in three days. Thursday morning. Now! Suppose you tell me what you're on to?"

Charles Kovac lifted his pipe. "You probably won't believe me, but I don't have the least idea what I am looking for. My hunch is based on the supposition that the spy in your midst expected a different courier, or expects a fellow counter agent to show up here as your courier. It seems the only way in to learn the secret of Operation Pratfall. Assuming, of course, the fertilizer ruse is secure."

"That end of it is total security. Fourteen straight months! But how could the courier get a message from the communist in here?" Van Zukor swore.

Kovac shrugged. "If we knew that, we'd know who the spy is." He got to his feet. "However, if there is a message, I think it's in

plain view. It would have to be with precautions you take. I'll work on it."

"Lots of luck," Van Zukor said dispassionately. He didn't believe Charles Kovac had a prayer chance. If there was a message, in plain sight, it would have been seen before this.

IT WAS AFTER dinner that Kovac begged off playing cards with the other men. He yawned, complaining he hadn't acclimated to the time change and was going to bed. He returned to his room and locked himself in, musing to himself it was a wise precaution. Already two men in Prafall knew he was on special assignment.

Kovac stood at his window, smoking his pipe. What's obvious, he puzzled as he stared across the windows of the other rooms across the way. Could it be lights in the windows? Hardly. A spy couldn't run around switching other officer's lights on. Besides, they couldn't be seen in the day time.

He stared at the wash some officer had hung to dry on the balcony railing across the way. The men kidded each other about that. There was something psychological about handling those papers. Taking showers and changing clothes was a favorite pastime.

Kovac looked at other washings hanging out to dry. Then he looked again at the one directly across from him. He smiled. The man had

washed out five socks. A lot of towels, but the odd number of five socks.

Kovac's smile drained away as he puzzled the way the man had haphazardly hung his wash. One sock, a towel, and a sock. Then a half dozen towels before two socks, a towel and a sock on the end.

Kovac looked down on the roof top of the first floor that filled in the horseshoe space of the upper stories. There wasn't a stocking in sight. He puffed on his pipe. Suddenly he jerked it from his mouth.

A sock a towel and a sock? Dot dash dot! An R. Three towels in a row, an O. And they were separated from the next three towels, another O. Two socks a towel and a sock. An F. ROOF!

Charles Kovac looked up.

The wash lines of the laundry were strung high enough above the walled off roof top where they could be seen from the stories above the first floor. And they couldn't be seen from the street.

Kovac put his pipe back in his mouth as he felt his pulse quicken. The lines were vacant of wash now. *But!* What would hang on them tomorrow? There wasn't sign of a message he could see. It had to be the wash lines from the laundry.

Kovac didn't go to breakfast the next morning. When Malvitch came knocking at his door, he called out, "I've got some hellish cramps. Would you call the doctor?"

It was a few minutes before Lieutenant Colonel Douthitt rapped on the door.

"Can you unlock your door?" he called. "I'm the medical officer."

Kovac got out of his chair. He reached the door before he hesitated. The medical officer? he puzzled. Was it safe to admit him? Had that been Major Blatten's mistake?

"Do you hear us?" boomed from the other side of the door. Charles Kovac grinned. It was the perturbed voice of Colonel Van Zukor. He unlocked the door.

It took Kovac several minutes to get rid of the medical officer. "It was just gas pains," Kovac lied as he winked at Van Zukor without the doctor seeing. "I feel fine. And something of an ass for calling for you. I was half asleep when Lieutenant Malvitch knocked."

"Okay," the doctor nodded. "Your medical record hasn't arrived yet. When it does, I'll want to check you."

The doctor opened the door. Two armed, enlisted soldiers stood ready to escort him upstairs again. Colonel Van Zukor closed the door and locked it.

"So?" he questioned.

"I didn't quite know how to get you up here. Perhaps I should have come down, but knowing what happened to Major Blatten—" Kovac walked to the window. He pointed at the roof. "What time does the laundry put the wash up?"

"Huh?"

IT WAS JUST past ten-thirty that morning the laundry was hung on the line. Charles Kovac correctly guessed the top line would be it. It was. He turned to Colonel Van Zukor.

"There it is. The message for your courier. If he *were* the spy."

Colonel Van Zukor frowned at the line. Kovac had refused to tell him what he suspected. He had



been kept waiting for two and a half hours and he was fuming.

"Damn it! What do you see?"

"A towel, four handkerchiefs and a sock. Then, a sock and two long undershirts, then—"

"Code?" Van Zukor bellowed.

"Yes. Morse Code in English. That top line of wash reads: The waste paper from USSR latrines."

"I'll be damned!" Van Zukor seethed.

"I nearly missed spotting it. I was looking for a code written in Russian. But there," Kovac said, pointed across, "is the tipoff. That man's laundry he rinsed out himself, spells, *roof*. In other words, look up. There isn't room on that railing to code out the whole mes-

sage. The courier who enters your office couldn't help but see it. Especially if he was looking for a code. He could decipher the wash on the roof from the window of his own room. However, this doesn't tell us which man is the spy."

"The man who has the room!" Van Zukor roared, whirling to leave.

"Not necessarily," Kovac snapped, stopping him. Van Zukor glared suspiciously at Charles. Kovac lifted his pipe to indicate there was more to consider. "We can't jump to conclusions with the one fact: the man's laundry—on the railing condemns him. However, we can accept that the man who hung the laundry on the roof was guilty. At least as an accomplice."

Colonel Van Zukor's hazel eyes regarded Kovac coldly. To stand and listen to theory was difficult when they could rush out and collar the man who murdered Major Blatten, the spy who had given him a week of sleepless nights. He clenched his jaw as he whipped a cigarette from his pack. He didn't attempt to put it in his mouth.

This Captain Charles Kovac was an odd-ball, but a man to listen to, he decided. That's how Rodale had tabbed him: a man who'll disregard facts and still solve a murder.

Colonel Van Zukor lit his cigarette. He reasoned the spy wasn't going anywhere; probably the same thing Charles Kovac had thought out; from the twinkle in his eyes.

"All right, Kovac," he said. "But this is a fact you can't ignore. The man who hung that wash had to be an enlisted man. We can find him quick enough. But he couldn't have killed Blatten."

Kovac thoughtfully removed the pipe from his mouth. "You mean it's improbable."

Van Zukor stormed a string of his favorite swear words. Taking a second breath he said, "I mean, impossible! Every man upstairs is barred from the third and fourth floor. No one, I repeat, no one from up there comes down here."

Kovac shook his head. "That's wrong. A man from an upper floor was in my room this morning—"

Colonel Van Zukor's mouth flew open. It snapped shut. "Colonel Douthitt? You're crazy! He couldn't have—"

"I quite agree. Highly improbable that he killed Major Blatten. But nothing's impossible, Colonel. Your medical officer could be the spy. He could have drugged Major Blatten. Then, when he was summoned the morning Major Blatten was found dead, he could have broken his neck and declared that the cause."

Colonel Van Zukor slowly pulled his cigarette from his mouth with astonishment. "Douthitt?" he whispered.

"No, I don't believe so," Kovac said, feeling for a match to relight his pipe. "Nothing concrete to clear your medical officer of suspicion,

but we must search all avenues." He lit his pipe and puffed vigorously. "Supposing," he said between puffs, "it's the laundry man on the roof.

"We know," he emphasized, "he is guilty as an accomplice. The wash was deliberately hung with the message. Supposing he is the only spy in Operation Pratfall. If we assume that, then he must have killed Major Blatten. We'll assume, also, that he feared Major Blatten would detect the obvious code hung in front of your noses." Kovac waved his pipe.

"Now, what possible ways could he get to the major's room? By disguise? Masquerading as an officer? Was he an expert at makeup? Or, did he bribe one of your enlisted guards. Maybe, in the wee hours of the morning, he doped the coffee of the guard—you do have those hot plates all around for the men to make coffee."

"That's all entirely unlikely," Van Zukor defied with a careful choice of word.

"But not impossible," Charles Kovac smiled. "Another tangent to consider, is, if he didn't come down the stairs or the elevator, he gained entrance another way. By the window. Quite a feat, but not impossible, not for a skilled agent.

"We'll have to assume their counter espionage men have been trained with athletic agility. The roof top is a recreation area accessible to all. In the darkness of the

morning, he could have let himself down on a rope."

"What rope?"

"Well, the clothes lines, for example."

Colonel Van Zukor gritted his teeth. "You obviously suspect someone, or want me to go about it your way. Which?"

Kovac grinned. "Was I that transparent? Yes, you're right. I want conclusive evidence we have the right man. If you had stormed over there and arrested whoever has that room, and he wasn't responsible for arranging the laundry on his balcony—"

Van Zukor nodded. "I apologize. If the man wasn't guilty we'd alert the spy, never learn who he is."

"Exactly. You'd only have the man who hung the laundry on the roof. Not the man who murdered Major Blatten. Operation Pratfall would remain in jeopardy, unless you got a confession. Then there's the possibility the spy on your roof doesn't know the identity of a fellow counter agent. He couldn't confess.

"That's assuming," Charles Kovac went on thoughtfully as he stared above Colonel Van Zukor's head, "the officer in with us, the spy in our group, secretly passed him the word to code the laundry on the roof."

Kovac puffed on his pipe. "In World War II many agents didn't know who was giving the orders."

"I was in World War II, professor."

Kovac grinned. "You weren't supposed to know who I am."

Van Zukor shrugged. "I raised hell about you coming here. It's no place for amateurs. Lieutenant Rodale had to assure me, or I wouldn't have let you in. Stan—Colonel Renton knows how I feel about it. Guess he's as desperate as I am."

Charles Kovac leaned against his desk. "Tell me, who were the last officers to come into Operation Prtfall?"

"Six officers were doubly screened a few months back. They all read Russian. We needed them. I okayed them because I thought we had total security here. And we took in a few more enlisted men." He nodded. "They must be in that group."

"Was Lieutenant Fertig one of them?"

"No?"

"Would you mind if we called Lieutenant Fertig to your office and I talked to him."

"Anyway you want, Professor. Only, get them!"

LIEUTENANT FERTIG said, turning pale, "You are crazy. I'm not a traitor, or a spy. Who are you to—"

"I merely asked," Charles Kovac grinned. "I didn't accuse you. However, we have reason to suspect Lieutenant Sodek."

"Ed?" Fertig winced. "Hell, you must be wrong."

Kovac took him to the window and pointed to the laundry on the railing. Charles Kovac suggested Fertig make the socks dots and the larger pieces, dashes. Fertig stared a moment then looked up at the opposite roof.

"Keerist!" he bristled. "Sodek! But who'd see it?"

"Are you good enough actor to find out?" Van Zukor asked.

"Huh? I mean I'd try, sir."

"We chose you," Kovac said drily, "because of your personality—meaning, you are liked by the men. At noon, when Lieutenant Sodek goes to his room, go there on some pretext. Get up a poker game for the night. Anything he'll believe. But, in bouncing around his room, as is your habit, whether you're conscious of it or not, touch the laundry hanging on his balcony railing. They're bound to be dry. Pull them off and toss them inside! Just say, 'These are dry,' and switch to something else. Women would be a good subject."

Fertig nodded. "Then what?"

"Leave as soon as it looks good. Guilty or not, you won't see any reaction on Lieutenant Sodek's face. Do you think so?"

Fertig shook his head. "No, sir." He looked at the serious set on Colonel Van Zukor's face, then turned back to Kovac. "That's all of my part?"

"Yes," Van Zukor barked. "Play it cool, Lieutenant. I'll see who puts it back up."

KOVAC TESTED the walkie-talkie in his hand. "One, two, three. How copy?" He was sitting in Colonel Van Zukor's office facing the window and looking at the balcony washing that spelled *roof*.

"Solid copy. Now keep your eyes open. Fertig just went in," came back on the set in Kovac's hand. It was Colonel Van Zukor who spoke. He was in the other wing of the building, watching Lieutenant Sodek's room.

Kovac lit his pipe without taking his eyes from Lieutenant Sodek's window. Several minutes passed. Then he saw Fertig come to the window laughing. Fertig quickly snatched the laundry from the railing.

"Fertig got the laundry off the railing," Kovac reported on the walkie-talkie.

"Keep watching. Let me know the second it's back up—Okay! Fertig just came out. Sodek's alone in the room. Oh, damn!" Colonel Van Zukor swore. There was a pause—then, "Lieutenant Malvitch just went into Sodek's room!"

"The laundry is going back up in the same code!" Kovac reported. "Colonel! Colonel?" There was no answer. He quickly set the walkie-talkie on the desk and hurried from the office.

By the time Kovac arrived at Lieutenant Sodek's room, both Lieutenant Sodek and Malvitch had been handcuffed. They were sitting on the bed, mouths open,

looking at Colonel Van Zukor and the guards who held guns on them.

Lieutenant Sodek frowned at Malvitch and tried to move farther away from him. Lieutenant Malvitch's round face distorted with rage.

"He's lying!" he roared.

Van Zukor grabbed Charles Kovac's arm as he entered. "Which one?" he bellowed, thinking Kovac could identify the man who had replaced the laundry.

Kovac studied both men. "I was going to say the blond man in the white shirt," he said ironically.

"They're both blond!" Van Zukor exploded, not bothering to add they both wore white shirts.

Charles Kovac curiously stepped closer to the men. "It doesn't matter. Let me see their hands. I'll tell you the man you want."

"Stand up!" Van Zukor commanded. Suddenly a puzzled frown replaced the anger on his face. "How?" he demanded of Kovac.

Malvitch jumped up voluntarily and turned around. The two soldiers helped Lieutenant Sodek to his feet. Kovac quickly inspected both men's hands and straightened. He nodded as he pulled out his pipe.

"You can see the towels on the railing are wet," he said. "They've been dampened and hung out to dry again! Lieutenant Malvitch's hands are dry. This man," he said, pointing towards Sodek with his pipe, "is your spy."

Lieutenant Sodek capitulated without protest. "Had a hunch about you," he said to Kovac. "Should have followed it."

Sodek was led away by two soldiers as another man unlocked the cuffs on Malvitch. Colonel Van Zukor had left to get the man on the roof.

COLONEL VAN ZUKOR knew he had another problem now that he had the double agents in custody. Professor Charles Kovac would soon ask to be returned home! That couldn't be done! Van Zukor debated it from all angles even though Kovac hadn't mentioned it, he knew he soon would.

When Merle Rodale, as the courier, arrived on Thursday by the service elevator, Van Zukor ushered him to the private room. He told Rodale how Charles Kovac had uncovered the spies without revealing to Rodale how Prاتفall operated. Grinning, Rodale requested to see Kovac.

"All right," Van Zukor agreed. "But if he tells you the method here, you'll stay here, too!"

When Kovac was summoned to Van Zukor's office, Rodale came out of his private sanctuary. "I knew you'd do it, Chuck," he said enthusiastically shaking his hand. "But, don't tell me," he implored, "how this outfit works!"

"A matter of luck," Kovac smiled.

Van Zukor lit a cigarette and

blew smoke as he watched the two friends. He then complained, "You should have seen the rigmarole he put me through when he *knew* who the spies were."

"It had to be conclusive, Colonel," Charles Kovac defended. He winked at Rodale. "We caught him wet-handed. So" he imitated Van Zukor as he lit his pipe, "what are the arrangements for my return?"

Van Zukor had made it clear to Rodale how he felt about Kovac's leaving. Rodale placed his tongue in his cheek and found the ceiling interesting.

Van Zukor straightened the ash tray on his desk as he cleared his throat. "None!" he said factually. "We can't jeopardize—"

"I thought as much," Charles Kovac cut him off. Rodale raised an eyebrow, thinking his friend wasn't going to object. But Kovac lit his pipe and said, "I'm certain I can uncover the double agent plaguing Colonel Renton."

"Who is it?" Van Zukor demanded.

"Someone on his staff."

"Who?" Van Zukor persisted.

"I'm not positive, yet!" Kovac snapped. "But unless he's caught, your couriers will be murdered one by one until Renton unwittingly appoints a courier they want to get in here. I've prayed Merle survived his round trip."

Merle Rodale looked at Van Zukor. An attempt had been made on his life; at a supposedly safe motel

where he'd slept before catching the flight to Germany. But the four security guards assigned to protect him had caught a man planting a bomb under his bedroom. Colonel Van Zukor grudgingly admitted the plot to Kovac.

"But still," he said, "any courier coming here won't learn how we do it."

"Suppose there is a third double agent in here?" Kovac suggested.

Van Zukor clenched his fist. "Yes, damn it! The attack over there must stop!" He shook a finger at Kovac. "But, if they get hold of you, that'll blow it!"

"The risk isn't great. They won't expect me to return if I know Operation Pratifall's method. Let's plot it that way. Don't code back that we caught the spies here."

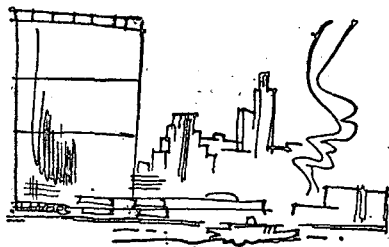
Kovac puffed on his pipe as Van Zukor considered the proposal. "Another thing," he said. "Has it occurred to you that the spy over there only learns what Colonel Renton knows?"

The insinuation startled them. "Hell, not Renton!" Van Zukor retorted.

"Impossible, Chuck." Merle Rodale agreed with Van Zukor.

Kovac blew smoke smugly. "We've discussed impossibilities before. However, see my reasoning. If Renton doesn't know *all*, he can't be sabotaged. By the way, does he know how Operation Pratifall gets its information?"

"No, he does not!" Van Zukor



snapped. I stumbled on to it. And I isolated it here."

Kovac deliberately avoided looking at Rodale. "What's the best way to get me back to California?"

"In a coffin," Van Zukor said sourly.

He stood up. He hated to let any man walk out knowing Pratifall's secret, but the criminology professor was the only man who'd helped them. Their best agents, including Renton, had drawn blanks. He grimaced. The same thing was true here, and included himself.

"You'll ship out with Rodale," he said.

When it was timed to leave, Van Zukor escorted them in private to the service elevator. Kovac saw it contained a large wooden box that did, in truth, resemble a coffin, except that its rectangular size was wider.

Rodale grinned as he got inside of it.

Kovac found it wasn't large enough for them to completely lie side by side. He was partly on top of Rodale as he stretched out.

Van Zukor perfunctionarily

nailed the lid in place and rapped on the side. "You're on your way," he called to them.

It was totally dark inside. They heard the elevator doors close and felt themselves descending. If all went well they would be inside the box only twenty minutes. Rodale complained that Kovac was heavy for such a skinny man.

Then whispered in Kovac's ear, "What about Colonel Renton not knowing about Operation Pratfall's method? He lied to us that he did."

"Glad you didn't give it away to Van Zukor. You sure there's air holes in this thing?" Rodale impatiently assured him as Kovac squirmed to more comfort. Kovac grunted, then said, "Of course, maybe it was Van Zukor who lied."

Merle Rodale groaned. "Then what are we doing in this box? If Van Zukor—we might be on our way to be buried! What do you think?"

"I think I've claustrophobia!"

"You're a big help—Quiet! We've stopped. We're inanimate material."

They felt their box lifted to a cart and rolled to a truck whose engine they could hear. There was a twelve minute bumpy ride before the truck stopped and the engine was hut off.

"Now we wait," Rodale whispered in Kovac's ear. "You'd never guess, but we're in a warehouse of a fertilizer factory. I hope! Our driver will open this thing up when

he sees our next chauffeur to the airport coming with another truck."

It wasn't long before the lid was being pried off with a crowbar. The husky German, helping them quickly recovered his surprise finding two uniformed officers in the box. He helped Charles Kovac out.

"Ya," he grinned revealing missing teeth. "No one knows. Goot, huh?"

IT WAS ON the plane that Merle Rodale guardedly demanded to know if his friend suspected Colonel Stanley Renton. "How could you?" he groaned. "He's the guy who recruited us!"

"Highly improbable," Charles Kovac mused.

"You're not making sense, Chuck. I figure that Van Zukor said Renton didn't know Pratfall's method because it's better we didn't know the fact."

"Ummm," Kovac affably nodded. "You should be a detective."

Merle Rodale turned down a corner of his mouth and lifted one eyebrow. "I might have been, if I'd had a better teacher."

Kovac grinned genially. "You're right. I'm nearly positive that's why Van Zukor denied Renton's knowing. Though, there are two other possibilities. Perhaps, assuming Renton does know, Van Zukor's not aware of it. But the second is more profound. Supposing, all these years, Stanley Renton has

been a counter espionage agent. What would be more clever than sending in somebody like me to learn Pratfall's method for him?"

Merle Rodale thought a moment. He shook his head. "That's reaching for an answer. But I'll concede it's possible."

"Total scrutiny, eh? It's also possible he had those hoods waiting to chase us from the hotel. To make it look good. Perhaps they weren't to kill us, just shoot at us."

"What about Bird and Wing?"

"Yes. I haven't forgotten them. Matter of fact, I want to set a trap for those two. Right after I quiz Colonel Renton." Kovac halfway laughed. "Renton won't be surprised. He'll catch my suspicion right off. But with Bird and Wing and the rest of his staff, I'll need your help."

"Name it! I haven't seen Helen for a week."

"What about Christiana Walters?"

Rodale grinned. "She flew back with me. Military. I sat with her. She said you have quite a line."

"The girl talks too much."

"She's an eye-ful!"

"I noticed. But, I thought married men weren't supposed to?"

"You know better than that. Helen would know there was something wrong with me if I quit looking."

"Are you able to call Helen from the State Department?"

"Yes. Renton allows me to call

once. But, we won't go to the State Department this trip. Renton said they'd have new quarters to take me to. We'll be met at the airport."

Uniformed Lieutenant Rodale and Captain Kovac were met when they got off the plane by agents Bird and Wing. There was also an armed entourage attempting to be inconspicuous among the military personnel greeting the deplaning passengers.

Neither Bird nor Wing showed surprise at seeing Kovac with Rodale. They ushered them to a private room, then waited for their bags to come from the plane. Kovac and Rodale changed to civilian clothes during the silence. Then then they were driven to a private home. Precaution was taken that they were not followed.

The house belonged to a wealthy man in the State Department, who sometimes, was the liaison between Colonel Renton and Washington. He offered his home to Renton when he learned Renton could no longer use the hotel.

The entire staff connected to the State Department Intelligence had transferred to the large two-story home. The living room, den and library had been hurriedly converted into offices. Furniture had been pushed back and files, desks and typewriters were moved in. There were twenty busy men and women in the living room when they entered.

Bird led them up to the desk

next to the den. The chair was unoccupied. He pressed an intercom button. "Courier's here. And Charles Kovac."

"Be right out," the answer came back.

Bird made a friendly wink and walked for the library to help Wing decode the papers that Merle Rodale had brought. Stanley Renton opened the door of the den. Chris Walters slipped out, lifting her hand in greeting.

Renton ushered both Kovac and Rodale into the den. He could use a shave but his gray eyes were alert as always. He closed the door.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Colonel Van Zukor didn't let me in," Kovac lied. "I was held in protective custody at some hotel until I could be returned with Merle."

Renton tapped the knuckle of his thumb on his chin. "God!" he groaned. "I expected anything but that!"

"I'd like to phone Helen," Merle Rodale requested.

"Yes! Certainly," Renton answered absently. "Ah, use the phone in the kitchen. It's safely routed."

Renton watched Rodale leave and then asked Kovac, "What really happened?"

Charles Kovac smiled. "I lied for Merle's benefit. Actually, we found who murdered Major Blatten. Colonel Van Zukor has the man. It won't be in your report. I

asked Van Zukor to withhold it so I could come back."

A pleased expression appeared on Renton's face as he studied Kovac. "Congratulations! I can't imagine how you did it, but what's more astounding is how you persuaded Van Zukor to let you out of Pratfall."

Kovac smiled genially. He enjoyed parrying with Renton. "For two reasons. First, to find the spy on your staff. And, I couldn't tolerate the isolated work in Operation Pratfall."

Renton laughed easily. "I'd guess not. Psychological thing, eh?"

"Definitely!" Kovac agreed, not offering more.

Renton motioned for Kovac to sit down. He watched as Kovac lowered himself into an upholstered chair.

"Professor Ko— excuse me, Charles!" he said, with humor twinkling in his eyes. "You're an extraordinary man. I'm amazed you'd suspect me."

Charles Kovac packed his pipe. "You have reasoned why. You're fencing, the same as I. You're waiting for Bird and Wing to decode the latest from Van Zukor before you commit yourself. I'm speculating whether you really know how Operation Pratfall functions?"

"Ah!" Renton exclaimed. He smiled. "Of course. Van Zukor told you I didn't? Well, don't blame

him. If it were known that I knew
—Give me a moment.”

He blew smoke, then nodded. “I’ll have to prove it. Though, at the same time, pick up my lead. The Russian soldier is not issued a necessary object.” It was a statement.

Kovac raised his pipe agreeably. “Van Zukor has the substitute. It’s a relief to know I’m not being duped by a master spy, Colonel Renton.”

“Umm,” Renton grunted. “See the confusion that results when Intelligence is infiltrated.” He pushed from his desk and circled to sit in his chair. “But you scored a major victory over there. It’s a clean sweep if we nail the double agent in my outfit.”

“We’ll do that!” Charles Kovac promised. “If you’ll follow my lead. I can’t reveal how! Some way they’re tuned in to you.”

Renton thumped his desk. “We can talk in here! But, I’ll do it anyway you say.”

“Good! I want to go home tonight, get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow we’ll get down to cases.”

Renton’s frown was quizzical. It evaporated under Kovac’s deliberate smile. Renton needed no explanation.

Agent Bird came to the den and closed the door. He placed the decoded report on Renton’s desk.

“Nothing in here about Kovac?” he said.

Kovac answered quickly. “I



asked Colonel Van Zukor to delete everything about me. I worked in Operation Pratifall, but it was useless to search for the spy who killed Major Blatten. I persuaded him I could do a better job over here. He let me come back.”

Bird straightened slowly. His heavy jaw moved to one side as he said to Renton, “He shouldn’t have been allowed back, not when he knows about Pratifall.”

“We need him here!” Renton replied authoritatively.

Bird filled his massive chest with air. “All right!” he exhaled. “But you’re not going to let him go home?”

“No one knows I worked in Pratifall,” Kovac innocently said. “Keep it that way and I’ll be safe.”

Bird looked at Renton and saw agreement on his face. Bird shrugged. “It’s his funeral. But if they make him talk first, it’s all over.”

"True," Renton said. "But the fact we are careless about guarding Charles is the best insurance. That is, if what he knows doesn't leak out."

"They won't hear it from me," Bird grunted. He pointed to the paper he placed on the desk. "We have two things here, sir. One should go to Washington—" He hesitated.

Kovac got to his feet. "I'll look for coffee. Go ahead, I don't wish to know more."

Charles Kovac walked out of the office and shut the door behind him. Chris Walters was at the desk by the den. She smiled up expectantly. Kovac asked, "How about coffee?" Chris nodded.

Charles Kovac waited until they were in the kitchen. There was no one else in the spacious room. She placed a cup under the coffee urn.

"Actually, over there, was a fiasco," Kovac said. "There was no chance to sleuth. All the evidence had been removed. Colonel Van Zukor tried me out on the work. I didn't fit in. I persuaded him I'd do more good here. So, here I am. I'll be working with you, tomorrow. How was your trip?"

Chris handed him the cup of coffee. "Uneventful," she said, filling herself a cup. "Over and back." She turned and sipped at her coffee, her eyes twinkling. "How's your social life?"

"Promising, I think? How about tomorrow night?"

"Great! Only, can you leave here?"

"Of course. If I wasn't just utterly dead for sleep we'd celebrate tonight."

Chris nodded sympathetically. "You better forego the coffee and get upstairs to bed."

"No. I'm going home."

Chris Walters lowered her coffee. "Home? Charles, are you crazy? Merle Rodale is kept under lock and key. There was an attempt to blow him up at a motel. If Colonel Renton would let you sneak out, the last place you want to go is home Where you could be found!"

Kovac guardedly checked the kitchen, then leaned towards her. "Actually, I won't go home. I'm not that naive. Merle's letting me use his home. Colonel Renton believes the ploy of my running unguarded will convince them I don't know anything. Only, don't intimate I told you! He'd revoke the privilege."

Chris shook her head. "Don't chance it, Charles."

Kovac imitated her pout. "I like you better when you smile. Where'll we go tomorrow night? You're not isolated here, are you?"

"No. I'm a typist. We go home nights."

AGENT WING WAS in Renton's den when Kovac entered. Wing affably shook Kovac's hand; his dark eyes also genial until Kovac

yawned and asked if he could get someone to drive him home.

"Home?" Wing stiffened. He whirled to Renton. "We can't risk it."

"Why not?" Charles Kovac asked. Wing swung back towards him.

Renton nodded, taking advantage while Wing's back was turned. "I told Captain Wing you worked in Pratfall. He and Bird had to know, in case—"

"I'm not deserting," Kovac defended from Wing's disapproving frown. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Wing grimaced. "You can't run loose, knowing what you do."

"My knowledge will be kept a secret."

"From whom?" Wing spit back. "You know damn well there's a double agent among us. Bird knows about you, I know. So does Colonel Renton. And who else? The whole staff out there saw you come in with Rodale. Don't underestimate anybody! You've been tagged. If I were the spy, you'd be my next target. Not to kill! But to pump by force!"

Wing turned to see if Renton agreed. Kovac took the opportunity to quickly motion his pipe towards Wing.

"I still need a ride, unless you've changed your mind."

Renton pretended to consider. He finally said, "Wing, you're the best man I have. But there are times when you can't question de-



isions. However, I trust you." He smiled ironically. "I should, after six years. Anyway, I want you to drive Professor Kovac home."

"All right, Colonel," Wing agreed reluctantly. "You're running it. But I'd keep him here. And I'd also keep everyone on the staff isolated here. Married or not! We should have total security the same as Colonel Van Zukor."

"It may come to that," Renton said as he nodded.

It was while Wing was driving him along the freeway that Kovac asked about his Volkswagen.

"It's still at the hotel garage,"

Wing said. "We're paying rent for the space." He gave Kovac a glance. "What did you want to do? Pick it up?"

Charles Kovac removed the pipe from his mouth. "I'm not sure. I've been thinking of what you said about the danger."

"And well you might, Professor. I don't expect to see you alive again. Colonel Renton's making the biggest mistake I've ever seen him make."

"Yes," Kovac agreed. "Odd about that. It wasn't my idea to go home."

"What?"

"No. I confessed I was sleepy. You know, Captain Wing, when I was in Germany certain doubts came up. One is the horrendous possibility that the spy in Pratfall over here is Colonel Stanley Renton."

Wing drove in silence for several seconds. He finally shook his head. "No. He's been straight on too many operations. Hell, he's uncovered counter agents! He wouldn't do that. Twice, I know of times he could have covered for the other side without any of us knowing."

"I'd say that made him a trusted agent."

"Positively! It promoted him too, Colonel. Head man on the coast. Wouldn't Russia love to have the head man for American Intelligence a counter spy of their own? Most any sacrifice would be worth it."

Wing groaned, went on. "You can think yourself into any hole with negative reasoning. If you're onery enough you can think Russia set Pratfall up to feed us false information."

"I'm going to take your advice. I'm not going home. But I'd still like to sleep. Pull off the freeway and get me a motel. I'll register and then take me over and get my car."

Wing looked in the rearview mirror as he changed to the slow lane. "Still might be dangerous," he warned.

He pulled off the freeway at the first exit.

"We weren't followed," Kovac said. "There's a motel on Exposition Boulevard. It's near my home."

It was after Kovac had rented a stucco unit at the Olympic Motel and Wing had driven him to the hotel garage for his Volkswagen that Wing said, "I'll follow you back to the motel, see if you're tailed."

"Thank you," Kovac said.

Charles Kovac drove back to the motel and parked in the canopied space beside his unit. Wing had driven down the motel's driveway. He stopped and leaned wearily on his steering wheel as Kovac came from the open garage.

"Nobody," Wing said. "But you never see the one that gets you."

"I'll keep my door locked," Kovac said soberly. He pulled the motel key from his coat pocket. "I

trust you won't mention where I am?"

Wing grimaced. "You might never know it, but you're lucky you chose me to drive you here. So long. See you tomorrow, I hope."

Charles Kovac grinned. "Watch after yourself, too."

Wing swung his car around the circle at the end and drove away. Kovac quickly entered his room



and locked the door. He picked up the phone and requested an outside line.

"Kovac, here," he said when he recognized Rodale's voice.

"Yes, Chuck. Where are you?"

"The Olympic Motel. On Exposition. Unit twenty-six."

"Get out of there!"

"Soon as it's dark. I'll leave the door open. About an hour to go."

"Watch yourself. You have the gun?"

"Yes. It was in my glove compartment. But Wing hung around. I couldn't bring it out with me."

"Better get it."

"No. He could be watching. There's an alley in back here. I'll

exit by a window. I'll leave it open with the shade up so they can get in the same way. Well, I guess the trap is cocked. I'll call you every hour."

"Don't forget I'm going to lose fingernails."

Charles Kovac hung up the phone. The bed looked inviting but he refused to use it. He found a crossword puzzle in a magazine and worked that until it was dark. Then he opened the window to the boarded-off alley and looked out. He could walk out to the street between the units and the fence, but he decided to exit by going out the rear.

Charles Kovac eased himself out the window and dropped to the ground. He picked his way to the rear fence, carefully avoiding making a noise that might frighten other tenants.

There was a choice of scaling the fence to the alley, or going over the back fence and dropping into the back lot of a gas station. He chose the gas station, watching between boards until no one was in sight. His timing was fortunate. As he walked across the station he saw a bus approaching the corner. He ran in time to catch it.

As the bus drove from the intersection he watched out the window; apparently his escape had not been seen.

Charles Kovac called Rodale every hour. Sometimes from a phone booth, sometimes from a

coffee shop. After every call he moved on by taxi or bus to another location. By four in the morning he was exhausted. He was in a diner in Long Beach. The moment Rodale recognized his incoming call he practically shouted.

"Come in! It worked. Hell, we'll come get you. Where are you?"

"In a fog! Literally," Kovac answered. "In Long Beach: Pine Avenue. I'll have to ask the address."

"Get your address. We'll radio a car to pick you up."

It was an hour and a half later that the police officers who picked Kovac up were able to find their way through the fog to Stanley Renton's temporary headquarters. They escorted Kovac up the steps. Both Merle Rodale and Stanley Renton were sitting on desks in the living room, waiting for him. Rodale jumped off his desk.

Renton pointed towards the den. "In there!" There were soldiers on guard.

Merle Rodale gleefully hooked Charles Kovac's arm and rushed him into the den. Stanley Renton closed the door behind the three of them.

"Did it ever work!" Merle Rodale chortled. "Lieutenant Merced and five officers were in there waiting. Three hoods broke in about three to kidnap you."

"Yes, your trap worked, Professor. Who have you caught?" Renton asked.

"Well, there were three traps," Charles Kovac said. "Merle's house, my home and the motel."

"Right! We had men in all three places. Therefore, Bird—" Rodale stopped as Kovac shook his head. "It couldn't be, Wing! He thought you were in the motel, or changed your mind and went—"

Renton's gray eyes squinted. "We have both Bird and Wing under guard."

"Neither one!" Charles Kovac snapped. He whirled to Kovac. "I assume it was your home that was invaded?" Rodale nodded. "I guessed as much. No, gentlemen. The spy in your group is Christiana Walters. She was the only one who thought I was going there. She is also the only one who had the opportunity to tip someone, the time Merle and I were attacked on the freeway."

Renton lost no time in having Bird and Wing released. He came back into the den. "I sent them after Christiana Walters. She'll be taken to the Federal Bureau detention center. Would you like to question her?"

Kovac shook his head. "I'd rather not."

"What's bothering you?" Merle Rodale asked. "First time I've seen you dejected when you've solved a case."

"I'm tired."

"No, there's more than that," Rodale insisted.

Charles Kovac forced a smile. "I

suppose. All victories are not made without losses."

"You liked her!" Rodale exclaimed.

"Yes, I did."

Renton cleared his throat. "Works like that sometimes. I've had friends— Damn it! I'll tell you I was fond of her, too. Tell me, when, if ever, did you suspect her?"

"Oh? From the start, I suppose. But I didn't want to believe it, because she liked me, too. It wasn't all pretense. At least, I'll always think so."

Charles Kovac stood up. "However, gentlemen, I'm about to drop. I'll solace myself by dreaming of black widow spiders."

"Do that," Rodale nodded soberly. "And Chuck. One of the hoods is talking. We've picked up her contact. That wipes out the whole nest."

"Good. May I use a bed upstairs?"

"Be my guest," Colonel Renton said, as he and Merle Rodale watched Charles Kovac tuck his pipe away as he left the office.

In the Next Issue:

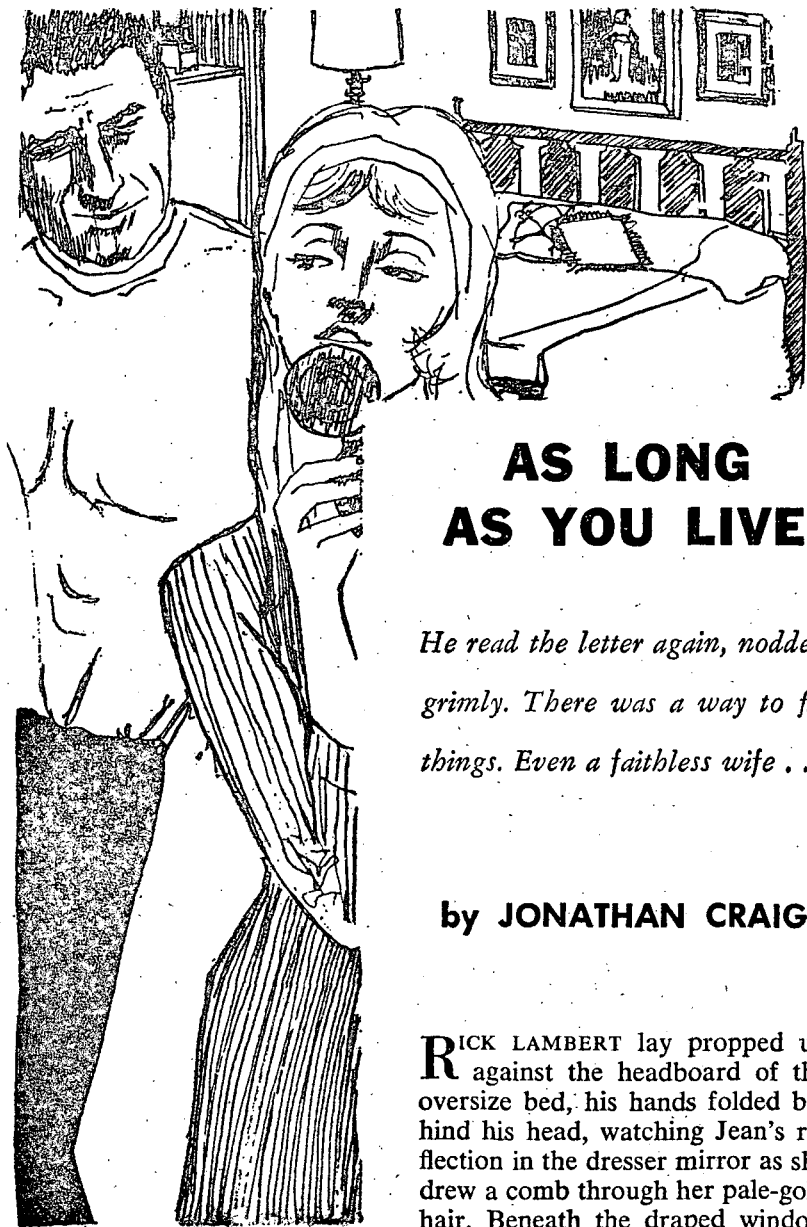
DIE IN HASTE

A Thrilling New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**



Trustingly she had gone to her honeymoon tryst, the girl who carried with her, unknowingly and innocently, a secret that marked her for swift and dreadful extermination. "Find her," the gangland chief told Mike Shayne. "Find her and bring her back to me. If you do, maybe both of you will stay alive. If you don't —" When the man they called the Boss spoke that way, Death was in the air. His death. Soon! . . . Ask your dealer to save this issue for you. It's a must for Mike Shayne's faithful fans!



AS LONG AS YOU LIVE

He read the letter again, nodded grimly. There was a way to fix things. Even a faithless wife . . .

by **JONATHAN CRAIG**

RICK LAMBERT lay propped up against the headboard of the oversize bed, his hands folded behind his head, watching Jean's reflection in the dresser mirror as she drew a comb through her pale-gold hair. Beneath the draped window

the air-conditioner hummed softly. It was only a few minutes past ten, but here, on the edge of the desert, the sun had already pushed the thermometer past ninety.

"Ten days now," Rick said thoughtfully. "I don't think we'd better stretch this out much longer, Jean."

She smiled at him in the mirror.

"Ten heavenly days," she said. "And ten even more heavenly nights." She put the comb down and reached for her lipstick. "And why not stretch it out, Rick? Are you worried about Harvey?"

"No use lousing up a beautiful situation," Rick said.

"There's nothing to worry about, I tell you," Jean said. "Harvey will let me know before he starts back. Why not make the most of it?"

Rick took a sip of the highball on the bedside table and reached for a cigarette. "He might be trickier than you think. What makes you so sure he doesn't suspect something?"

She laughed. "Harvey? Don't be ridiculous. He thinks everyone else is just as pure as he is."

"I'm not so sure," Rick said. "The guy's pretty bright. He's got an I.Q. of a hundred and sixty-four, I think you said."

"He also collected degrees the way some people collect stamps," Jean said. "But when it comes to people, he doesn't know anything at all, Rick. Especially some people. Especially you and me."

"All those papers and things he writes on radioactivity and who knows what all. And that secret job of his with the government. A brainy guy like that—"

"A brainy guy like that can be pretty dumb about some things, Rick. Half the time his mind's a thousand miles away."

"Let's hope he's still a thousand miles away."

"Closer to two thousand. He's still in Miami, Rick."

"Let's hope. How long's it take to read a will, anyhow? Even when a guy's coming into as much loot as he is, ten days is a long time."

"There's a lot to do," Jean said. "Reading the will is only the beginning. There're all kinds of people to see—lawyers and real estate people and brokers and more lawyers and on and on and on. It takes time. But the thing is, when he does come home he'll have better than two hundred thousand dollars with him."

Rick whistled softly.

"Maybe even more," Jean said. "His aunt was a very wealthy woman, Rick. And Harvey was her favorite nephew."

"So you told me," Rick Lambert said. "Two hundred grand and an I.Q. of a hundred and sixty-four and a beautiful wife and a big-cheese job out there in the desert with that super-secret government setup to boot." He paused. "Just what kind of work does he do out there, anyhow?"

Jean shrugged, leaning closer to the mirror to examine her makeup.

"Who knows?" she said. "As you say, it's all super-secret, hush-hush stuff out there. He won't tell me a thing." She stood up, slipped into a negligee like a pink nylon mist, and drew the belt tightly about her narrow waist. "And who cares? All I know is that papa does the work and mamma gets the pay."

The front door chime sounded.

"Let's hope that isn't papa now," Rick said.

"Don't be silly," Jean said as she crossed to the hall door. "That's only the postman. You know, it's funny, but this is the first place I ever saw where they actually do always ring twice."

When Jean came back she was carrying an envelope.

"From Harvey?" Rick asked as she lay down on the bed beside him.

"Yes," Jean said, smiling. "And talk about always being in a fog! He's addressed it to me where we used to live, in Albuquerque. They had to forward it."

Rick took another drag on his drink. "Well, read it. Let's hear the great news."

Jean tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter. "'Darling Jean,'" she read aloud. "Oh, if he only knew."

"Yeah," Rick said. "If he only did."

"He says the will and the legal stuff and all that is out of the way,"



Jean said. "His share—*our* share—is two hundred and forty-three thousand."

"Nice," Rick said. "Very nice. Go on."

"Now, that's odd," Jean said, frowning. "He says he can't seem to forget what happened to Charlie Morris."

"That the friend of his at work that soaked up too much radiation?"

"Yes. It was horrible, really. Such a slow, terrible way to die. There's no cure at all, you know, and—"

"Yeah, I know," Rick said. "There couldn't be anything worse. But go on, Jean."

"Well, he says that he's often thought of giving up his job before something like that happened to him. He says that, now he's come into all that money from his aunt, he'd like to go somewhere far away and just read and study flowers and birds."

"Boy," Rick said. "He's a pretty rare bird himself, if you ask me."

"He says he knows I wouldn't think much of that idea," Jean said. "Well, he's right on that point, at least. Studying flowers and birds

—for heaven's sake! Imagine."

"I can't," Rick said. "Flowers like you, okay. Any other kind—"

Jean bunched the pillow more comfortably beneath her head and shoulders and turned the page.

"He says he was getting tired of all those experiments he was making out there in the desert," she went on. "It seems making things radioactive and then trying to make them unradioactive was getting to be pretty much of a bore."

"Just like Harvey himself," Rick said. "But that's pretty wild stuff to be putting in a letter, Jean. What's the point?"

"With Harvey, there doesn't have to be any point," Jean said. "He just rambles along in his letters the same way he does when he talks."

"Well, get on with the rambling, then," Rick said. "What I want to know is, when's he coming home?"

"He'll probably get around to telling me, if he happens to remember it," Jean said. "And listen to this. He says he's been looking into extradition treaties. You know, like when you go to some foreign country in South America or somewhere and the United States wants you back but—"

"I know about extradition treaties, for God's sake," Rick said. "You think I'm simple or something? Some places, if you steal a million bucks or murder somebody and go there, you're home free. The U.S. can't do a thing about it." He paused. "But what's that got to

do with anything? What would Harvey care about extradition treaties?"

"Search me," Jean said. "That's just the way his mind works. Or doesn't work. Take your choice."

"Read on," Rick said, swirling the ice cube around in his drink.

"Rick!"

"What?"

"He's not coming back. He's taking a plane to one of those places where the United States can't bring him back and—and study flowers and birds!"

Rick Lambert stared at her. "He's going to what place? You've got to be kidding."

"He doesn't say what place, naturally. And he didn't make a mistake when he addressed this letter to where we used to live in Albuquerque. He did it intentionally, so it would take another two or three days to get here. He wanted plenty of time to get wherever he was going."

Rick Lambert wet his lips.

"I don't get it," he said. "He must've gone simple."

Suddenly Jean sat bolt upright. "Rick! Rick, he knows about us!" "A lot that matters now."

"He's known all along. He says he knows how you were always here, all those times he was at work."

"I ought've known we couldn't fool a double-dome like that," Rick said. "I did know. We were just fooling ourselves."

"And he says he knows very well where you and I have been spending all our time ever since he left—right here in this bed."

"Where else?" Rick said. "Well, okay. So he knows about us and now he's off in some other country with his two hundred and forty-three grand." He shrugged. "So you've still got some loot in the bank and some booze in the kitchen. And I'll still be around—for a while at least. You've got to be philosophical about these things, Jean."

"Are you crazy? Be philosophical about two hundred and forty-three thousand dollars?"

"We had a lot of fun, anyhow."

"But Rick, that's practically a quarter of a million!"

Rick Lambert finished his drink and put the glass down on the table.

"Go on with the letter," he said.

Jean stared at him for a long moment, then began to read again.

"He says he wouldn't be able to enjoy his birds and flowers if he let us get away with what we did to him," she said.

"And so he ran off with the loot."

"He says he did something that would make both of us think of him as long as we lived."

Rick Lambert laughed. "We'll remember him, all right."

"He says that just before he left he—" Suddenly Jean leaped from the bed and stood staring down at it, her eyes wide with horror, her body rigid and trembling.

"What's the matter with you?" Rick said. "You gone nuts?"

"He—" she began, and then choked. "Rick, he—"

"He what?" Rick demanded. "What're you trying to say?"

Her body sagged, and she stumbled, as if she were about to fall. "The—the bed springs."

"The *bed springs*? What about them?"

"He made them radioactive."

Complete in the Next Issue

A HEART CASE

A Novelet of Brooding Terror

by **BRYCE WALTON**

Readers of the bizarre, the weird, will acclaim this powerful mystery as supreme in its field. Don't miss this story of a faceless phantom and four doomed men.

Black and Blue Monday

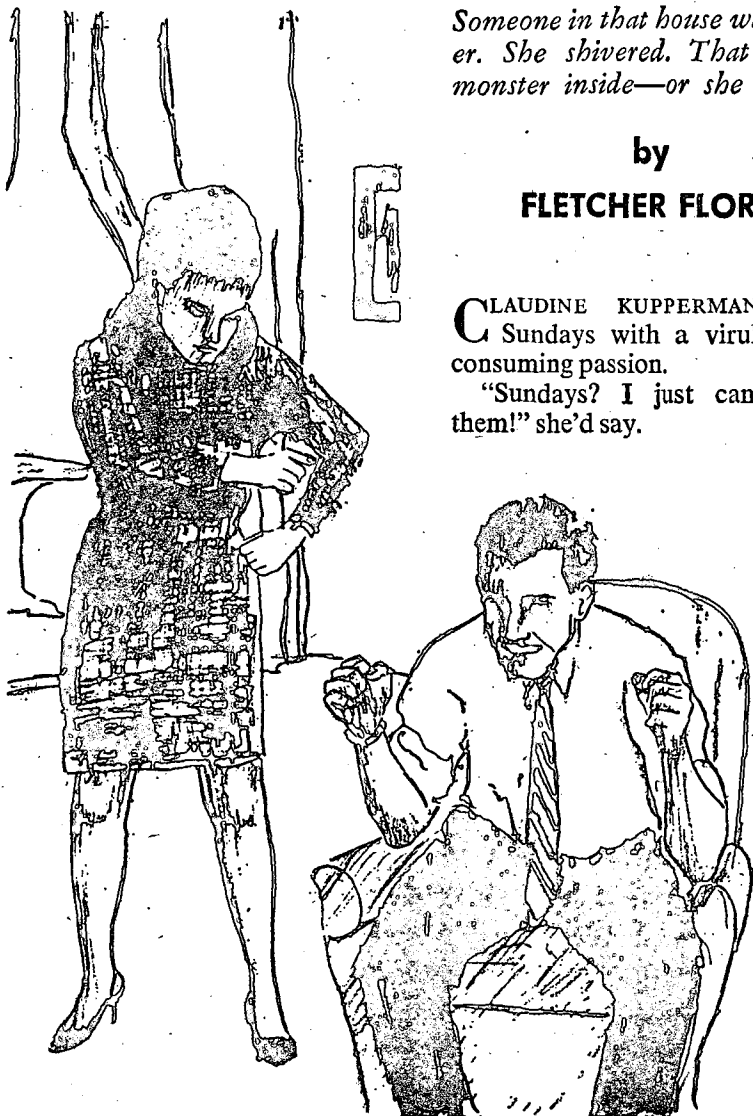
Someone in that house was a killer. She shivered. That sodden monster inside—or she herself?

by

FLETCHER FLORA

CLAUDINE KUPPERMAN hated Sundays with a virulent and consuming passion.

"Sundays? I just can't stand them!" she'd say.



There had been a time, however, when she did not. That was when she was a little girl, years ago. Sundays had been very nice when Claudine was a little girl, especially the Sundays of summer. After a breakfast of oatmeal and eggs and bacon, she had put on a pretty dress and walked five blocks to the Lincoln Avenue Methodist Church, where she attended Sunday School and was rewarded with a copy of *Classmate* and a colored picture of Jesus or Moses or Saint Paul or someone.

After Sunday School she met her mother in the vestibule, and they attended church service together, and she was allowed, toward the end of the service, to put into the walnut collection plate the small, sealed envelope which contained her mother's weekly pledge. When the service was over and they had shaken the hand of the minister at the door, they walked slowly home side by side, and her mother changed into a house dress and began immediately to prepare Sunday dinner, which was invariably chicken on one Sunday and roast beef on the next.

Meanwhile, Claudine, who had also changed, was allowed to pass the time outside if the day was warm and fair, or in the living room with the funny papers if it was not.

Claudine's father, who read the books of H. L. Mencken and applauded the periodic biological

arguments of Clarence Darrow, did not himself participate in this pleasant nonsense, but he allowed others to do so with good humored tolerance. Oh, Sundays had been nice in those days. Very nice.

No longer. Sundays nowadays were spoiled by Marvin. In the first five years of her marriage to Marvin Kupperman, Claudine had believed optimistically that she could change things, or hopefully that things would change of themselves.

"Tomorrow's Sunday, Marvin," she would say. "Let's do something nice." But they never did.

Now that she was well into the second five, she had abandoned all optimism and hope whatever.

Marvin never got up early enough on Sunday to go to church, or anywhere else, because he invariably had a hangover. And so, for that matter, not invariably but more and more frequently, did Claudine. That was because Saturday night, as Marvin put it, was Marvin's night to howl.

In the beginning Claudine had howled with Marvin because she loved him and wanted to share his life and all, but later, after togetherness had worn threadbare, she continued to howl on Saturday night simply because she had acquired the habit of howling and a taste for gin.

Besides, to be honest about it, it wasn't a bad idea to go along and keep an eye on Marvin, who wasn't any better than he ought to be.

Well, there it was. There was the pure and simple reason why Marvin didn't get up and go to church on Sunday morning, or Claudine either. Sometimes Claudine thought it wasn't a very good reason for not going, and she had trouble understanding Marvin in the matter. Claudine's father had never gone to church, true enough, but her father was an agnostic or infidel or something, and so it had been a matter of principle to stay away.

That was understandable.

Marvin, on the other hand, was the most belligerent believer imaginable. Marvin had once said, "Any stupid son of a son who doesn't believe in God and Jesus should be hung up by his thumbs until he developed a little faith."

Still, in spite of being such a believer, he wouldn't say grace at table or his prayers at night or get up Sunday morning and go to church, except now and then at Easter and just before Christmas. It wasn't principle, so what was it? Except the hangover, Claudine didn't know.

But that wasn't what made Claudine hate Sundays. She had never gone to church out of any deep conviction, and her early evidence of faith, if you could call it that, had been no more than happy submission to a pleasant habit. Now that she no longer went, she really didn't miss it. It had only been a diversion, after all, and

what she missed was simply a diversion to take its place.

It didn't even have to be a *morning* diversion. When one slept through Sunday morning, as they always did, one did not feel a conscious need, of course, to be doing something else. It would have been fine with her, and it would have saved Sunday, if only they could have done something interesting and diverting in the *afternoon*, like going to a movie or even for a walk in the park or a ride in the country.

Not Marvin, though. You couldn't drag Marvin out of the house on Sunday afternoon with a team of mules. Any Sunday afternoon was bad enough, but worst of all were all the interminable Sunday afternoons in the interminable time between late summer and early winter.

What made Claudine hate Sundays was football. Marvin was a rabid armchair fan of the pros, a boob tube terror. He'd even gone in hock for over five hundred dollars so he could see all the games on a wide screen in living color. He'd fall out of bed at eleven or twelve o'clock, depending on when the game started, which depended on where it was played, and on his way to the kitchen through the living room he'd make a detour to the TV set and turn it on so that it could be warming up while he was getting a can of cold beer out of the refrigerator, which he considered medicinal in the case of hangovers.

When his eyes had come unglued and focused, thanks to the medicinal beer, he would go back into the living room and collapse on the back of his neck in his chair, and there he would be, by God, there would be Marvin Kupperman, maniac, for maybe five or six hours on end.

One game should have been plenty for any rational man, and possibly tolerable to Claudine, but no, no such thing, not for Marvin Kupperman. There were always at least two games scheduled, sometimes three, and he liked best those Sundays when one of the games was played on the east coast and the other was played on the west coast, because then the time difference made it possible to see both games entirely, one right after the other.

Even Claudine was inclined to prefer this arrangement, in spite of the fact that it made the afternoon six years long, for if the time difference was shorter it meant that the games over-lapped, and Marvin was forever compulsively switching channels to see some of both, which added, in Claudine's opinion, confusion to tedium.

Channel-switching, moreover, was a calculated risk, and sometimes disastrous from Marvin's point of view, for someone might throw the bomb or break away for an eighty-yard scamper or do something else exciting and terribly important in the game he wasn't

watching, while nothing exceptional whatever was happening in the one he was.

Marvin was very likely to react violently on such occasions, cursing his lousy luck in a loud voice—"Damn it to hell," he'd shout. And these profane explosions were naturally disturbing to Claudine and made worse a day that was already bad enough. The grim truth had eventually to be faced. Sunday might be for others a day of rest and worship, but it had become for Claudine a day in which to contemplate the advantages of divorce, if not murder.

This Sunday, the Sunday before the black and blue Monday, was no exception. At least it was no exception in the way it started and in the way it continued from hour to hour and coast to coast, but it was, for all that, an exception in the way it ended. Marvin had watched two entire games, east coast and west, consuming in the process six cans of beer and three corned beef sandwiches, and Claudine, lying on the sofa and observing her unshaven mate in the long intervals between his trips to the kitchen to stuff his gut and the bathroom to empty his bladder, had reached in her mind the incontestable conclusion that divorce was safer but murder quicker.

"What about dinner?" Marvin said.

"That's a good question," Claudine said. "What about it?"



"I don't smell anything cooking."

"You know why? Because I'm not cooking anything, that's why."

"Well, damn it, what are we going to have?"

"I don't know what you're going to have, but I think I'll have a small filet with mushroom sauce, baked potato, green salad with oil and vinegar, garlic toast and coffee."

"That's good enough for me, too. You sure you got all that stuff in the kitchen to fix?"

"It doesn't matter whether I have or haven't, because I didn't say I was going to fix it. I said I was going to have it, which is, I believe you will concede, quite different."

"Now that's interesting. That's very interesting, indeed. And who, may I ask, is going to fix it for you? I thought Sunday was the cook's day off."

This was Marvin's feeble idea of sarcasm, of course, there being no cook or any other kind of domestic help in the Kupperman household,

not with Marvin holding the purse strings. But Claudine was imperious.

"Whoever's the cook at August Epsom's Rendezvous, that's who."

"This is Sunday. We never go out to dinner on Sunday."

"I know we never go out to dinner on Sunday. We never go to church or dinner or the movies or anyplace like that. The only place we ever go on Sundays is to the damned football games."

"And what's wrong with football games?"

"Nothing's wrong with football games when they're played on football fields, but it may come as no surprise to you to learn that I get very sick of having the Bears or Packers or Chiefs playing all over my room."

"If you don't like it, why don't you leave?"

"And just where, exactly, would you suggest that I go?"

"Go anywhere. Take a walk."

"A walk! Where in the hell do you want me to talk for four, five, six hours? Around the world, maybe?"

"Go see your mother. She's always whining because we never come see her."

"I may just do that. One of these days I may just go see my mother and stay. Did you ever think of that?"

"We're off! By God, we're off!"

"You're damn right we're off. We're off to August Epsom's Ren-

dezvous. At least, I'm off, and you can come or not, whichever you please, and it doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference to me, if you care to know, whether you do or don't."

She got up off the sofa and went into the bedroom and began to get ready to go, and even Marvin could see that she was determined. He was exhausted from rooting for the Bears and cursing the Rams, which was his prerogative as a Bears fan, and all he wanted to do was stay home and have a nice little dinner in the kitchen to supplement the beer and corned beef sandwiches.

But he decided that it wouldn't be right to let Claudine go to August Epsom's Rendezvous alone, and maybe, in her present state of mind, not even safe. So he heaved himself out of his chair with a groan and a belly rumble and went in and shaved and showered and got ready to go with her.

August Epsom's Rendezvous was a nice nice restaurant out on the highway, about a mile beyond the city limits, that served steaks and chicken and sea food, and it was pretty popular and usually crowded.

Marvin and Claudine had to wait for a table, and while they were waiting, who should arrive but Fred and Nadine Whitecastle, friends of theirs. Then, while they were waiting with Fred and Nadine, who should come along but Walter and Wilma Nettle, other

friends of theirs, also of the Whitecastles, and so they decided that they'd wait for the table for six in the corner, which was about to be vacated, and just sort of make a little party of it.

No liquor was served on Sunday, but Fred had an unopened fifth in his car, and he went out and got it and held it under his coat until they were seated, and then he set it on the floor beside his chair, where it would be readily available.

They had time for a drink around while they were waiting for their orders to be filled, and then they had another drink around after they had eaten. By that time everyone was feeling convivial, good friends all, and Fred said it would be a damn shame to break up the party just when it was going good, and why didn't they all come over to his house?

"I don't know, Fred," Marvin said. "Tomorrow's Monday and all."

"Nuts to Monday," Fred said.

"That old alarm goes off mighty early," Walter said.

"Nuts to the alarm," Fred said.

"Oh, come on, you guys," Nadine said. "You'd think you were getting *old* or something."

So they said nuts to Monday and Monday's early alarm and went over to Fred's and finished the fifth and broke out another and maybe, for all Claudine knew, still another. As for Claudine, she couldn't remember. She could re-

member everything clearly enough up to the time when Fred was telling her a story about a man with an Airedale that could recite William Ernest Henley's "Invictus," and then all at once she couldn't remember another thing, not even how the story came out.

As a matter of fact, she wasn't conscious of another thing, not leaving the party or coming home or going to bed or anything whatever, until she woke up on Monday morning.

And here she was. Here she was in her own bed with another hangover, which made two in the last twenty-four hours, which was one too many, if not two. She looked at the clock on her bedside table and saw that it was early, only seven-thirty, and she couldn't understand why she had wakened so early after such a night.

It was, she guessed, just because she was used to getting up early on week days to fix Marvin's breakfast before he had to go off to work at eight, and she had developed by a kind of conditioning process a sort of built-in alarm. Thinking of Marvin made her realize that he was gone from his side of the bed, and she wondered for a moment if Marvin hadn't got home at all last night, but then she saw, no such luck, that the bed showed the unmistakable signs of his occupancy as usual.

He had apparently risen to the summons of his own built-in alarm,

hangover notwithstanding, and was probably, out of some absurd consideration for her, at this instant in the kitchen fixing his own breakfast, if he was capable of eating any under the circumstances. But no. Not likely. Marvin's demonstrations of consideration were so rare nowadays as to be practically extinct.

She got up, her head splitting, and slipped on mules and a robe and went out through the living room to the kitchen, and there at the table, sure enough, was Marvin, looking like the wrath of God.

"Have you had breakfast?" Claudine said.

"Just coffee," Marvin said.

"I'll fix you an egg. Soft boiled."

"I don't want any. Besides, I don't have time."

"What do you mean, you don't have time? It's only just after seven-thirty. You can drive to work in ten minutes easy."

"I can't drive this morning. I'll have to walk."

"Why can't you drive?"

"It's too risky. Someone might notice the fender and put two and two together."

"What *are* you talking about? What fender? Two and two what?"

"The fender that hit the old man. It's mashed in a little."

"My God, Marvin, you're undoubtedly the most exasperating man who ever lived. What old man?"

"You know what old man. The

old man you hit when you were driving home last night."

"Are you insane? How could I have possibly driven home last night? I was completely unconscious. The very last thing I remember is Fred Whitecastle telling me some absurd story about an Aire-dale that recited poetry."

"That was early. Long before the party broke up."

"I don't remember a thing. I swear I don't."

"Well, if you were blacked out, no one would have guessed it. You were talking and drinking and playing around just like the rest of us."

"Why in God's name did you let me drive?"

"If I'd known you were blacked out, I wouldn't have. But it's your own fault, Claudine. You kept insisting and making a big issue of it."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe there was any old man at all."

"Go look at the fender," Marvin said.

The garage was attached to the house with a door into the kitchen, and Claudine opened the door and looked into the garage, and there was no mistake about it. The right front fender was mashed in. She turned, feeling sick to her stomach, and sat down at the table with Marvin.

"What are we going to do?" she said.

"I've been thinking about it," Marvin said. "The police will be

checking garages for damaged fenders, so I'll have to get it fixed somewhere by someone who won't report it. I know a guy with a garage in the city that I can trust to keep his mouth shut. I think he handles a few hot cars and stuff. I'll contact him today and take the car over tonight if he says okay."

"You mean the police don't know about it? Didn't you call them or anything?"

"What do you want? You want to get stuck with a manslaughter rap? Damn it, Claudine, we were both loaded. You can bet your sweet life I didn't call any police. Not Marvin Kupperman. Soon as I'd made sure the old man was dead, I shoved you out from under the wheel and took off like a bat out of you know where."

She stared at him, her stomach churning, and all of a sudden, like intuition or insight or something, she was struck with an unholy idea.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I was blacked out. How do I know I was driving? How do I know you weren't driving?"

"You don't. I guess we'll have to trust each other."

Marvin stood up and kissed her on the cheek, bending over, and then moved to the door, where he paused.

"It's what we get for going out like that on Sunday," he said. "After this, when we're through watching the football games, we'll just have a nice, quiet dinner at home."

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THE ALLEY was dark. A dingy alley, open at both dark ends, littered with cans and garbage, the sound of water lapping against rotted pilings whispering through it like a faint voice of the night itself. Long after nightfall the whisper of the water was the only sound in the alley.

Then, just after ten o'clock, the stray cats came alert, tensed rigid and watched the end of the alley away from the Bay. There was nothing to see, but the cats sensed

danger. Long before the danger appeared the cats would be gone.

The man who emerged from the night and paused at the shadowed entrance to the alley saw no cats. A youngish man of medium height, he frowned and peered nervously into the alley. He rubbed his fingers uneasily through his thin black hair. His other hand held a small, paper-wrapped package.

The man looked all around him. Nothing moved anywhere in the night. On the bay there was the

sound of boat motors, a sounding of boat horns. A woman screamed somewhere, and the man at the mouth of the alley jumped. He smiled weakly at himself, wiped his sweating brow.

He took a deep breath, looked around once more and stepped into the alley. As his eyes became accustomed to the dark in the alley, he began to look closely into all the dim hidden corners and crevices.

He walked slowly, silently, and took some two minutes to reach the other end of the alley.

When he reached there he stopped and frowned again. In addition to his nervousness he was now clearly uncertain. He looked at his watch, and then at the alley again. He examined a small piece of paper. He shrugged and re-entered the alley.

After he walked to the other end again, where he had started, his uncertainty changed to annoyance. "Damn!" he said aloud.

He peered all around him. "Where the hell are you? Come on. It's safe; let's get it over with."

"He spoke to no one, to the night. The night did not answer. Then there was a sound. It came from behind the man and to his right as he faced the alley.

The man turned, said, "Damn it, what kept—" He stopped in mid sentence, stared, and began to run into the alley.

He had taken no more than a

few steps when he stumbled to a sudden stop.

Shadows flitted across the mouth of the other end of the alley. Light footsteps moved toward the man. He looked wildly around. Someone appeared behind him, from where he had run. The figures moved toward him from in front. He was trapped—a man behind him, other men in front of him.

His voice was a hoarse whisper of alarm. "Snow-bird? Is that you, Snow-bird? Damn you—"

That was the last word the man ever said.

Two shots exploded in the alley. The roar of the shots echoed from the walls, reverberated out across Miami and the bay.

The man seemed to leap into the air, turn once, and fall sprawled out on the cobbled surface of the alley. He moved once, crawled, and died.

For a long three seconds nothing at all moved in the alley. The night seemed to hold its breath.

Then furtive figures materialized from the shadows and gathered around the dead man like grotesque shapes from the bowels of the earth itself.

There were three of them. One was a tall man stooped into the shape of a question mark. His chest was narrow and caved-in, his neck was thrust out like the neck of a chicken. His eyes were white, dilated, with tiny pin-point pupils. He could not stand still.

"Get it, Bird! Get it!"

The second man was little more than a midget, as wide as he was tall. He wore a T-shirt, and his muscles bulged. His face was battered, and his eyes never stopped blinking. He did a small dance, flexing his powerful shoulder muscles.

"Shut up, Crow. You don't go tellin' the Bird what he do."

The question-mark man, Crow, flinched. He whined, "I ain't tellin' the Bird. On'y the fuzz gonna be on us."

The third man had said nothing. He was looking down at the dead man. He was a dark man; dark, and heavily tanned. In contrast to his companions he barely moved. Not tall, and not short, he was muscled and well-dressed. He wore dark glasses. His hair was completely white, although his face was not old. When he moved at last it was with the economy and smooth grace of a panther.

This man, the leader, bent and picked up the package the dead man had been carrying.

"Can I, Bird?" the question-mark man, Crow, whined.

The leader said nothing, but turned and began to walk from the alley. He seemed to hardly move, yet his pace was fast. The other two fell in behind him, the muscular midget giggling half-insanely at the twitching hands and bobbing head of his companion.

Seconds later they were gone.

The alley was silent again. Only the dead man lay face down in a spreading pool of blood.

Some ten minutes later the cats began to appear. They warily circled the dead man.

Twenty minutes later a figure strolled past the alley and looked in. The figure stopped, peered, and then stepped into the alley. It was a policeman. He stood and walked fast away.

II

MICHAEL SHAYNE had been in court all morning. His testimony had helped free one of Miami's worst hoodlums. He did not feel good about it; he did not like to see a man like the hoodlum on the streets of the city. But the man had been innocent this time, and Shayne had helped prove it.

When he walked into his office he was feeling depressed. Lucy Hamilton watched him. The brown-eyed secretary knew every mood of her boss.

"Bad, Michael?"

"The truth is never bad, angel, but sometimes it's depressing."

"He was acquitted?"

"He was innocent. This time he had an alibi, and I had to prove it for him."

"He'll make a mistake, Michael."

"I know, angel, but I don't appreciate freeing a hood like him. His mistake, when it comes, will

probably cost someone else his life."

"Can't they do anything?" Lucy asked.

"Gentry never stops trying, angel. But even the police can only do so much."

"They'll get him, Michael. Chief Gentry will."

Shayne suddenly smiled. "Right. Look on the good side, eh? We still have justice even for a bum like him."

Lucy smiled in return. The pert secretary also knew every way to get Shayne out of a mood. Shayne started for his private office, and stopped. He turned back.

"What is it, angel? You've been handling me again. You've got something on your mind."

"Tim Rourke called," Lucy said. "It sounded urgent."

Shayne nodded. "Get him for me then."

The big redhead walked on into his private office. He flipped his panama onto the hat rack and strode to his desk. He sat down, and the telephone buzzed at the same instant. Shayne picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Tim. A problem?"

"A big one, Mike. Can you come over here?"

"I just got in," Shayne said. "Can't you—"

Rourke's voice was low. "I'd rather not talk on the phone, Mike. This is serious, and I'd like to keep it quiet."

"Okay, Tim. I'll be right over. I'll grab a sandwich."

He hung up and thoughtfully rubbed at his gaunt jaw. Rourke had sounded very serious. But the redhead knew better than to speculate without evidence, and he stood up again, retrieved his panama, and left the private office.

"I'm going over to *The News*, angel."

"You haven't had lunch," Lucy said severely.

"I'll grab a sandwich."

"That's not enough for a big man," Lucy Hamilton said. "At least make it two, and have some salad."

"Three and a head of lettuce," Shayne said, grinned.

He left the office and rode down in the elevator. He picked up a roast-beef sandwich on his way to his car, and then drove to the office of *The Miami Daily News*.

Rourke was waiting for him. Shayne ate his sandwich while Rourke swiveled in his chair.

"You know about our crusade against narcotics, Mike?" Rourke said. "We've got six staff men on it, digging up everything they can against the peddlers, wholesalers, jobbers, as high as we can get."

Shayne nodded. "I heard about it. It's a good idea. I hope you can get up beyond just the peddlers, especially where they're pushing to kids."

"That's our major goal. The whole paper's behind it, no ex-

pense spared," Rourke said. "We've got a lot of small-timers in trouble, but so far no real break. Now maybe we have one."

Shayne finished his sandwich. "What?"

"Last night a James Craig was found shot in an alley near the bay. The area is one where we know narcotics business is handled. We've had tips on meets in that alley but they never panned out."

"Now they have?"

"Not exactly, Mike, but I think that Craig was involved in some sort of narcotics deal. And on a high level, very high."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well," Rourke leaned forward eagerly. "He was dead when the police found him. But the patrolman who discovered the body is pretty sure he saw a couple of known peddlers hanging around just a few minutes before."

"You said it was a known area," Shayne said. "Is this Craig known to be in the trade?"

Rourke shook his head. "No, Mike. That's just the point. When the patrolman reported, Gentry went to work looking for a connection. He didn't find any. Craig had no record of any kind. On the surface Craig was just an ordinary citizen. Had a small trucking business. His wife knows nothing about anything else. Gentry hasn't turned up a ghost of a lead. But the police lab found traces of heroin in his coat pocket!"



Shayne rubbed his chin. "You think he's some kind of hidden power?"

"I think he's at least a link to the top. He had heroin dust, and he wasn't an addict. No trace of using the stuff. He was found dead in that alley, shot, and his wife has no explanation. Not only can't she explain why he was shot, but she also claims she knows no reason for her husband to be in that alley at all."

Rourke took a breath. "Add it all up, Mike, and I think we've got a real undercover agent for the narcotics ring."

"And you think he was killed because of that?"

"Why else would a simple citizen be killed in that alley with heroin-traces in his pocket? Someone shot him, Mike, and on the record, James Craig had no enemies and no reason to be in that alley."

"Who do you think killed him?"
Shayne said.

"That's what I want you to find out."

"Me?"

Rourke nodded. "I've got the backing of the boss. We want to hire you to find out who killed James Craig and why."

"And you want the names of any narcotics people I come up with?"

"That's it. But primarily, we want you to prove that Craig was a narcotics big-wheel, and find out who his connections were."

"Okay, Tim. I'll take the job. I'll enjoy it. Especially if it turns out that James Craig was involved in a narcotics ring."

"And the narcotics boys killed him," Rourke said. "That's the real key we want, a murder charge to hit them with. Find them for us, Mike."

"If they killed him, I'll find them," Shayne said evenly.

"If? Listen, Mike, we—" Rourke started to say, and stopped. The elongated reporter looked at Shayne.

"I'll try to find who killed Craig, Tim. No matter who it is," Shayne said.

Rourke colored. "Of course, Mike, sorry. It's just that this narcotics stuff gets to you. If you'd seen what I've—"

"I've seen," Shayne said grimly. "I hope some big drug peddler killed Craig, too, and I hope I can

nail him. But I do a job, and I don't start out with any set notion of who is guilty."

"I'm sorry, Mike."

"It's okay, Tim. I know how you feel. I had to help free a killer today. Now give me all you have on this Craig."

Rourke gave Mike Shayne the home and business address of James Craig. "His wife's name is Helen."

Shayne stood up. "Okay, Tim. I'm hired. You know where to have the paper send the check. Who's handling the case at Headquarters?"

"Gentry himself, Mike. They've got a crusade on against the junkmen, too."

"I'll be in touch when I have something."

Shayne left the lean reporter staring grimly into space. He knew that Rourke was seeing a chance, a big break to nail some of the never-nailed rulers of the world-wide narcotics empire. The men who traded and grew fat on worse than death. The white-death that turned men, and now children, into living dead.

III

CHIEF WILL GENTRY leaned back in his chair in his impressive office and chewed on the stump of his black cigar. The Chief of Miami Police was a gruff man who said what he thought.

"I hope Tim is right," Gentry said, "but so far I've got nothing more than Tim's hope."

"Fill me in," Shayne said. "Or maybe someone else has the details?"

"I'm handling this myself, Mike. If it pans out as Tim hopes, I want to be there when we end it," Gentry said. The Chief knitted his heavy brows. "So far it doesn't read good. A patrolman found James Craig in the alley. He'd been shot twice with a forty-five caliber automatic—regulation Army issue of World War II, according to ballistics."

"Then he didn't walk far," Shayne said.

"After he was shot? He didn't walk an inch, not with two forty-five slugs in him. He flew about five feet in the air from the slugs, that was it. No, he was shot in the alley. We figure by someone maybe twenty feet away.

"He was thirty-two years old, lived in Manor Oaks, a medium-priced development on the north side, owned a small intra-state trucking company, and had a wife, Helen, aged twenty-eight. They'd been married five years, no children. The wife can't give us a reason for Craig to have been in that alley, and neither can anyone at his company."

"Trucking?" Shayne asked.

Gentry nodded. "I spotted that first thing, Mike. So far we can't turn any use of his trucks in drug

shipping. He only operated inside Florida. He hauled almost anything, rented the trucks to the citrus people in the season. I've got the lab going over the trucks with a vacuum. But so far they look clean."

Shayne rubbed his chin. "What else?"

"Practically nothing. Craig had no record; he's lived here in Miami all his life. He comes from a regular middle-class family, no slum connections we've found. He's never been in any trouble; we're checking his finances now.

"The patrolman who found him reported seeing two known pushers about two minutes earlier. They're named Crow and Jimmy D. They won't be hard to find, Jimmy D's a midget. We're looking for them. The patrolman saw no one else, and we thought we had nothing until the lab turned up traces of heroin in Craig's pocket. Craig himself wasn't a user, according to the M.E."

"When did it happen?"

"About ten-fifteen, near as we can figure, and that's mostly on the patrolman. Craig hadn't been dead more than a few minutes when he found him."

"No gun?"

Gentry shook his head. "No, he wasn't armed, and no hint he ever carried one. No reason he should, Mike. If he was a hidden higher-up in the narcotics set-up, he didn't need a gun. It looks to me like he

went to that alley to meet friends. He didn't expect to need a gun."

"Some friends," Shayne said.

"In narcotics, Mike, there are no friends. It looks like someone wanted Craig out of the picture. But maybe they made a mistake this time—Craig was clean and unsuspected. This could blow something sky high."

"Any ideas who might have done it?"

"No, but maybe I will have when we pick up Crow or Jimmy D."

"Anything I should know about the body? Any special marks, scars?"

"No, but you can take a look."

Shayne stood up. "You've seen everything I could. I'll keep in touch, Will."

"Do that," the Chief said. "I've got a personal interest in this one. If I never did anything but break up the drug traffic here, I'd retire happy. You know we're a narcotics shipping center, Mike?"

"I know. That's what made me wonder about Craig's trucks. He didn't own boats as well, did he?"

"Not that we know."

Shayne went out into the afternoon sun and considered whether to start with the wife, Helen Craig, or the office. He finally decided against both. He wanted to have a look at the alley where Craig had died.

He found the alley in a section of factories and slums. He parked

and walked to the entrance away from the Bay. He walked into the alley and stood in the center and looked both ways.

Even in the afternoon sunlight the alley was shadowed by buildings on either side. There was activity now, but he guessed that at night all was darkness and silence. The closest slum apartment was at least a half a block away. He could see no plausible reason for a legitimate man to be in this alley at night.

He began to search the ground of cobblestones. He did not know what he was looking for, but he looked for anything. Half way through the alley he had found nothing and straightened up to rest for a moment.

He became aware of someone watching him. He looked around, casually and slow as if still looking at the ground of the alley. From under his thick brows he glanced around. A tall, skinny, man bent like a question mark was watching him from across the road at the Bay end of the alley. The man seemed very interested in him.

The man seemed unable to stand still, jerking from foot to foot. Then the question-mark man realized that Shayne was looking at him. The man turned and scuttled away as if shot at. Shayne watched him go. There was no use trying to stop the man now, not in this area where the man was probably at home and Mike Shayne wasn't.

Shayne went on with his inspection of the alley. He found nothing all the way to the bay end, and he saw no one else watching him, although he had a feeling that eyes were on him from somewhere. He retraced his steps and made one more search of the ground. He found the object not far from the center of the alley.

He bent and picked it up. It was a tiny pearl. Shayne held the small jewel and examined it closely. It was a strange thing to find in the alley. Traces of cement showed that it had once been part of some larger object. It was not pierced. Small ridges in it, on the sides with the cement in between, suggested that it had been held in place by some kind of small prongs as well as the cement. It came from some piece of jewelry.

Shayne put it into his pocket, in a small envelope he always carried for the purpose. It could have some bearing on Craig's murder, or it could be nothing at all. Still, it was odd to find a pearl in an alley.

He went to the ends of the alley and saw that the nearest street lamps were some distance away. The mouths of the alley would have been dark. On both streets there was plenty of cover—doorways, cellar entrances, narrow spaces between buildings. It would have been an easy matter to creep up on the alley.

In the dark James Craig could have been killed before he ever

knew anyone was after him. Or he could have run from somewhere else and been caught in the alley. It was a logical escape route from the one street to the other.

Shayne walked from the alley across the street to the edge of the Bay. There were piers jutting out. It would have been easy for a boat to slip into one of the dilapidated piers, tie up, and deliver its load of heroin.

He was still thinking about this when he looked up again and saw the man shaped like a question mark looking toward him from out at the end of a pier. The tall, skinny man was no longer alone. A creature who looked like some grotesque shape from a nightmare stood with him.

The second man out on the pier was tiny, yet broad, like a small ape, only that his arms were short and he was obviously a dwarf. Both men stood motionless and watching. Except that the tall man still did his twitching dance in place. Shayne stared out at them, but they made no attempt to move toward him.

There was nothing else he could do here, and he walked back across the street, into the alley, and through to his car. In his car he lit a cigarette and sat back. He wanted to think, and he wanted to see if the two men who had been watching him would appear again.

What he thought about was what reasons Craig could have had to be

in the alley at 10:15 at night. There was no business in the area at that hour—no legitimate business. It was essentially an empty area, and the few apartments were all slums. The police would check to see if Craig could have been visiting someone.

Shayne did not think they would find anyone. The heroin in Craig's pocket was looming larger and larger. An alley was a place for a sale, a transfer, a delivery. Craig was dead, and no heroin had been found beyond the dust traces in his pocket. Either a delivery had been made, if that was what Craig had come to do, or there had been a hijack.

Shayne finished his cigarette, and the two men did not appear. Maybe they had not been watching him after all, or maybe they were just two locals who watched any stranger in their small, shabby world. He started the car and drove off. He headed for the home address of James Craig.

IV

MANOR OAKS was a normal middle-class tract development set among the few surviving orange trees of what had once been an orange-growing section. The city was growing like a weed, and the fruit had to give way to the fruit of humanity.

Shayne parked in front of the small ranch-type house that was ex-

actly like the one on its right, and differed from the one on its left by one small room. It was drenched in flowers, and the garden and lawn were well tended. It looked exactly like any tract house in its price range, and yet it wasn't.

An air of desolation hung over it like a house in some town on the front lines of a war. The shades were drawn. Nothing seemed to move, and there was a sense of abandonment, as if the tenants had left suddenly and would never return.

Yet, as he walked up the gravel walk, Mike Shayne sensed that the house was not empty. He was being watched. A faint movement at the corner of a shade showed where the eyes were hidden. A rake and a watering can lay in the middle of the lawn as if dropped in an instant and forgotten.

Shayne reached the front door and pressed the bell. There was no sound inside the house. He pressed the bell again, and heard it ring somewhere in the back of the house. Then slow footfalls approached. The door opened a crack.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Craig?"

The eyes peered at him through the narrow opening. "What do you want?"

"I'm working with the police, Mrs. Craig. I'm sorry, but I have to talk to you."

"I've told the police all I know,"

the unseen face behind the eyes that peered out said. "I don't know why James was killed. I don't know!"

The voice rose hysterically behind the door. It carried in the afternoon sun, and Shayne looked around and saw faces at the windows of other houses. No one came out, but they watched, ghouls waiting for excitement in their sullen lives.

"Maybe I can help you find out," Shayne said. "And maybe you better let me in unless you want the neighbors in on the whole act."

"What do I care about the damned neighbors?" the voice said.

There was the sound of a chain being removed, and the door opened halfway. Shayne slipped inside. The door closed behind him.

He was in a dim and tiny entrance hall. The whole house was darkened by the drawn shades. He turned to look at the woman behind him. She leaned with her back against the door as if she needed the support to stand.

She was small and round and pretty. Her curves were all in the proper places, and there were enough of them. She had the kind of soft figure a man can't keep his hands off. The breasts and hips were well shaped. She did not look like she had slept recently.

"Can we sit down to talk?" Shayne said.

"Why not?" she said.

There was an edge of numbness



Tim Rourke

to her voice, an indifference that seemed to come from despair. As if she had been thinking all night about why James Craig had been shot and had not come up with an answer.

In the small, neat living room Helen Craig waved Mike Shayne to a seat on the cheap modernistic couch. The widow herself sat on a straight chair like a ventriloquist's dummy waiting for its master.

"What can you tell me about

your husband, Mrs. Craig?" Shayne began quietly.

"What do you want me to tell you? That he was a master criminal?"

"Was he?"

"That's what you police seem to think. Who am I to disagree? I only lived with the man for five years."

That, the thought of five years with James Craig, seemed to make the woman see something on the far wall of the hot and shaded living room. "Five years," she said. "That's not very long, is it? It seems like forever. You get to think it's forever. Five years. I'm only twenty-eight."

She looked at Shayne. "He was a good man, you know? He didn't drink much, he never fooled around. He worked hard, all the time. Six days a week, sometimes seven, and a lot of nights. He'd come home, real late, and I'd pretend I was asleep and I'd watch him."

She smiled at that thought, then brushed something from her eyes. "He'd sit on a chair, too tired to undress. He'd stare at the wall, and then he'd sigh, and start to undress. He'd raise his foot to take off a shoe like the foot weighed a thousand pounds."

Her full, ripe lips curled. "And you cops think he was some kind of master mind! Look at this house. Does it look like the house of a master mind?"

"If he was what we think, Mrs.

Craig, the money wouldn't be in the open."

"You think he had a fortune hidden? Even from me? What the hell would a man do that for? What good would he get out of it? I mean, what you've got in mind is dangerous. Why do it if he's getting nothing out of it he can spend?"

"All hidden criminals figure they'll make it now, spend it later, Mrs. Craig. They tell themselves they'll get their pile and pull out and live happily ever after in some other world. Only it doesn't work. They get too greedy, or they get caught, or someone doesn't want to let them pull out."

Helen Craig paled. "That's what you think happened to James, isn't it? You think he tried to quit and they killed him."

"It could be, Mrs. Craig."

"Not for James. How could he hide the money, and what he was doing from me, all these years?"

"It's been done," Shayne said drily. "I knew a woman once who lived with a man twenty-two years without ever knowing that he was a paid assassin."

The woman said nothing. A silence gripped the room. Mike Shayne was wondering what the woman was really thinking. Helen Craig seemed to be seeing the wife of the paid assassin, living for twenty-two years with a killer and not knowing it.

Shayne broke the silence. "You said he worked six days a week,

sometimes seven, and a lot of nights. Are you sure he was working at the trucking company?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Sometimes I called him there, at night."

"Then you weren't so sure? You were checking."

She smiled a wan smile. "Every wife suspects another woman at some time when her man works late a lot."

"And he was always there?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "He couldn't always come to the telephone. I mean, sometimes Barney or Joe or one of the girls would take the call to tell me that James was too busy, or under a truck, or out on a call. You know? I mean, he runs a personal business. He's not always in the office."

"So he wasn't always there. How much wasn't he there? About what percentage?"

"I don't know. I didn't call too often," Helen Craig said, and looked at Mike Shayne. "I mean, his business took him out a lot. That's the kind of business it is. There was always some kind of trouble he had to go and take care of."

"So he was often not in his office when he was supposed to be?"

She looked at the floor. "I guess so, yes."

"All right," Shayne said. "Who are Barney and Joe?"

"Barney Rogers and Joe Donato," she said. "They're in the office. Joe runs the shop section, re-

pairs and all. Barney is the salesman. I mean he was. I guess Barney takes over now."

"You mean he gets the business?"

"No, I get that. But Barney is a sort of junior partner; he has ten percent and he knows the business best. I suppose I'll keep him on. I can't run it."

Shayne took a breath. "You mentioned other women. Were there any?"

"No!" Helen Craig snapped, stopped, looked at Mike Shayne from those dark, weary eyes. "I'm sorry. No, there were no women, I'm sure. Miss Sanchez was just a good secretary."

"Miss Sanchez?"

"Dolores Sanchez, my husband's secretary. I know she had her dirty eyes on James, but he never gave a thought to her."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure," the widow said.

But she wasn't sure. It was there in her voice.

"Anyone else I should know about?" Shayne asked.

The widow hesitated. "Well, he did have an argument a few months ago with Adam Estro, another trucker. Estro runs a big outfit and he accused James of cutting into his clients. James said there was nothing to it, but—"

"You told the police?"

"Yes, but I know Adam Estro. He's a hard man but he never hurt anyone. The business my husband

was supposed to have taken was chicken-feed to Estro."

If she had told Gentry and his men, Estro was probably in the clear, but it would be worth checking into. Estro was another trucker, and heroin was still the big issue in this murder.

"No one else?"

"No one. James was a very busy man, and the time he spent away from work he spent with me."

"I'm sure he did," Shayne said.

"What does that mean?" Helen Craig snapped.

"It means that your husband was a hell of a busy man with very little to show for it. He was, on the surface, an ordinary man, nothing special, except that he worked harder and longer than most men and apparently spent little of it on you or himself."

"I said he worked hard; I didn't say he made a lot of money."

"He had to make some. What did he spend it on?"

"He plowed most of it back into the business. He worked hard for our future! Now there won't be any future. He's dead. You understand? My husband is dead. Why did he work so hard? What was it all for?"

"For you, it looks like," Shayne said drily.

The widow stared. "You get out of here. I don't have to take that kind of talk from a cop. Get the hell out of my house."

Shayne got out.

In his car he thought about it.

He wondered again about a man who worked so hard, when he had a woman like Helen Craig at home, and yet seemed to have little result from his work.

The answer should be at Craig's office.

V

THE OFFICE OF Craig Hauling Company turned out to be a green-painted wooden building about as long as an old-style Army barrack. It was set beside a large parking yard and a galvanized iron garage-workshop large enough to hold two of the trucks in the yard. The whole installation, office and all, was behind a tall cyclone fence.

Shayne pulled into a parking place in front of the office. He walked up wooden stairs into the office. It was cool and shaded inside—the shades drawn and air-conditioning on.

A small, dark-haired woman with flashing Latin eyes looked up as Mike Shayne entered. Two men were deep in conference at the far end of the long building. A small area at that same end was glassed-in.

The glassed-in office was empty now. Shayne guessed that it would wait a long time for its occupant to return.

"Can I help you?" the dark-haired woman asked.

"Are you Dolores Sanchez?" Shayne said.

"Yes. How—" the girl watched him. "Police?"

"In a way. I'm investigating Craig's murder. I heard that you liked him, Miss Sanchez."

The woman did not flinch or protest. She watched Shayne steadily from her dark eyes. "I liked him," she said evenly. "I liked him a lot. But if you mean anything else, you're off base. I suppose you've been talking to Helen Craig."

"I have," Shayne said.

"I thought so. She had a thing about me a couple of years ago. There was nothing to it. I thought maybe she'd forgotten about it. I suppose this has hit her hard, though."

"You had a fling with the boss, but it ended a couple of years ago?" Shayne said.

Dolores Sanchez smiled. "No, no fling, Mr.—"

"Shayne. Mike Shayne. I'm a private investigator."

Her eyes widened. "Private? You mean Helen hired you?"

"No, not Helen."

"Someone else?" Her eyes were even wider now. "Who?"

"I can't tell you that, Miss Sanchez."

The woman seemed to hardly hear him. She was watching empty space. "I wondered if there was something—"

"Something what?" Shayne snapped.

"What?" Dolores Sanchez said. "Oh, nothing. You asked about my

fling with the boss. There wasn't any fling, Mr. Shayne. I have a nice boy-friend. What I said was that Helen thought we had a fling about two years ago. She was wrong. I was sure she had forgotten."

"What did you wonder about, Miss Sanchez?"

Miss Sanchez glanced around. Then she bit a very pretty lip, and looked up at Shayne. "I wondered who the men were, and where Mr. Craig went some nights when he was supposed to be here."

It was there in the office like some lurking animal. Shayne felt a cold thrill in his back. It was a thrill of recognition. James Craig had been involved in something.

"He went somewhere? Not on a service call?"

"A service call would be checked through me sooner or later, Mr. Shayne. A lot of times he would go out, and next day there wasn't any service-call report."

"And the men?"

Her dark eyes widened. "I thought maybe you were working for them. I mean, for some strangers involved with Mr. Craig."

"No, I'm not working for anyone who knew Craig. I can't go into details now, but that's the truth. Now tell me about these men."

Dolores Sanchez glanced at the two men who had stopped their work now and were watching Shayne. The pretty secretary spoke hurriedly.

"I feel you're telling the truth, and I like you, Well, there were three of them. Sometimes they came alone, and sometimes only one at a time. Mr. Craig was always nervous when he saw them. Whenever they appeared, Mr. Shayne, Mr. Craig got his suit jacket and went with them."

"Can you describe them?"

"Not really. They were all pretty average, nothing special. The funny part is they seemed nervous, too. They kept looking at their watches."

"Did they come here often?"

"No, not often. More in the last few months."

"What else can you tell me about Craig? Was he having any money troubles?"

"I wouldn't really know, Mr. Shayne. He did seem nervous the last few months. There was that thing with Mr. Estro."

"Just what was that all about?"

"I'm not sure. Something about Mr. Craig stealing some jobs from Mr. Estro. He's another trucker."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, Mr. Shayne."

"Was there a woman, Miss Sanchez?"

"No, I'm sure there wasn't. Mr. Craig really thought about no woman except Helen. I'm sure of that. I'm not so sure about her."

"Why not? You think she was cheating on Craig?"

"Well, she called here quite a lot at night to ask for Mr. Craig. I

—I got the feeling that she was checking to be sure he was here."

"She told me that herself."

Dolores Sanchez nodded. "But I had the funny feeling that she was not so much checking on him, as she was making sure of where he was. You know what I mean? Sometimes she called three times in a night."

Shayne was about to go on with his questions when he became aware of a man approaching. He turned and saw that one of the two men who had been conferring was walking toward him. The man was small and thin and gray, and there was grease in the creases of his hands that he would never get out.

"You got some business, mister?" the man said suspiciously.

Dolores Sanchez answered. "Mr. Shayne is a detective, Mr. Donato. He's investigating Mr. Craig's murder."

"More cops? You got ident, mister?" Donato said.

Shayne showed his credentials to the shop-foreman of Craig Hauling Company. He guessed that Joe Donato was about sixty, give or take a few years, and that the man was not really belligerent. It was just the foreman's manner from dealing with too many truck drivers.

"A private," Donato said, and handed the credentials back. "We don't have to talk to you, Shayne."

"No, but I'm on your side. At least, I am if you were a friend of Craig's."

"I was a friend, a good friend, let me tell you," Donato said. "What can you do the police can't?"

"Probably nothing, but every little bit helps in a murder case, especially in a case where there seems to be no motive."

Donato was a smart man. "You got an idea about the motive?"

"I've got no idea, unless you can tell me what Craig was doing down there in that alley where he was killed."

"Yeah," Donato said, "that's been bothering me, too. Come on back. Maybe we ought to talk after all."

Shayne followed the foreman back toward where the other man waited. He had the impression that Dolores Sanchez was reluctant to let him go. Maybe the secretary had more on her mind. He made a mental note to talk to her on his way out.

Donato waved him to a chair at the desk where the two men had been talking when he came in. Donato himself sat on the edge of the desk. The foreman nodded to the other man.

"This is Mr. Shayne, Barney. He's a detective working on Jim's killing. Shayne, this is Barney Rogers, our sales chief."

Barney Rogers nodded. "Glad to meet you, Shayne. You have any ideas who killed Jim?"

Shayne said, "As I told Donato, it depends on whether anyone can give me a logical reason for Craig



to have been in that alley last night."

"I can't," Rogers said.

"I'm not sure," Donato said.

Shayne looked at the foreman. "You've got a notion?"

"Well," Donato said, "maybe. Only I don't want to stick my neck out. Tell me what you got on your mind first."

"All right," Shayne said, stalled, "but I've got a condition. You tell me about the men who used to come here and pick up Craig. The ones who were nervous, and Craig always left with them."

The two men looked at each other. It was Rogers who spoke first this time. "Dolores been talking?"

"She said some things. What about those men? You know who they were?"

Rogers sighed. "Yeh, we know, Shayne. Every guy has his secrets, I guess."

"Secrets?"

"Yeh," Donato said. "They were some of the gamblers."

VI

MIKE SHAYNE narrowed his grey eyes. "Gamblers? Craig was a gambler?"

Rogers nodded. "Poker. He always said it wasn't gambling. It was a game of skill. I told him that maybe it was for most guys, but the way he played it was a hell of a gamble, and a bad one at that."

"He was a loser?"

"All the way," Rogers said.

"We don't know how much he lost over the last couple of years," Donato said, "but he was in deep."

"That's why he worked so hard?"

Donato said, "He was up to his neck, we think. I think he just about had the business on the line. I guess there are some pretty sick gamblers around now."

"Why sick?" Shayne snapped.

Rogers said, "Joe means that Jim owed the money personally. He was milking the business dry to pay up, but the debts were personal, so they died with him. The company doesn't owe a dime of his debts."

Shayne thought—it explained a lot about Craig's actions, but it did not explain why he had been killed. The gamblers had no reason to kill Craig. And it did not sound like a heroin tie-in, unless—Maybe Craig had been ready to pull out, make his break, and he was taking the money out of the company to do

his run. Maybe the poker was only a cover-up.

"You said you had some ideas, Mr. Donato," Shayne said.

"Yeah," Donato said. "It's about Adam Estro. You know that Craig was in a scrap with Estro?"

"I heard something."

"Well, what it was about was a sharp deal Jim pulled with one of Estro's best customers. We know why Jim did it. He needed the money bad, and he was willing to risk stealing a client or two from Estro. Now in our business we don't take that easy."

"You think Estro had something to do with it?" Shayne said. "I heard Adam Estro didn't go in for that."

"He don't, not usually, but in our business guys got a way of handling troubles like that personally. Not that I think Adam Estro would use a gun, but—well, he got men driving for him who'd shoot their mother for a dime."

"Go on," Shayne said.

Donato said uneasily, "Well, Adam Estro got a trucking yard not two blocks from that alley. He uses it for picking up shipments from the Bay."

"And you think maybe some of Estro's men might have decided to do the boss a favor?"

"I'm thinking about it," Donato said, "only I don't want to get anyone into trouble. Adam Estro's an okay guy. I was wondering if I ought to tell the cops."

"They've probably figured it out by now," Shayne said.

"Yeah," Donato said. "I guess so."

"Still, maybe he went to the neighborhood down there on some business to do with Estro," Shayne said. "He could have been chased into that alley. I'll talk to Estro."

All this time Barney Rogers had been frowning. The sales chief was a big man. His ruddy face was set in the frown. His hands were large, and he continually ran them through his dark blond hair. Shayne judged his age at no more than thirty-five. Young to be in his job, but, then, so had Craig been young. He guessed that Barney Rogers was good.

Rogers spoke up. "I don't see Adam Estro in this, no. It's just not his style. I mean, Jim took some business, okay, but not enough to hurt a man like Estro. Chicken-feed to Estro."

"It could be a matter of principle, Barney," Donato said. "You know our business."

"Sure, but murder?" Rogers said.

"He has some pretty bad boys who drive for him," Donato said.

"Maybe, but Estro keeps a pretty tight rein," Rogers said.

Shayne listened to them debate. He had the impression that Rogers really wasn't convinced. The salesman had something else on his mind. Shayne waited. Rogers finally turned to him.

"I'm not saying Estro isn't in-

involved," Rogers said. "But I don't like the pattern."

"Why not?" Shayne said.

"The trouble with Estro happened months ago. Craig didn't seem especially nervous until yesterday."

"He was nervous yesterday?"

"He was by the afternoon."

"Tell me about yesterday," Shayne said.

Rogers rubbed the bulging bicep of his left arm with his right hand. The big salesman seemed to be thinking it out, trying to be sure he had it right. Donato, too, was visualizing Craig's actions of yesterday.

"Well," Rogers said, "nothing so special, not at first. Jim came in as usual, did a regular morning's work. You remember, Joe, we talked about the new semi-trailer."

"Yeh, I remember," Donato said. "We had a shot at a pretty good haul, only we needed a semi-trailer. Barney thought we had the price of one, but Jim said no. They had a session over it."

Rogers nodded. "We really smoked over that. I was sure we had the money, but Jim said we didn't. It'd been like that for almost a year now. My figures said we had money to buy equipment; Jim said we didn't have the dough. It's what made us realize he was in trouble. I mean, it was his money, but it's our business, too. He was running it into the ground."

"Then what?" Shayne said.

"Nothing. He went out to lunch with Dolores," Rogers said. "When he came back he was nervous as hell. He worked until about four o'clock; then he left. Helen says he never went home."

"He went to lunch with Miss Sanchez?"

"He did that a lot," Donato said. "Don't get any ideas."

"His wife seems to have had some ideas," Shayne said.

Barney Rogers smiled. "Helen was pretty wrapped up in Jim. She was always getting ideas like that. She's the jealous type, and she was stuck deep on him."

"Dolores isn't a girl who plays around," Donato said.

"All girls play around under the right conditions," Shayne said.

Rogers shrugged. "They kept it awful quiet if they were up to anything."

"Maybe they kept it real quiet," Shayne said. "She said she has a boy-friend."

"Yeh," Rogers said. "Joey Valdez. He works somewhere over in Miami Beach. In one of the hotels. I think he tends bar."

"Anything else you can tell me?" Shayne asked Donato and Rogers.

The two men looked at each other, then shook their heads.

"We can't figure what happened to Jim," Rogers said. "Unless there's something we don't know about. Shayne, that was a strange place for Jim to be at that hour. I can't even imagine who would

want to shoot him, anyway. It seems crazy."

"It usually is," Shayne said.

He left the two men staring at the floor, and walked back to Dolores Sanchez. The girl watched him coming. She looked beyond him at Rogers and Donato, and then at his face.

"You want to know what happened at lunch yesterday," she said.

"All of it," Shayne said. "Did your boy-friend appear?"

"Joey? Of course not. I told you there was nothing between myself and Mr. Craig."

"Then what did happen?"

She bit her lip. It was a sensual mannerism. Shayne decided that if anything had been going on between the girl and Craig he would not be surprised, and he would not really blame Craig. But the girl had other things on her mind.

"I'm not exactly sure what did happen," she said slowly. "We were eating, just talking like we always did, when this man came up to the table."

"Did you know who he was?"

She nodded. "One of the men who used to come here. I think Mr. Craig called him Al. Mr. Craig seemed nervous to see him, and yet sort of eager. You know what I mean? I thought it was business, but Mr. Craig said I should stay."

"What did they talk about?"

"Nothing, really. This man, Al, sort of smiled and told Mr. Craig that they'd expect him as usual.

Same place, same time. Then this Al said Mr. Craig maybe ought to get there a little early if he wanted to talk about the other thing."

"The other thing?" Shayne said, frowning.

"That's what he said," Dolores Sanchez said. "Then this Al said something funny. I'm not sure I even heard it right."

"What was it?"

"Well, it sounded like this Al said, 'The snow-bird figures it might play.' I mean, that's what it sounded like."

"How did Craig react?"

"He got pale, but he just nodded. This Al went away then. Mr. Craig hardly ate after that, and we came back. He was nervous all afternoon, and he left early. That's the last I saw of him."

"He said nothing about who this Al was, or what snow-bird meant?"

"Nothing."

"And you don't know anything about this Al?"

"No."

"Okay. Thank you, Miss Sanchez."

She smiled, and Shayne went back to the two men. They had returned to their work but stopped when Mike Shayne came back.

"Does the phrase *snow-bird* mean anything to you?"

They both shook their heads.

"How about Al? Probably one of the poker players."

"No," Donato said.

"I know," Rogers said. "That's

Al Jenks. He plays in the game Jim went to."

"You know where I can find him?"

"I think his address is in Jim's address book," Rogers said.

Shayne went into the deserted office and got the book. There was an address for Al Jenks. Shayne wrote it down and left the office. He felt their eyes watching him as he walked out to his car.

VII

THE ADDRESS OF Al Jenks was a run-down apartment building in an older section of the city. The yellow brick had long-ago turned grey with grime, and the double glass doors of the lobby were cracked and stained.

The lobby itself needed a coat of paint, and the tile floor had a dull, dispirited air as if too many mops had been swished over it too many times with no effect but to redistribute the layer of dirt. Al Jenks' apartment was on the fourth floor.

The elevator creaked slowly up, jerked to a bouncing stop that made Shayne's stomach do a dance, and Shayne stepped out. The corridor was dark and dingy. Shayne turned left and walked down the corridor, studying the numbers of the shabby doors.

He found Jenks' apartment, the last door in the corridor. He pressed the bell. There was no answer. He

pressed the bell again. Suddenly he heard the door open behind him. He whirled. He had a glimpse of the open door of what looked like a broom closet.

Then a shot exploded in the narrow hall.

The noise roared up and down the corridor, bounced and echoed. The concussion of the shot in the confined space hammered Shayne's ears. The bullet slammed into the wall inches from the detective's head.

It all happened in a split second. Mike Shayne saw only the opened closet door, and then he was down, rolling, clawing for his own pistol. A second shot missed at close range as Shayne rolled, came up with his gun out but his back three-quarters turned to the closet. He saw a vague shape. A big man. Masked by something over his head and face. Behind him. Out of the closet.

He tried to fall sideways in a turn.

A foot kicked up his gun. Something smashed against the side of his head. He went down. Dazed, he tried to get up, grapple with the attacker who was still behind him. Something hit him again and he went out.

He came to with a round, moon-like face peering down at him. A strange face, pulpy and red, yet with the grey of long years of dissipation around his small eyes.

The face spoke. "You okay, friend?"

Shayne tried to sit up. His head spun, and he slumped back.

"Easy, friend. You got a nasty bump there," the moon-faced man said.

Shayne breathed slowly. He looked around. He was lying on the floor of the corridor under a window. The broom closet stood open and empty. There was no one else in the dingy corridor except the man with the moon face.

"Somebody try to rob you?" Moon-face said.

Shayne painfully checked his clothes, his pockets. Nothing was gone. Moon-face seemed to be watching him closely. He looked up at the man. The dissipated face grinned a nervous grin. The man did not know him, had no reason to grin. The grin was obviously a nervous habit, used to cover any situation that made the man uneasy.

Shayne had a hunch. "You're Al Jenks?"

Moon-face jerked backward as if slapped in the face. "How come you know me? I never saw—"

There was fear in the man's eyes. No, not exactly fear. Extreme nervous caution. Al Jenks did not like to find himself known by a man who had just been beaten.

"I was on my way to talk to you, Jenks. You got any ideas who jumped on me?" Shayne said. He did not mention the shooting.

"Me? See me?" Jenks said. "I mean, no. How would I know who

beat on you? I mean, who are you?"

But the eyes of Al Jenks told a different story. The eyes said that Jenks had at least an idea of who might have attacked Shayne. An idea that scared Jenks even to think about.

Shayne let it go for the moment. He was more interested in why he was still alive. The man had tried to shoot him at first. Then the attacker had defended himself by hitting Shayne before Shayne could use his gun in defense. That was all logical enough. But why had the man not shot him after he was unconscious?

"Did you see anyone before you found me?" Shayne asked Jenks.

"No. But when I got off the elevator I think I heard someone heading down the stairs."

So the attacker had heard the elevator coming, and had not wanted to be caught in the corridor with a dead man. Jenks' arrival had probably saved his life. The attacker could not know who was coming up, and could not risk another shot. That had to be the answer. At least, until Mike Shayne found a better one.

Shayne stood up slowly. He was thinking about the man who had attacked him. The attack had been quick and hard and he did not think the man would give up. He would have to be alert.

The sharp sound of the object striking the floor of the corridor echoed through the narrow space.

Shayne and Jenks both looked down. At first Shayne saw nothing. Then a stray ray of light glinted on an object.

Shayne bent and picked it up. He stared at it. It was the small, metal, needle-and-head of a hypodermic syringe.

Shayne turned it over in his hand, and looked down at the floor. The small needle must have been caught in his clothes. When he had stood up it had fallen out. And there could be little doubt where it had come from. It had to have fallen from the clothes of his attacker.

"What is it?" Jenks asked.

"Let's go inside," Shayne said.

The moon-faced man hesitated. He was not happy about the prospect of talking to Shayne. But, reluctantly, he bent over his lock and opened the door. In the light from the door, Shayne looked for his automatic. He found it on the floor in a far corner of the corridor.

Inside the apartment, Shayne sat down. Jenks perched on the edge of the bed. The apartment was a single large room with worn places in the cheap rug and furniture that looked like it had been rejected by the Salvation Army. Al Jenks did not live high.

"Tell me about James Craig, Jenks," Shayne said bluntly.

"Craig?" Jenks said weakly.

"Craig," Shayne said. "You played poker with him?"

Jenks nodded, licked his lips.

"We—we played in the same game sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"We had a kind of regular game."

"Here?"

"Sometimes, yeah. I mean, we didn't always play here."

"Where else did you play?"

"Around, you know? I mean, nowhere special."

"What kind of game? Big?"

Jenks nodded. "Big enough for me."

"You don't look like you could play in a ten-cent game."

"Yeh, that's because I didn't play in a ten-cent game, Mr.—"

"Shayne."

Jenks paled visibly under his ruddy complexion. "Mike Shayne? I heard of you."

"You were telling me how you could play in a big game."

"I had dough, I get dough. I been havin' a bad year. That's why I'm in this trap."

"Was Craig having a bad year?"

Jenks hesitated, looked around as if for help.

"Come on, Jenks."

"I guess he wasn't doing so good. Mind you, I ain't sure. I mean, we just played poker. We wasn't buddies."

"You know he's dead," Shayne said.

"I heard."

"Tell me about who would kill him and why?"

Jenks tried to swallow twice. "I don't know nothing about that."

"You know something about who attacked me."

"No. I swear."

"What do you know about this little gadget?" And he held out the syringe needle.

Jenks began to sweat. "I never saw it. I mean, I don't know nothing about it."

"You know what it is."

"Yeah. It's a hypo needle. I'm clean. I never been on the junk, I swear."

Shayne studied the moon-faced man. Jenks was sweating, shaking, and twitching. The man was in a state of high nervousness, but was trying to cover desperately.

"Tell me about yesterday. Did Craig come here?"

"Yeah," Jenks said sullenly.

"There was a game?"

"Yeah."

"When did it start?"

"About seven o'clock, like always."

"What time did Craig get here?"

"Maybe six-thirty, like always."

"No. He came early. You talked about that with him."

"Not me," Jenks said.

"You were heard."

"Somebody's lying, Shayne."

"You didn't talk about snow-bird?"

Jenks twitched, jerked. "What's snow-bird? I mean, I don't know nothing about snow-bird."

"When did Craig leave?"

"Maybe nine o'clock. He was broke quick."

"How much did he owe you, Jenks?"

"Me? He didn't owe me."

"Who did he owe?"

"I don't know. I swear."

The man was shaking like a man with palsy now. Shayne watched him. Jenks seemed to be looking everywhere for a way out. The man was so scared, Shayne knew he couldn't trust anything Jenks said, one way or the other.

And there was something about the way the moon-faced man was fidgeting on the bed. Jenks was watching the door, squirming. The man wanted out of the room. Mike Shayne had a hunch. He stood up.

"Okay, Jenks, only don't try to go anywhere. The police are going to want to talk to you."

Jenks almost slid from the bed. "The fuzz? Why? I mean, I can't tell 'em nothing. Craig played poker here, that's all. Last night he left early. I never saw him after. I was here all night to maybe one. I can prove it."

"Then you've got nothing to worry about, have you?"

Shayne turned on his heel and left the shabby room. In the corridor he walked to the elevator and took it down. In the lobby he was wary, but his attacker did not seem to be around.

Out in the street he got into his car and drove off—to the corner. He turned and circled the block, making sure there was no parking lot around the apartment building,



and only one other exit—a side exit.

He parked at the corner from where he could watch. His car was almost hidden from either exit. He lit a cigarette and waited. Three minutes later Al Jenks came out the front entrance.

The moon-faced man walked to a dilapidated grey sedan and got in. Jenks never even looked around. He seemed in a hurry. He jerked the door of the grey car open and almost lost his balance. He tried to drive off without releasing the emergency brake and the car stalled. On his second try Jenks pulled away from the curb.

Shayne eased out and followed. Jenks drove erratically, stupidly. Shayne followed without any trouble.

VIII

THE GREY CAR led him across the city and south to the edge of Biscayne Bay. Jenks turned off into a dirt road among heavy growth and palm trees. Mike Shayne slowed and held back. The area was barren, and Jenks would spot him now if he drove too close.

He let the grey car get out of sight, and then followed into the dirt road that was really a sand road. He passed no turn-offs. He continued slowly ahead until he came around a turn and saw the grey car parked at the edge of the road far ahead. He parked off the road, and began to creep through the brush, in the cover of the palms. His automatic was in his hand.

Shayne crept close to the grey car. There was no one around it. The water of the bay was close here. To the left, a hundred yards away across sand, there was a small house. It was a white beach cottage, and looked in good condition.

Shayne studied it from the distance for a few minutes. He saw no activity. But he did not rush it. He remained crouched and in hiding for another few minutes. It paid to be careful.

Just as he was about to start approaching the houses, the front

door opened and a man came out. It was not a man Shayne had seen before. It could have been the masked man who had attacked him, but he could not be sure. He studied the man carefully.

The man stood on the porch looking slowly all around as if checking. In the dim light, he seemed not tall and not short. He wore dark glasses, and was heavily muscled, from the look of the good suit he wore. But it was his hair and his movements that Shayne watched.

The man was not old, but his hair was completely white. And he moved with a liquid grace that gave the impression of barely moving at all. His clothes were all good, and something gleamed on his tie.

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes as he tried to see what it was that shined on the man's tie in the sun. A stick-pin of some kind. Diamond, perhaps—or pearl?

Shayne thought about the tiny pearl he had found. It was exactly what a pearl from a stick-pin would look like.

The man on the porch completed his inspection and seemed to glide inside with his legs barely moving. The door closed. There was no sound from the white houses and nothing else moved.

Shayne surveyed the terrain. The sand was open all the way from the grey car to the house. But to the left there was a sand dune and a row of tall palms.

The crest of the dune was bare, but the defile behind the dune was heavily grown with brush. The dune seemed to curl around the house toward the rear.

Shayne eased himself into the undergrowth that led along behind the dune. It was slow going, as if he was to make it without excess noise. He did not hurry. Haste was the danger here.

He worked his way along the defile behind the dune, out of sight from the house. He estimated distance and location: when he thought he was behind the house, he crawled up the slope of the dune and peered over.

The rear of the white house was directly in front of him, not ten yards away. He did not move for a full minute. He heard faint voices inside the house, the sound of light feet pacing. No one came out the rear, and the shades were all drawn. A black car was parked close to the house here at the rear.

Shayne released the safety on his automatic and crawled over the top of the dune and down. Using the car for cover, he crawled up to the house. No one came out, and he worked his way around the house in the sand. The shades on the one side of the house he had not seen were also drawn, but one window was open at the bottom.

Shayne reached the open window and flattened against the wall underneath the window. Voices spoke inside the house. One of the

voices was Al Jenks—a scared Al Jenks.

"You gotta help me get out of town, Bird. I mean, they're comin' around askin' questions."

"How'd they get on to you, Jenks?"

The second voice was low, cold, almost a whisper. A menacing voice that made Shayne think of a sinuous panther gliding, pacing the dark jungle.

"How do I know? You didn't tell me there was going to be any shooting."

"I didn't know there was going to be shooting, Jenks. In this line of work you never know," the whispering voice said.

A third and fourth voice chimed in now inside the hidden room. Shayne listened beneath the window. The third voice laughed first, cackled like a chicken.

"Hee-hee, old Jenks got hisself scared."

"Jenks never did have no guts," the fourth voice said.

Jenks' voice rose high and quavering. "You never said there was gonna be shootin'. Find a big loser, you said. Make him an offer, you said. So I found Craig an' you got your man, only I don't want no part of a shootin'. Pay me my cut an' let me get out of town."

The third voice cackled. "Jenks, he ain't scared of the money."

"How far you gonna run, Jenks?" the deep fourth voice said.

"I did my share," Jenks cried.

"You know I did my share, Bird. Craig picked up the stuff and delivered it. Don't kid me. I know you got the stuff, and I want my cut for putting you onto Craig."

"You want a lot, Jenks," the cold, whispering voice said. "You haven't told me how they got on to you."

Beneath the window Mike Shayne shifted his position, his legs numb from the crouched position. He decided that there were only the four men in the house. Jenks and three others, and one of the others, the obvious leader, was called 'Bird'. Probably 'Snow-bird', which had the ring of a narcotics connection.

"Hell, it wasn't hard for them to find the game, you knew that. I told you I'd been around his office. You said it didn't matter."

"Did I?" the whispering voice said. "That was before Craig got it. Now it's different. Now you're trouble, Jenks."

"I know I am. What've I been saying? Just gimme my cut and let me get out of town."

There was a short silence inside the room. Shayne shifted again, rose to try to see into the room. But the shade was down tight, and if he tried to move it they might easily see inside the room. He was considering risking it when the silence was broken.

"Okay, Jenks. Pay him, Jimmy."

There was another silence.

"Now listen to me, Jenks," the cold whisper hissed. "You've got your cut. Now get out of Miami fast. Go a long way. When you leave here you go straight home and clean out your room. You got that? Clean out everything. Don't leave anything could lead to you or us."

"Sure, Bird. I'll go so far no one'll ever find me."

"You make sure, Jenks," the whisperer said.

There was movement inside the room. Shayne flattened. The front door opened. Shayne crawled to the front corner of the house. Footsteps crossed the porch. Cautiously, Shayne raised up until he could just see over the edge of the porch.

The white-haired man who wore dark glasses stood alone on the porch. Jenks was already walking away toward his car. Jenks walked fast through the soft sand, glancing around as if afraid that even the blue sky held danger.

The white-haired man watched until Jenks reached his car. The car started and drove away. In a few seconds it was out of sight along the dirt side road. The white-haired man turned to the house.

"Crow, Jimmy."

The two other men came from the house. Shayne recognized them at once: the question-mark shaped man, and the brawny midget who had watched him when he searched the alley. And, close now, he saw that the white-haired man,

who had to be 'Bird', did wear a small diamond and pearl stick-pin in his tie.

The three men were in a hurry and did not look toward Mike Shayne. They vanished around the other side of the house. Moments later Shayne heard a car motor start, and the black car came out from behind the house, drove to the road, and vanished in the same direction as Jenks' car.

Shayne stood up. He tugged slowly on his left earlobe. He could not reach his car in time to follow any of them now. He walked to the porch and up to the front door of the house. They had forgotten to lock the door. Shayne stepped inside.

He stood in a small living room. It was sparsely furnished with wicker-and-bamboo beach furniture. He checked the other rooms. There were two small bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. The two bedrooms were bare except for two cots in each room. There was no sheets or blankets on the cots, yet they looked like they had had plenty of use.

The kitchen contained dirty dishes and rotting food. It looked like the kitchen of womenless men who did not care much about food or cleanliness. There was milk, cheese, sour meat, beer and whiskey in the refrigerator.

In the bathroom he found the key to it all.

There was nothing in the medi-

cine cabinet out of the ordinary, but when he lifted the top from the toilet tank he found the answer. Sunk in the water was a large waterproof bag. Inside the bag was another bag, transparent and also waterproof. Inside the bag were four hyperdermic syringes made from eyedroppers, four spoons with bent handles, and five or six small white packets.

Shayne opened one of the small packets and tasted a touch on his finger. Heroin.

It was obvious that the house was a junkie haven, a place where privileged junkies came to get their fixes and maybe sleep a while. And it looked like James Craig was smack in the middle of it all somewhere.

The footfall sounded directly behind him. Shayne had no chance to turn. Something smashed down on his skull.

He pitched forward, and his head struck the toilet bowl. He bounced off to the floor, turning as he fell. He saw the brawny dwarf and the man shaped like a question-mark before it all went black.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE came awake. His head throbbed. He had been hit twice in the same day, in almost the same spot, and his head hurt. He tried to move. He could not move. He was sitting up in a chair in a dark room. His hands were

tied behind him. His legs were tied to the chair.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dark he saw that he was in one of the two bedrooms. The shades were still down, and it was now dark outside. The door was closed. There was a thin line of light under the door.

Shayne became aware of voices. As his head cleared, he realized that someone was talking in the main room outside the bedroom. He leaned forward and stood on bent legs, the chair still tied to him. Bent, he walked to the door with the chair on his back.

A beam of light came through a large keyhole. Shayne sat and put his eye to the keyhole. The tall man bent like a question mark was pacing nervously out in the main room. The man seemed unable to stand still. His face twitched like a gopher with a tic. Shayne saw his eyes as he moved in and out of the light. A junkie—a heavy junkie.

The brawny dwarf sat on a bamboo couch, sprawled, and watched his thin companion. Shayne remembered the names the white-haired man had used, and the names Chief Gentry had mentioned, and was sure that he was looking at Crow and Jimmy D, the two junkies who had been seen near the alley when Craig was shot.

Shayne watched them and worked on the ropes that bound him.

The twisted man whined out in the main room, "How come the Bird lets him live? I mean, he's a peeper, Jimmy."

"The bird knows what he doing," the dwarf, Jimmy D, said.

"That Jenks, he brought him down on us. We oughta finish him fast," Crow said.

"What you got for brains, junkie?" Jimmy D said. "The Bird, he's got to know the score first, right? I mean, this ain't no easy play with that Craig blasted out. The Bird he's out learnin' the play."

"I don't like no peeper around," Crow said. "I need a fix, Jimmy."

"The Bird says no fix until he gets back," the dwarf said.

The question-mark man lapsed into a sullen silence, twitched his way back and forth across the narrow range of Shayne's vision through the keyhole. Shayne watched and strained against his bonds. The ropes around his hands had been tied tight but with a poor knot. He could feel a give in the knot as he strained.

Out in the room the scarecrow continued his lopsided pacing. His staring eyes with the pinpoint pupils stared longingly toward the bathroom. But it was clear that he was deathly afraid of the dwarf, who languidly watched his every twitch.

"Bird, he's a long time," Crow whined. "Where did he go?"

"The Bird know where the Bird go," the dwarf said.

"Maybe he's at the barge?"
Crow said.

"Sure, the barge an' everywhere else. He lookin' for the word, junkie. The Bird got to find the word, find where the heat comes, see?"

"Sure, sure," Crow said. "He's a long time. He didn't mean I should miss my regular fix, Jimmy."

"Bird say no fix until he gets back."

"Sure, sure, only he don't mean I miss my regular boost. Sure, sure, Bird he got held up some, see? I mean, I got to have my regular shot."

"Bird'll get back."

"You call him, Jimmy, yeah? I mean, the barge way down by the pier, you know? Maybe he's at the barge an' ain't comin' back so fast."

"Bird says no fix," the dwarf repeated.

The dwarf seemed to be enjoying the torture of the tall, skinny Crow, as if he were playing with some small, frantic animal. Enjoying the suffering of his pet. Crow trembled as he limped, his dead eyes watching the dwarf with a mixture of cunning, hate, and fear.

"Maybe somethin' happen to Bird," Crow said as if the idea had just struck him. "Maybe we better finish the peeper and cut out, Jimmy. I mean, maybe Bird he finished and we on a limb."

"Nothin' happen to Bird."

"How you know, Jimmy? I mean, the barge is mighty close

down that alley. See? I mean, maybe Bird he got blast too, and we oughta cut out fast."

"Bird don't get blast, Crow," the dwarf said, but for the first time there was something like uneasiness in his voice. The dwarf looked at Crow. "You maybe know somethin' I don't know, Crow? You maybe holding out on Jimmy D.?"

"All I know's Bird he oughta be back, and that alley's mighty close to the barge. Maybe I better get my fix an' we cut out."

The dwarf seemed uncertain. Crow watched the small man. Shayne strained against his bonds in the dark bedroom. If they panicked and ran they would probably kill him before they ran. The corded muscles of his arms stretched at the ropes, strained the slipping knot. Sweat stood out on his face.

The dwarf suddenly snarled. "You just tryin' to get a fix. You tryin' to trick old Jimmy D."

"I got to have that fix, Jimmy. I ain't connin' you. Maybe Bird is in trouble and we oughta take a look. Maybe Bird he cut out on us. Maybe he found the heat's real bad. Bird, he ain't been himself since that alley, you know?"

The dwarf bit his lip. Lines of fear were etched in his grotesque face, and clouds of worry filmed his eyes. Crow watched the dwarf, and Mike Shayne watched them both.

Sweat poured down his face as

he felt the ropes giving. The bad knot was slipping. He tried to pull his wrists out, but the knot had not slipped enough yet. He did not know how much time he had.

The dwarf suddenly stood up. "Okay, get the H. I'll take a fix myself. Maybe you're right, Bird's gone a hell of a long time now. Maybe they blasted the barge, too."

The tall, twisted Crow heard none of the last. At the first word about getting the H, Crow had limped toward the bathroom. In a moment he would be back with the syringe, the spoon, the white packets of all the world's release from pain and trouble.

Shayne watched the dwarf. Jimmy D. was blinking rapidly with the effort of thought. Then the small, brawny man reached into his pocket. Shayne worked frantically on his bonds. He felt his wrist slip through.

Out in the room Crow returned carrying the fix equipment in wildly trembling hands. The tall, question-mark man lighted a match that immediately went out. Crow swore, danced like a man with terrible palsy.

Jimmy D looked at him. "Hold that, Crow. First we better fix the peeper: Bird, he run out; that's for sure now. Yeah, I know a runout when I sees one. So first we fix the peeper."

Jimmy D brought a small, snub-nosed pistol out of his pocket. Shayne felt the skin tear on his

wrist as he strained to pull it from the ropes. Crow seemed not to have heard the dwarf. It was what saved Shayne's life.

"I said you hold off while we fix the peeper," Jimmy D said, stepped to Crow, knocked the match and spoon from the tall man's hands.

Crow screamed and clawed at Jimmy D. The dwarf hit Crow with the revolver. Crow went down.

And Mike Shayne's wrist came out of the ropes.

Before Crow could get up, Shayne had his other hand free. He bent and tore at the knots of the ropes around his legs. They came loose. He pulled the ropes around his chest up over his head.

Out in the room Crow was up and had a pistol out in his shaking hands. The question-mark man had to hold the pistol in both hands. The dwarf started for the door to the bedroom where Shayne stood up now.

"We kill him together," the dwarf said. "I ain't lettin' you cop no plea if they roust us."

Crow nodded, trembling and afraid but too much in need of his fix to hesitate. If he had to kill Shayne, or ten Shaynes, to get his fix he would kill them. Crow would have killed his own child for his fix now.

Shayne looked at the window. There might not be time. He felt for his automatic, but it was gone. They were almost at the door. Shayne flattened against the wall—

not behind the door but on the wall away from where it opened.

The eager Crow came through first. He came through so fast he did not notice the empty chair until he was three feet inside the room. Jimmy D was three feet behind him. The dwarf could not see the empty chair because Crow was in his way.

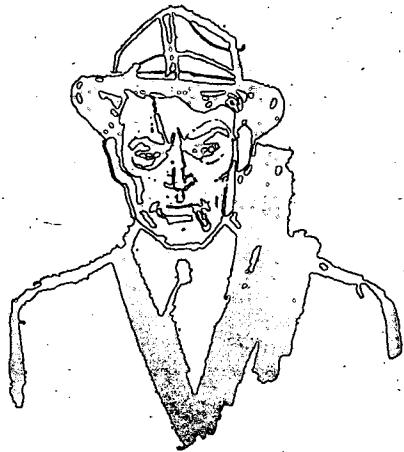
Crow saw the empty chair.

Shayne kicked Crow's legs out from under him, and hurled himself on the dwarf. Crow went down flat on his back, his limp neck snapping his head hard against the floor. The pistol that had been in his trembling hands skittered across the floor.

Shayne caught the dwarf full in the side and pinned him against the door frame. The dwarf cursed and struggled to get his gun hand free. The dwarf was incredibly strong. Shayne could not hold his gun hand.

On the floor Crow had revived from his stunning blow and was crawling across the floor toward his pistol.

Shayne suddenly stepped back and hit the dwarf full on the point of the jaw. The dwarf was strong but weighed a bare eighty pounds. The force of Shayne's blow sent him flying backwards into the main room. Crow had almost reached the pistol. Shayne jumped and kicked the man full in the face. Crow grunted and fell over, bleeding.



Shayne did not wait. In a single big leap he jumped for the window. He went through in a headlong dive, his eyes closed, his head tucked tight against his chest, his body curled.

He landed in a ball on his shoulder. He hit hard, but the ground was sand, and he rolled and was up and running. He ran twenty yards before anything happened behind him. Then a shot split the night. Two shots. Three shots. None of them came near him.

In the pitch dark he ran on and reached the dirt road. He had seen no car. They could not follow him. When he reached his car he saw how they had known he was in the house. All its doors were open; it had been searched. They had spotted his car when they left earlier, and had come back to check.

He got into the car and drove

off. He wondered if Snow-Bird had really run away. On the highway he turned right toward Miami and looked for the first telephone.

X

IN THE ROADSIDE tavern Mike Shayne ordered a sidecar and sipped the brandy and cointreau while he waited. His first call had been to Will Gentry, and his second to Tim Rourke. Both men were on their way.

Shayne was thinking of a second sidecar when he heard the cars pull up outside. He paid and walked out. Chief Gentry was waiting beside his car. There was another police car. Both police cars were unmarked.

"You got here fast," the redhead said.

Gentry looked at Shayne's head. "You okay, Mike?"

"I will be when we take those two punks."

Tim Rourke stepped out of his ancient roadster. "Who are they, Mike?"

"A couple of Gentry's favorite junk-men Crow and Jimmy D."

Rourke was grim and yet elated. "Then it is dope? I mean, Craig was involved in narcotics?"

"It looks like it, but I'm not sure how or how big he was. I'm not so sure he wasn't just a pick-up messenger."

"That's all right," Rourke said. "He was killed for some reason,

and I still think it will lead us to someone high up."

"I hope so," Chief Gentry said, his black cigar at an angry angle in his gruff mouth. "Let's go, if you're ready, Mike."

Shayne nodded and walked to his car. He led the other three cars back along the highway to the dirt side road. They drove along the sideroad to just about where Shayne had parked earlier. Then Mike Shayne stopped, and they all got out and moved out silently toward the small white house.

Gentry directed some of his men to circle around and ring the house on all sides. Shayne, Rourke and Gentry crouched in the dark night at the edge of the palms from where they could see the house while they waited for Gentry's men to get into position.

"Just the two of them?" Gentry growled.

"Unless Snowbird came back," Shayne said.

Gentry swore. "Is the Bird in this? Then it could be big. I've been trying to collar the Bird for six years. But he's a clever devil."

"Who is he, Will?" Rourke asked.

"Sandor Renyi," Gentry said. "At least that's the only name we really know on him. We've been sure he's a big pusher, but we've never been able to trace his supply line."

"He's not on the top level himself?" Rourke asked.

"I don't think so, but he could have moved up. We think he's about one rung below the really big time. The only big point against him is that he's an occasional user himself."

"Occasional?" Rourke said.

Gentry nodded. "He seems to be one of the rare people who can handle a small habit and stay with it."

A faint light flashed briefly in the night on the far side of the house. Shayne whispered, "There's the signal, Will."

"Okay, let's move in. And be careful, everyone. Mike says they're armed and probably hopped-up to the eyeballs."

The police began to move cautiously through the night. They made no sound on the soft sand, and flitted like shadows toward the lighted house. Gentry, Shayne and Rourke moved in the lead.

The redhead watched the house carefully. The light was on just as when he had left. The window he had come through was still broken, the shade up. But nothing seemed to move inside the house. Shayne walked silently forward and studied the house. The front door was closed, and no shadows moved across the light of the windows inside. There was no sound inside the house.

Shayne frowned in the night. If the two junkies were high they should not have been so silent. There was a desolate, abandoned air to the small house. Shayne did

not like it. There was every indication that the birds had flown.

"It's pretty quiet, Mike," Gentry whispered.

"Too quiet."

"You think they've gone?" Rourke said. The elongated reporter sounded disappointed.

"Maybe, or maybe they're just sucking us in. We better be very careful," Gentry said.

Shayne said nothing. The big redhead reached the porch. The house was surrounded, and still there had been no move from inside. Shayne climbed the wooden steps and stood on the porch. Gentry and two of his men stood beside the redhead. Rourke waited a few feet back on the steps.

Some of Gentry's men peered in at the windows, but the shades were still down, and the men shook their heads to indicate that they could see nothing.

Shayne looked at Gentry. "Ready, Will?"

"I'll kick it in," Gentry said. "You go left, I'll go right. My men will come in right behind us."

Shayne nodded. The two men took deep breaths, drew their pistols—Shayne had borrowed a revolver from the Chief—and Gentry gave a short nod as signal. The Chief kicked hard on the door.

Shayne leaped in the instant the door flew open. He jumped through and left, crouched, his pistol ready.

Gentry crouched at the right.

The room was empty.

Nothing seemed to move or even breathe in the silent house. Nothing had changed since Shayne had escaped. Gentry pointed to the living room table. Two spoons with bent handles lay on the table. Matches lay with them. There were two eye-droppers with syringe tips.

Gentry instructed his men. "One of you take the kitchen. You take the bathroom. Shayne can check the left bedroom. I'll take the right bedroom."

Shayne approached the bedroom from which he had escaped. He held his pistol ready, and moved with caution. The door was open. He saw the chair still on its side, the ropes still festooned over it. He checked behind the door first, then stepped into the room. The beds were empty, the room deserted.

"Mike."

It was Gentry's voice. Shayne left his bedroom and walked into the next bedroom where Gentry waited for him. The bluff Chief of Police nodded toward the two beds.

They lay on the beds as if taking peaceful naps. Crow was on the right bed and Jimmy D on the left. They were not taking naps, and if they were, perhaps, peaceful now, they had not gone peacefully to wherever they had gone.

They were both dead, and their faces said that they had not died easily. Both the faces were horribly contorted as if they had each seen some great horror at the moment of death. Perhaps they had—perhaps

they had seen where death would take them. Maybe they had seen, in that final moment, the horror of their own souls.

Gentry pointed to their arms. Each of them lay with his right sleeve rolled up. Shayne approached and looked closely at the arms. Faint trickles of blood showed where the needles had gone in.

"They were both on the fix," Shayne said.

"Yeah," Gentry said.

Tim Rourke stood in the doorway of the bedroom now. The lean reporter was pale as he looked at the tortured faces of the dead men. "What killed them?" he asked in a low, shaky voice.

Gentry and Shayne each examined a man. Shayne could find no wound on Jimmy D. Gentry straightened up from his examination of Crow.

"Not a mark on him, Mike," the Chief said.

"Nothing but the needle," Shayne said. "I've seen faces like that."

Gentry nodded. "Yeh. It looks like a hot-shot. Overdose or poison, I can't say. The M.E.'ll tell us, but it looks like some kind of hot-shot to me."

Shayne agreed. "It looks like it. They must have fixed as soon as they couldn't catch me. They've been dead at least that long."

"I better call the M.E. and his wagon," Gentry said.

Shayne and Rourke followed the Chief out into the main room. There was a telephone in the corner. Gentry called in. Tim Rourke looked at Shayne.

"Someone fixed their dope to kill them, Mike?"

"It looks like it, Tim. Someone was scared of them. It's a classical way to get rid of dangerous witnesses or 'friends' in the narcotics racket. A user is always an easy mark for a hot-shot."

"You think someone wanted to silence them? Someone afraid that we were getting too close?"

"It has the look, Tim."

"These men could have led us to someone big. Someone who had to kill them to silence them."

"Maybe, Tim," Shayne said, "but these two aren't going to lead us anywhere."

"Do you have any leads, Mike?"

"Maybe," Shayne said, and glanced toward Gentry. "But it may be too late already. Keep Will company, Tim, and don't let him know I've gone. I don't want to scare my man off with the police."

"Okay, Mike," Rourke said.

Gentry was still talking on the telephone. Casually, Shayne began to wander toward the outside door. He smiled at the uniformed policeman on the door. Gentry continued to speak on the telephone. Shayne eased out the door and strolled off into the night.

Once in the dark he began to walk fast back to the road, and

along the road to where he had left his car. In his car he drove back down the dirt road to the highway, and turned left toward the city. It was probably too late anyway, but now that Crow and Jimmy D were dead, Shayne knew he had to start again almost from the beginning.

XI

THE RUN-DOWN apartment building looked no better at night than it had earlier in the day when he had first come to look for Al Jenks. The yellow-brick seemed even dirtier at night.

The old, slum section was more crowded at night when the denizens of the dark emerged in their element. The lobby of the building still needed a coat of paint, but two ancient derelicts were industriously redistributing the dirt once again with their mops.

Shayne rode up the halting elevator and emerged onto the fourth floor. He walked more warily down the corridor this time. He checked the broom closet where his assailant had hidden earlier. The closet was empty now, and the corridor was silent. Shayne listened at the door of Jenks' apartment.

He heard no sound inside. He was not surprised. It was a thousand-to-one against Jenks still being in the room—or even in Miami. The moon-faced man had been scared and running even before he left the house on the beach.

But there could be something in Jenks' apartment to lead him to the man he really wanted—Snow-Bird. He did not believe for a split second that Al Jenks would have worried much about leaving anything behind. The man had been too scared. No, Jenks was on the run before his feet hit the floor of the apartment.

There was a good chance Shayne would find something in the apartment. He took out his special key ring, studied the lock, and chose a key. The second key he tried opened the door. He stepped into the dingy room. He found something at first glance. It was not what he had expected.

Al Jenks lay in a shabby arm chair facing the door. The moon-faced man seemed to be grinning at Shayne. But it was a grin that would never change. Al Jenks had a third eye in the center of his forehead. The nervous poker player was dead.

Shayne closed the door behind him, and stepped across to the body. Jenks was cold, his body stiff with rigor. Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin.

The moon-faced man had been dead some hours. At least since only a short time after he had left the house at the beach.

The nervous man had not run far or been nervous for long. The single shot showed powder burns. Jenks had sat in the chair and looked up at his death staring down

at him. The fear was still there in the glazed and staring eyes.

Shayne reluctantly searched the stiff corpse. He found nothing at all—no money, no identification, no keys, nothing. Jenks had been stripped. Shayne narrowed his grey eyes, stared down at the stripped dead man, and then turned his attention to the room.

The room was the same as the body—stripped. Only the dead man's few weary clothes had been left. Al Jenks had not been living high. Shayne made a meticulous search of everything there was, and came up blank. He had examined everything he could see, now he turned to what he could not.

He took the drawers out of the bureau, searched the cracks of the wood and the joints, and then searched the insides of the bureau itself. He took up the cushions of the shabby couch and chairs. He felt in all the cracks and crevices. He went down on his hands and knees to search the empty closet.

Finally, there was nowhere else to search except one place. Shayne bent, lifted the body, and laid it on the floor. Then he searched the chair where the body had been. He found nothing. He put the body back and looked for the telephone to call Gentry's office.

He saw the telephone on a small table in a dim corner. He strode to it, reached for the receiver, and stopped. Figures were written in faint pencil on the white wall.



Shayne peered at them. They were telephone numbers. One of them was labelled: *Craig Hauling*.

Another had the scrawled word *barge*.

Shayne heard, in his mind, the conversation of the dead Crow and Jimmy D. They had spoken of the barge. They thought that Snow-Bird might be at the barge, which was near the alley, and which had a telephone.

The redhead picked up the telephone and reported the murder of Jenks. Then he hung up and left the silent room. Jenks still grinned his fixed grin at empty air.

In his car, Mike Shayne drove as fast as he could through the night toward the bay. The dark and silent streets were deserted when he once again reached the alley where James Craig had died. He parked on the street nearest to the bay and got out. He saw nothing that looked like a barge.

Behind him the night seemed to stretch empty as far as he could

see. Ahead piers jutted out into the Bay. Shayne began to walk ahead. Less than fifty yards from the alley mouth he saw a dark shape anchored out in the water. It was a barge or a scow. He looked up and around. He saw no telephone lines. He walked on.

He passed two more barges, but none of them had a telephone line. Then he reached a shabby pier less than two blocks from the alley. An amorphous shape loomed up at the end of the pier. A telephone line ran out onto the pier. Shayne drew the pistol he had borrowed, and moved out on to the pier.

He followed the telephone line through the shifting shadows of the pier. The line went straight on out. The pier was rotten and rickety. Twice his foot broke through the boards and he held his breath in the night.

Nothing moved.

Shayne moved on along the dark pier. He reached the end. The telephone line ended in a box—but it did not end. Another line came out of the box and vanished ahead over open water. Shayne looked down. There was no gangplank, but just beyond the edge of the pier a barge was moored to pilings. The telephone line seemed to go to the barge.

There were no windows on the barge. But on the rear of the black shape there was a kind of box-like housing, and a faint line of light seemed to filter through cracks in

the structure. Mike Shayne studied the distance. It was too far to jump.

He began to look around at the end of the pier. There had to be a way to get to the barge. He found nothing and realized that whoever occupied the barge crossed on some kind of board and then pulled the board onto the barge behind him.

Shayne walked back along the pier. His grey eyes searched the night. Some twenty feet back he found what he needed—a long, flat board. He tested it. It seemed strong enough. The only question now was whether or not it was long enough.

He carried the board back to the end of the pier and stretched it out over the open water. It just reached. His pistol firm in his hand, he walked out onto the board. It sagged and creaked, but it held. Moments later he stood on the deck of the old barge.

The redhead stepped carefully along the littered and rotted deck. He reached the dark shape of the deck housing. A solid door leaned on its hinges. A padlock hung open on the door. There was light from below. Shayne circled the housing and saw something ahead farther to the bow of the barge. It was more faint light.

Shayne stepped very lightly to the new light. It came from a kind of hatch cover. The cover was not on square. A thin opening where it had not been fitted properly showed the light. Shayne lay prone

on the deck and peered through the crack. He saw a strange sight.

The hatch covered a large square opening that led into the hold below. The same hold the stairs inside the housing had to lead to. From where Shayne lay he had a clear view of the lighted area below. It might have been a hold once, the simple bowels of a barge, but now it was something else—it was a well-furnished and expensive apartment.

Shayne saw leather chairs, and polished wood tables, and a long, comfortable couch. A shiny bar filled one corner of the room. There were many bottles behind the bar. Rugs covered the floor. Two expensive arm-chairs surrounded a marble coffee table in the center of the room. In one of the arm chairs Shayne saw the white-haired man from the beach house: Snow Bird.

He had found the private hide-out of Sandor Renyi, alias the Snow-Bird. And he had found Renyi-himself. Now, as he watched, he considered how to get to the man. Where Renyi sat an ugly .45 automatic rested on the coffee table marble. Something else rested on the marble top.

Even as Shayne watched, Renyi picked it up. It was a hypodermic syringe. Not an eye-dropper, and there was no spoon or match. What Snow-Bird held was a regular medical syringe, and instead of the spoon, packet of heroin, and match to melt it, the white-haired man

held a small bottle with the rubber top ringed with metal that was a very familiar sight in any doctor's office.

Shayne watched the dark man insert the needle into the rubber stopper of the tiny bottle and fill the syringe. Renyi put the bottle down and began to roll up his sleeve. Shayne remembered what Gentry had said about Renyi being one of the rare few who could control a small habit. It looked like Renyi took good control, to the point of getting his drugs in safe form.

Probably morphine, or cocaine, or something even less deadly than either of those older drugs. With a clean and sterilized syringe and a safe supply of his drug—

Shayne came to his knees, still watching through the crack. Renyi had his sleeve up, the syringe ready. Shayne had a hunch. A wild, sudden hunch. He ripped the hatch cover up in one motion.

"Drop it, Renyi!"

Below, the man leaped up, looked wildly around, clawed at his pistol.

"Drop that fix! It's a hot-shot!" Shayne shouted hoarsely and jumped down through the gaping hatch opening.

The glass syringe shattered on the floor. Renyi looked up. The automatic started up toward Shayne. Shayne struck the man full in the face with his left arm as he fell from above.

XII

SNOW-BIRD fell as if pole-axed. Shayne hit hard and sprawled sideways on the floor of the elegant apartment hidden under the shabby deck of the old barge. But he held onto his pistol. Renyi struggled up. The pistol of the white-haired man had bounced away across the deep rug. Renyi dove for it.

Shayne kicked it away. Renyi recovered with amazing speed. He caught Shayne's ankle and threw the redhead over backward. He kicked at Shayne's gun hand. Shayne's gun flew up into the air. Renyi dove for the gun. Shayne hit the man with a short left.

Renyi staggered back. Shayne went after the dark man. Renyi grabbed a lamp and threw it. Shayne ducked and caught Renyi with another left and a long, looping right. Renyi went down. The white-haired man saw his pistol only a few feet away. He tried for it. Shayne's big foot came down on his hand. There was a crack of breaking bone and Renyi screamed.

Shayne picked up the white-haired man's automatic. Renyi lay on the floor. The redhead walked to his own pistol and retrieved it. He stuck Renyi's automatic into his belt and covered the man with his own pistol.

Renyi sat up, swearing a string of oaths and holding his broken

hand. Shayne sat on a chair and watched the dark man. Once again he noticed the stick pin—this stick pin had one small pearl missing. Shayne reached into his pocket and held the tiny pearl up in front of Renyi's face.

"This was in the alley where Craig was killed," Shayne said. "You want to start talking?"

"Go to hell," Renyi said in his chilling whisper. The man had been about to have a fix, and yet no strain showed on his face. He sat glaring only hatred and holding his broken hand.

"Why did you kill Craig?"

"I don't know how you got loose from my boys, peeper," Renyi said, "but you won't live long."

"Like Craig?"

"Like Craig, friend. Like Craig."

Shayne sneered. "Knock it off, Snow-Bird. I'll live a lot longer than you. No one's going to give me a hot-shot."

Renyi blinked. "Hot-shot? Who's giving who a hot-shot?"

"Someone just gave both your boys their last fix, Renyi. Crow and Jimmy D are flying way up or way down right now. They're in the morgue, Bird, and you were going to join them. You want to tell me who's after you all?"

Renyi licked his lips and looked toward the small bottle on the coffee table. "Who told you that's a hot-shot, peeper?"

"No one, Bird, it's just a hunch. You want to try it out and see? I've

got a lot of hunches. I've got a hunch you didn't kill Craig, right? I've got a hunch you don't even know who did. I've got a hunch you're worried about who killed Craig, and probably killed your boys. Now, let's test out my hot-shot hunch."

Shayne picked up the bottle from the coffee table and broke the metal seal. He sniffed at it. It had a strange odor. He could not place it, but he knew the smell of morphine. It was something else.

"You tell me," he said, and handed the bottle to Renyi.

The man took it, looked at Shayne. Then Renyi sniffed. The dark face changed, paled. Renyi put out a finger, touched the liquid in the bottle, tasted with a probing tongue-tip. There was a shudder through the immaculate clothes.

"Strychnine," the whisper said. The cold dark eyes looked at Shayne, and the face quivered again. "How'd you know, peeper?"

"I didn't know," Shayne said. "I had a hunch. You didn't kill Craig. You didn't kill your two men. The way Crow and Jimmy D talked it had to be someone else, some other force that killed Craig and them. A force I was sure would kill you."

"Yeah, we didn't burn the sucker."

"Sucker?"

"Craig," Renyi said. "We don't burn him."

"Did you try to shoot me? At Jenks place?"

"You? Hell, no. We never saw you until you showed up on the beach."

Shayne nodded. It was clear in his mind now. The attack on him had been strange, peculiar. The man had shot twice, missed twice at a range no man should have missed at, and then just knocked him out.

Jenks could have surprised the attacker, it was logical in its way, and if what Crow and Jimmy D had said had not made him think that they had not killed Craig he might have accepted the idea of his lucky survival in the corridor. But when he realized that the three narcotics men had not killed Craig, it all became something else.

It became a quiet, careful leading of Mike Shayne down a garden path toward narcotics killers. The needle that had so conveniently fallen out of his attackers' clothes onto his, Shayne's, clothes.

"Tell me about Craig's killing, Renyi."

The white-haired man sat in an elegant leather arm chair and watched Shayne. Shayne had the guns, and they were alone on the barge. The scare of the hot-shot was still in the room. It weakened Renyi. It would soon pass, the scare, but now Renyi was weak, might talk and wait for his time to return.

"We went to the alley to meet Craig and get the stuff. We had the date set up, see?"

"Craig was delivering a package of heroin to you?"

"That's it," Renyi said. "We got there maybe five minutes late. I mean, we got there early and we watched a while. I always watch a while before I show in the open."

"Clever. Go on."

"We saw him there. We watched. Then we moved in. Right then he spotted someone in the other street. I guess he figured it was us, only he saw right off it wasn't, and he started to run down the alley.

"Then he sees us, you know? He stops again. He gets blasted, from behind. Two shots. We wait. Nothing happens. The killer don't show. So we moved in and took the stuff and blew fast."

"You never saw who killed him?"

"Not a hair."

"The killer just shot and left him there? How much was the heroin worth?"

"A quarter-million, give or take."

Shayne thought about it. Craig had been carrying \$250,000 worth of heroin. Someone had killed him for it.

"Do you think the killer saw you, Renyi?"

"Maybe," the white-haired man said.

"The killer, or killers, made no attempt to get the heroin?"

"Not that we saw," Renyi said. Shayne tugged slowly on his left

earlobe. "Where did you get whatever you have in that bottle?"

"I got my sources," Renyi said. "You want to figure how it got the hot-shot in it? So do I, peeper. That bottle was here on the barge maybe a couple days. Somebody got my hideout pegged."

"Both your hideouts. It looks like the beach house was pegged, too. Someone wanted to get rid of all of you."

"Yeah," Renyi said. "You got any ideas, peeper?"

"Do you still have the heroin here?"

"Hell, no. That was cut and distributed yesterday."

Shayne reached into his belt and took out Renyi's .45 automatic. The white-haired man watched his every move like a snake.

"You're sure this is your automatic?"

"Yeah, peeper, I'm sure."

"Let's take a look around, and be very careful what you find, Bird," Shayne said.

"What do we look for?"

"Another forty-five automatic," Shayne said.

Ten minutes later Shayne and the white-haired narcotics peddler stood in a dark corner of the hidden apartment and looked at the .45 automatic in Shayne's hand—a second automatic.

Renyi stared at it. "It ain't mine," he said.

"No," Shayne said. He placed this gun in his pocket. "Now tell

me about exactly what your deal was with James Craig."

Renyi shrugged. "It's my system, peeper. I never use a regular carrier, you know? I always find someone who needs money real bad and make a deal. I had this shipment coming in; never mind how or where. I needed a carrier. I talked to Al Jenks, and he told me that Craig was in bad money trouble.

"Jenks sort of hinted at the job to Craig. The sucker needed the dough real bad. He kind of backed-off a while; then I guess he just had to have money. So he said he'd talk. Jenks told him to come early. We talked in Jenks place, and he agreed to do the job. I gave him time and place, and we split."

Shayne rubbed his chin. "That's all?"

"Yeah, except that was early. He had a while. So I kept an eye on him a while. He didn't do nothin' except have a drink with a dame. Then he showed up at the poker game, played a while, and went to pick up the 'H'. He got the stuff, brought it to the alley, and got blasted. He didn't even get paid."

Renyi laughed in his low whisper. The narcotics peddler seemed amused by the idea that Craig had not even been paid. Shayne was thinking of something else.

"He talked to a woman *after* he knew about the job, and *before* he



went to the poker game? Just a woman?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"You don't know who the woman was?"

"Hell, no."

"Okay, come with me."

"We going somewhere?"

"Yes," Shayne said. "We're going somewhere."

XIII

HE GOT THE address of Dolores Sanchez from the answering service of the Craig Hauling company. It turned out to be a neat, small white house surrounded by flowers. The garden showed a lot of work and care, and the lights were on inside the house.

Shayne led Renyi up to the door. The white-haired man looked around nervously as if he had never seen a house like this. The quiet respectability of the neighborhood seemed to make Renyi uneasy.

A small, heavy woman answered Shayne's ring.

"Yes?"

"We'd like to see Dolores Sanchez, if we can."

"Dolores? What do you want with my daughter?"

"Just a few words, Mrs. Sanchez," Shayne said. "Is Dolores at home?"

"Well—" the woman hesitated.

"It's quite important," Shayne said.

The older woman nodded. "All right, come in."

Shayne and Renyi stepped into the small, clean living room. Mrs. Sanchez vanished. Shayne watched Renyi, and listened closely to be sure he heard any unusual sounds in the house. But moments later Dolores Sanchez came into the room dressed in a robe and with her long dark hair down.

"Mr. Shayne," Dolores Sanchez said. "Is something wrong?"

Shayne glanced at Renyi. The white-haired man shook his head. No, Dolores Sanchez had not been the woman Craig had talked to.

"You said that Craig left the office about four o'clock. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"You didn't see him again?"

"He didn't come back that night. We were working late, as usual, but Mr. Craig never returned."

"Did his wife call to check on him?"

Dolores Sanchez blinked, thought. "Why, no, I don't think she did that night."

"Was everyone else there?"

"Yes."

"Rogers and Donato? All evening?"

"Yes. Of course, they had to go out on jobs."

"So they weren't there all the time?"

"No, but that was the way it always happened. That's our kind of work, Mr. Shayne."

"You implied that maybe Mrs. Craig was having an affair. Who with, Miss Sanchez?"

"I don't know, Mr. Shayne, and I told you that that was only a kind of impression I got from all her calls. I'm not sure of it."

"You have no idea about the man?"

"Well—no, not really."

"And that's all you can tell me?"

"Yes, Mr. Shayne."

"Okay, and thank you."

Dolores Sanchez hesitated. "Is —is this about who killed him, Mr. Shayne?"

"Yes."

"You don't think it was narcotics people? The police talked to me about narcotics. They seemed to think the company might be involved in drugs, but I assured them that as far as I knew the company was uninvolved."

"I don't think the company was involved either," Shayne said. "Not in narcotics."

"Then—" Dolores hesitated.

"Yes, Miss Sanchez, then—I think the company is involved, but not in narcotics. And thank you again."

Shayne beckoned to Renyi and the two men left. In Mike Shayne's car, the drug-peddler watched the redhead. Shayne drove away without speaking.

"You got an idea, peeper?" Renyi said.

"I've got an idea," Shayne said.

"You figure someone got wise to my deal with Craig and tried to use me and my boys for patsys?"

"That's the smell of it, Renyi."

"Yeah. Someone figured on blasting us all and planting the gun. The cops would figure some other junk-men and us was in a rumble, and Craig got it in the fight."

"You made a good suspect."

Shayne drove fast now. The city was humming with the night life of the gaudy coast. But Shayne had something else on his mind than the gaudy night of the Miami Coast.

He reached Manor Oaks and the small ranch-type house of James Craig. The air of desolation still hung over the flower-drenched tract house. A single light burned at the rear of the house. Mike Shayne pushed Renyi ahead of him up the walk to the front door.

There was a long wait after his ring. At last he heard slow steps coming from somewhere far back

in the house. The door opened the same small crack, on the chain.

"Mrs. Craig?" Shayne said.

The eyes peered out. "Mr. Shayne? What do you—"

"Something's come up. We've found the men who were involved with your husband. They are narcotics peddlers, Mrs. Craig."

"Narcot—Just a minute."

The door closed, the chain was removed, and the door opened again. The widow stood in the opened door, a shadowy figure in the dark hall. The round figure of the small woman was wrapped in a robe at this hour.

"Come on," the widow said. Her eyes looked at Renyi.

Shayne and Renyi followed her into the living room. She turned on a light. She faced the two men. Shayne looked at Renyi.

The white-haired man nodded. "Yeah, that's her."

The widow stared at Renyi. Something moved in her eyes. Something wary and hard. The distraught widow was not so distraught as she pretended.

"You said you didn't see your husband that day after he left the house in the morning," Shayne said.

"No, I didn't, Mr. Shayne. I didn't say anything about that day."

"But you implied it, and you told the police that."

"I suppose I forgot. It's been something of a strain. James killed by those narcotics men. You did

say that that was what you've learned, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't," Shayne said bluntly, "and you didn't forget about seeing your husband that day."

"Didn't I? What did I do, Mr. Shayne?"

"You lied, Mrs. Craig. You lied all the way."

XIV

THE WOMAN SAT down on the couch and stared at Mike Shayne and Renyi. Her pretty face was not so pretty. Hard lines and a coldness in the eyes had formed like a wall on her face.

"You lied all the way," Shayne repeated. "Not so much by commission as by omission and hints. You didn't tell me about meeting Craig. You didn't tell me that you had a lover. You—"

The woman jumped up. "How dare you! I don't have to sit here and—"

"Sit down!" Shayne snapped.

The woman stared, sat, her small face fixed toward Shayne.

"You led me down the path, Mrs. Craig," Shayne went on. "You quite cleverly planted a whole picture in my mind: the husband who worked late and had little to show for it. The husband who was supposed to be at work but often wasn't there. I was led each step of the way from you, to the office and the gambling; to the need James Craig

had for money, and to his nervousness that afternoon."

"Well, it's all true!" the woman said.

"Yes, everything was true, except for the murder, and the fact that you and your boy-friend knew all about what Craig was up to that night!"

"And just who is this boy-friend?" the woman sneered.

Shayne smiled a thin smile. "A man who always knew when Craig was busy. A man who was out of his office on jobs. You see, Dolores Sanchez is right. When you called the office you weren't checking on Craig, you were checking to be sure he was there! So you and your lover could have a clear field.

"He had to be someone Craig knew, and the only man who really could profit from Craig's death by marrying you and getting hold of the company! It must have seemed like a great idea—save the company from being ruined by Craig, and get the company by marrying Craig's widow. And you told me yourself who will run the company now that your husband is dead."

The noise came from behind Mike Shayne. He whirled, too late. Barney Rogers stood there with a gun in his hand, and the gun was trained on Shayne and Sandor Renyi.

"You're a smart man, Shayne," Rogers said, "but not smart enough."

Shayne watched the big man.

"You can't make it, Rogers. You should have killed me when you were in that mop closet. Only that wasn't the plan, was it? No, you wanted me to find the drug peddlers and pin Craig's killing on them."

Rogers shrugged. "It was a good plan. I don't know how it slipped." The big man glared at Renyi. "Craig was ruining the business. Helen and me, we've been in love for years. She was going to get a divorce, but Craig just kept ruining the business. I had to stop him."

Shayne nodded. "So you got the idea of killing Craig, saving the business, and marrying Mrs. Craig. That way you got it all. Only you couldn't figure how to kill him until you found out about the deal with Snow-Bird here."

Rogers laughed. "It was a perfect set-up. Craig was real nervous that day. He told Helen enough so we knew what was up. He told her about the alley, and about the three punks. I cased the alley and the beach house and the barge.

"When Craig showed at the alley I killed him. Then I fixed up those hot-shots, and planted the gun on the barge. They should all be dead! The gun should have been found! But you had to come along and louse it all up!"

"You faked that attack in the corridor to make me sure it was junk-men who were involved. You knew Jenks, or someone, would lead me to the Bird here."

"What went wrong?" Rogers snarled.

"You forgot something, Rogers," Shayne said. "You forgot that you can't count on junkies. Crow and Jimmy D talked too much where I could hear them."

"They should have been dead before you ever got there!"

"That's what I mean. You can't trust them. They didn't take their shots soon enough, and Bird is still around to talk."

Rogers grinned a cold, deadly grin. "Yeah, but not for long. You're smart, Shayne, but this was dumb. I'll just tell the cops that Bird brought you here, there was a fight, and you both got killed. They'll close the books on the whole thing. You're the only one who knows the truth."

"Don't be too sure," Shayne said. "Maybe I already told the police, and there's still Helen here. She knows."

Rogers' eyes flickered toward Helen Craig. In that instant Renyi jumped. Rogers whirled and fired.

The slug struck Renyi in the shoulder and knocked the white-haired man over backwards. Rogers swung the pistol toward Shayne. The redhead had no time to move. He had only an instant to fire from his pocket.

The two shots exploded together. Shayne felt the hot lick of the bullet along his neck. Rogers went over backwards. For a long minute there was only silence.

Then Helen Craig screamed and ran to the fallen Rogers. Mike Shayne touched his neck. The bullet had drawn blood but it was only a small flesh wound. He stood over Rogers. His one shot had hit the big man between the eyes. Rogers had died instantly.

Helen Craig sobbed over the dead man. In the corner Renyi was swearing and holding his shoulder. The white-haired man was in bad shape, his hand broken and his shoulder shattered. Shayne did not feel any sympathy.

Renyi tried to grin. "You got him, peeper. Great work. I'll testify."

"You'll testify," Shayne said.

"Yeah. I saved your life, peeper."

"You saved my life," Shayne said. "And you saved your own. With luck you might even have a life to live. If you play ball, talk long and fast, they might let you off with life."

Renyi's face turned yellow. "Let me off? For what? You heard him! He killed Craig, and Crow, and Jimmy D, and tried to kill me!"

"That's right," Shayne said, "but you killed Al Jenks."

Renyi blinked. "What?"

"You killed Jenks, Renyi. I figure you even used the other gun I've got. Your own gun, right? Rogers killed the others, but he had no reason to kill Jenks."

Renyi said nothing. Helen Craig was still prostrate over the body of

the man who had killed to get her. Shayne strode to the telephone to call Will Gentry. He waited while Gentry came to the telephone.

He looked at the sobbing widow who had tried to have everything

through murder, and now had what murder always brought—nothing. And he looked at Renyi. Even Tim Rourke would probably get his narcotics story—Renyi would tell everything to save what was left of his rotten life.



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November—1967

the hour of the man

by NORMAN DANIELS

Long had he sat there, staring out into the darkness, waiting. To kill a man, it was not nice. But his brother was in his grave, and he would not rest—not while Gomez lived . . .

MANUELO walked down the sun-drenched street and felt hot and uncomfortable. This was the neighborhood where he used to wear a light weight leather jacket emblazoned on the back with the name of the gang he headed. *The Whips!* Everybody else called their gangs by much more common names. It took Manuelo to think of this one.

He wasn't wearing that jacket now, but a grey suit. A suit his father once wore, and it was of good quality. He looked ahead and walked slowly, full of the sadness which he had just walked away from.

Hernando, his sixteen-year-old brother, two years younger than Manuelo, was dead, and only this

same morning the priest had said the last rites over the grave. By now, the earth was smoothed, the two poor bouquets of flowers placed at the head. The day was half over and there remained but one thing to do.

He was a short, thin young man, walking slowly down the street of this town, which was one of the many that make up what is classified as Los Angeles. He took off the coat and let the breezes dry his shirt and he felt better.

The car wasn't marked, but when it pulled to the curb suddenly, he knew it was the police. Two men got out. He didn't know the driver, but the other man was Sergeant Horgan, who was investigating the murder of Manuelo's brother.



Horgan said, "Okay, kid, you know the routine."

"Si," Manuelo said. "I know the routine."

He approached the car, leaned forward, put his hands on top of it to brace himself and patiently allowed the detective to search him. There was nothing. Manuelo was hardly that foolish. Besides, why did he need a weapon?

"Okay," Horgan said, and helped him straighten up. "Now listen, kid, we've checked on you and we know you're doing pretty good. At the laundry where you work, the boss says you're the best presser he's got and you've lasted a whole year. That's fine. Don't spoil it now."

"I go," Manuelo said, "to sit alone in the clubroom of the Whips,

to which my brother belonged. Do not tell me that is against the law."

"You're going there to sit and plan how to knock off Gomez; that's what you're going to do, Manuelo. Now listen to me. You ran with this pack of dogs—in fact, you led them—but you got smart enough to see what that would get you, so you quit. Fine! That's great! Gomez took your place. Your brother Hernando was shaping it up to take the boss-man's job from Gomez, so Gomez arranged a rumble and in the fight Hernando was knifed."

"Si," Manuelo said coldly. "I know that. I have just come from his funeral mass."

"You know and we know that Gomez knifed him to get him out of the way. The rumble was a set-up just to get rid of Hernando. We can't prove it now, but we will, and when we do, Gomez is going to be punished for it. I promise that, Manuelo."

"I shout, *olé!*" Manuelo said. "I approve! Now I go to sit alone and think of my brother. That is not bad, eh? To think of one's newly dead brother."

"I can't stop you," Horgan said, "but I'd hate to come after you for killing Gomez. He's not worth it. Okay, kid. Keep your nose clean, now."

"*Gracias.*" Manuelo bobbed his head.

Horgan turned back for a moment. "Oh—that clubhouse. No

sense going there. We cleaned it out, everything."

"*Bueno*, Sergeant Horgan. That is good."

Horgan and his driver got back into their car and drove down the street, passing Manuelo, who had resumed his slow walk in the sun. Horgan waved and Manuelo flashed him a smile, with his very white teeth glistening like a movie star's jackets. Manuelo kept going.

He reached the old, run-down shack, well behind the street line. The Whips had rented it for ten dollars a month and made a comfortable clubhouse of it. There'd been some good times there. Hernando had played the guitar very well indeed and he could sing and wiggle as well as Presley, and his songs made more sense. His mother had taught them to him and they'd been gay and lively.

Sergeant Horgan spoke the truth. The one room had been stripped clean except for an orange crate thrown in one corner. The police were doing that lately, cleaning out clubrooms of gangs that engaged in rumbles. Manuelo upended the orange crate and carried it to the center of the room. He folded his coat and placed it very carefully on a windowsill, where it would not get unduly soiled. Then he sat down on the crate to wait.

He was glad that Sergeant Horgan had come along and searched him right there in the open. If he'd had a weapon, he'd have been

taken away in the police car. Now Gomez must know he was weaponless. Gomez probably would not come otherwise. But Gomez must come!

Oh, he would have a gun, perhaps; possibly just a knife, and most certainly if he had neither of those, he would arm himself with a length of heavy chain. That was the favorite of Gomez—wolf, savage tiger, coyote!

For Manuelo had quietly passed the word that he was back and he would take over the leadership of the gang. That would break Gomez's heart and he was bound to fight for it. And what weapon would Manuelo have when he faced this coyote of coyotes? Just his hands. His two bare hands. There was no bullet that could stop him, no knife to turn him away, no heavy chain swung at his skull to down him. He had two hands and he knew how to use them.

It was a shame because, as Horgan said, he was doing very good at the laundry. How that came about was something to make him smile, because this was one thing Hernando had spoiled. Of course, Hernando did not know this, but it was true. Manuelo had quit the gang and gone to work because he had fallen in love for the first time in his life.

She was Maria, a slim, lovely little thing with black hair and eyes and a flashing smile. For her, he

had sought out a job at the laundry and talked the owner into giving him a chance, even if he had been in trouble with the police and even if he had headed up the Whips, which was a gang nobody liked.

So he was put on the big steam press, where he stretched out pants and coats fresh from the cleaning fluid, until he believed there could not be that many suits in all of Los Angeles. He worked hard, he sweated, and he sponged the suits and spot cleaned them and turned out the best work the laundry had ever seen. Two weeks after he got the job, Hernando told him he was like this with Maria.

It was true. Maria loved Hernando, who was still of the Whips, while Manuelo, who had quit the gang and gone to work just for her, had lost her. It would not have been so funny if she hadn't fallen in love with Manuelo's brother. It might have been a very serious thing if, for example, she had fallen in love with that no-good coyote, Gomez. Something would have happened then—to Gomez.

An hour went by. The sunlight was slowly moving across the dirty floor of the clubroom and Manuelo sat on the orange crate as if it were an overstuffed, comfortable chair. The sweat was dried off him now. He was thirsty, but he must not leave. Gomez could come any time.

He wouldn't wait long, because Gomez liked to be the hunter and not the hunted, and he knew that,

unless he came, Manuêlo would seek him out.

Sitting there, alone, Manuêlo felt like a small boy who had done some wrong and was being punished for it. He'd always felt like a small boy. Perhaps that was because his father was long dead and his mother must have babied her two sons too much.

Sometimes, after he worked two or three hours overtime at the laundry, Manuêlo felt grown up in the degree of tiredness he endured, but it wasn't the same. It wouldn't be right until he actually felt full grown. Maybe killing Gomez would provide that mysterious spark which turns a boy into a man. Not that it mattered any more, because man or boy, he was going to kill Gomez.

He could hear the happy cries of the Whips, still lingering in this room. It had been quite a place, decorated with old posters stolen from advertising firms specializing in movie billboards. There'd been some pretty good magazine pictures too, the kind that are sold as art. The Whips had chipped in for some furniture—beaten up stuff, but it was their own. They were careful, at Manuêlo's insistence, that nothing stolen ever be left in the clubhouse. The police had an annoying habit of visiting them often.

Of course, he hadn't always been the leader. Gomez had once led the pack and Gomez seemed to

have a knack for knowing who might unseat him. That was why he'd told Manuêlo to go home to his mama, like a good little boy.

That was when Manuêlo had stepped up to him and bared his teeth and called him a piece of rotten fruit to his face, and when Gomez swung, Manuêlo had simply ducked away from the blow, gone in with his head down, brought up his hard skull against Gomez's chin, tripped him and, as Gomez fell, he'd chopped at the back of his neck with the side of his hand. Then he'd kicked Gomez until the writhing, groaning leader had sworn Manuêlo would be admitted to the gang.

Even then, Gomez knew he was no longer the leader. Manuêlo was smarter; he looked so church-wise innocent, like a boy walking away from Mass at which he'd served as altar-boy. Even his mother was fooled, and the cops never suspected he was the one who picked the victims to be rolled, the small outlying stores to be robbed, the girls to be allowed to join and when—and where—the Whips would meet other gangs in pitched battle.

They'd been exciting months. There'd been the thrill of being a leader, of making the others jump like monkeys, of kissing the girls and taking them out.

Now it was over and Hernando was dead and Gomez must be punished, because the police would never arrest him. The police were

all right, but they couldn't operate without evidence and nobody in the Whips would ever so much as whisper the truth to them. Not even Manuêlo would have wanted that. The Whips took care of their own troubles and now he was with them again. He was once more their leader and he was going to kill Gomez.

He sat there, thinking back on the time when he had met Maria. Most of the girls he'd known had voluntarily come to the gang, or been brought in by members. Maria had all but spit in his face when he told her, rather proudly, that he was Manuêlo, leader of the Whips.

That had been the third time he'd taken her out. The first two times he had said nothing, inspired by some uncanny instinct which warned him not to brag. The third night he'd had too much wine to drink—too much sneaky pete—and it had loosened his tongue.

She stood up and pointed to the door leading to the street. They'd been standing in the murky hallway of the tenement house where she lived.

"*Vamos!*" she'd said crisply. "Do not come back."

"But Maria *mia*," he'd pleaded, "what have I done to make you so angry? Is it because I am one of the Whips? That I am their leader?"

"*Ai*, it is no honor, Manuêlo. They are no different from the other gangs. You are no different



than the other leaders. No good!"

"*Ai, caramba*, what a thing to say," Manuêlo had countered. "We are many, we are feared; sometimes we are rich."

"Always you are thieves and you run with girls who are no good. You are hated and never respected. You are feared only because you are many. Alone, none of you could stand up to my twelve-year-old brother. I will have nothing to do with such as you. Therefore, go at once and, if we meet again, give me the chance to cross the street before we pass."

He'd done some solid thinking that night. He'd roamed the streets for hours—downtown, where the gangs didn't often go. Maria was right about many things and, among them, was the fact that, alone, he didn't amount to much.

It suddenly had all seemed so useless. Where was he getting, where was he headed? At seventeen, he should be earning a living. Some day he would be old, maybe thirty-five, and whoever heard of a gang leader so aged? It was time

for a man to get married and raise a family. With a woman such as Maria, it would be a pleasure, even though it meant losing the gang and becoming one of the working stiffs they called saps.

To get married, he required money. To get money, he must either turn bigger thief than he was, or go to work. He chose the latter, and found it much harder than the former. A thief was his own boss, a worker had to say "Yes, sir", mostly, and snap into it when the boss said something sharp.

Then there was that jail term to explain and, for three days running, prospective bosses were interested up to the point where he told them he'd been in jail. He did so, because he did not regard it as a secret and anyway, it would come out some day and he did not wish to be fired. It was better not to get the job.

The man at the laundry was a kind man. He listened and he clucked his tongue and asked Manuelo, if he had really been guilty of rolling that drunk and when Manuelo said, "Si, I rolled him," the laundry owner had smiled and said Manuelo was the first jail-bird he ever knew who admitted he was guilty. He also said that Manuelo should report for work at eight in the morning. Manuelo was there at seven.

That night he took Maria out. She wouldn't see him at first, but he waited in the tenement hallway

until she came down and then he told her very firmly, though he spoke softly and with great tenderness.

"I have listened to you, Maria, and I have heeded what you say. I no longer run with the Whips. I have given up my leadership, and I now press clothes in a fine laundry, and I am to be paid every week."

She kissed him. He should have known then that her feelings were not on the same plane as his. Her lips were too cool, her responses without spark, but still he had made her happy and maybe she would find it in her heart soon to love him.

She'd gone out with him alone, from then on. It was nice to have money. He even gave his mother some, for which she was pathetically grateful, and Hernando sponged on him continually because the Whips weren't doing very well in the jack-rolling or shoplifting business. It was all due to Gomez's leadership, which had no imagination.

He bought Maria a small gold-plated locket. It was the first time he had ever bought any girl jewelry and it made him extremely proud and happier than Maria had been with it, and she'd kissed him three times.

That was the way it went until Hernando met Maria. Almost at once, it was evident that whatever Manuelo lacked, Hernando had.

That something which made Maria's eyes shine and her smile so full of pleasure as to be heart-warming just to look at.

They didn't see one another in any underhanded way, except one time when they agreed they were in love. Then, hand-in-hand, they'd marched up to Manuelo one night and right there, in the presence of his mother, they told him they were very much in love.

Manuelo didn't look for another girl. It was no use, because there'd be no other Maria for him. There was no anger in him either. What was one to do when his own brother took his girl away from him? The only thing Manuelo did was warn Hernando to get out of the Whips and find a job.

"*Si, si,*" Hernando had said. "I have made up my own mind to that, but first, there is one little job to be done. I need money—plenty pesos, my brother. It costs a great deal to buy a diamond ring and Maria shall have one."

"You are foolish as you are young," Manuelo had told him, "but I have known for a long time there is no way to change your mind when it is set. So—be most careful."

The job had never been pulled off. Gomez set up a rumble and Hernando had to go along with it and, in the fight, someone had stabbed Hernando. There could be no doubt but that Gomez had done it. There were whispers, meant to



reach the ears of Manuelo, that there were eye-witnesses and the knife had been found by the police and shown to Manuelo. He shook his head when they asked him to identify it, but he knew it belonged to Gomez.

Now Gomez would have to pay for what he had done. A brother must avenge the death of a brother. Not even the tearful pleadings of his mother could dissuade him. A thing had to be done.

He dug his heels into the side of the orange crate and saw that it was getting to be dusk. He'd been there a long time and Gomez hadn't shown. But he would. If it took two, three days, Gomez would show and Manuelo would be there, waiting for him. Perhaps Gomez was in hiding from the police, but

the word was out. It wouldn't be too long.

Manuelo's mind went even further back—to Guadalajara, where he had been born. Where his father had run a small truck farm on the outskirts and Manuelo had padded along in the dirt beside the plow and shrilly yelled "Burr-r-o," to get that balky, cranky old mule to move a bit faster. Perhaps, had his father lived, he'd still be there, grubbing in the dirt. But even that was better than this. Better than sitting here and waiting for a murderer to come so he might kill him.

He was hungrier than ever and possessed of a mighty thirst, but he would not leave. He could face hunger and thirst like a man. His father used to tell him how lucky he was to be a boy without worries or cares, and to think about, and dream about, growing into a man too fast, was throwing away a happy part of life. Right now, Manuelo wished he felt like a man. He lacked the feeling and he knew it, because he couldn't settle down long enough to really think things out.

Of course this killing of Gomez needed no thinking out. That was something very necessary. But afterwards, when the killing was over and Hernando could rest better, then what? Should he run from the police and keep on running? Or should he go to them and tell them what he had done and face whatever they wished to do to him.

He couldn't make up his mind. Maria could advise him, because she thought like an adult and not a child, the way he did. She could give him reasons why he should or should not run away.

He got to his feet, letting the blood run down into his legs again and he did a fast little dance to get the feeling back into them. Then he picked up the orange crate and moved it to a shadowy corner of the room, just to one side of the door. It was now rapidly growing dark. The time when a coyote likes to attack and if Gomez came through that door fast, Manuelo didn't want to be in his way. Not in the darkness.

There were so many things to think about, to consider. If he did this thing, as he must, he would hurt his mother and he would cause his very kind boss to shake his head and decide never again to take a chance on some Mexican who'd been in trouble before. It would be too bad to lose the job because Manuelo had that pressing machine working so well it seemed to talk back to him when he scolded it, as if to say, "Perfection is perfection, and the limit of things, and why should you curse such a fine machine?"

Then there was Maria, who had left the wake only to eat and to sleep for a few minutes at a time. She had mourned as deeply as he, or his mother. He had lost her, that is true, but he still wanted to con-

sider her a friend and he wished to look upon her when he could and imagine perhaps she would love him some day. Even though he knew she would not.

Oddly enough, she must have known what he intended to do, but she hadn't tried to stop him. Perhaps her sympathies were with him, and perhaps she did realize that for Hernando to rest well, Gomez must be destroyed.

Manuelo heard the soft steps outside. He came up off the orange crate like a cat, sidestepped toward the door, put his back flat against the wall and waited. This would be Gomez, sneaking in like the wolf he was. Gomez, puzzled because Manuelo had returned to the club-room, worried that he actually was going to take back the leadership of the gang. Afraid Manuelo was seeking blood vengeance and knew that he, Gomez, was guilty and deserved to die.

A shadow flitted across the floor, created out of faint light from the street lamps some distance away, and the furtively moving figure that approached the door. Manuelo sucked in a quick breath and poised.

The shadow moved again, lengthened and then became human and solid. Manuelo leaped. He made no noise. His right arm was hooked and wound about the neck of his victim while his knee sought the small of the back to bend it while his curved arm cut

off the air to the lungs and his left hand beat off his victim's attempts to struggle free.

The soft, voluminous hair touched his face, caressing it, and he gave a wild shout of horror and let go. It was Maria he had attacked! She went limp, drooping forward until he seized her, held her tightly. Then he told her to sit on the orange crate. She was wearing a beige coat and a matching small hat.

"Maria *mia*, why did you not say who you were? Maria . . . Maria . . . I would not hurt you! Nothing in the world would make me hurt you."

"It is all right, Manuelo," she said. "I am not much hurt . . . just scared. I thought you would be here. Gomez . . . he is coming. Later, he comes. My cousin Garcia told me. He knew I would see you."

"*Bueno*," Manuelo nodded. "I have been waiting long."

"I did not come to warn you," she said. "I came to talk to you. Is it so necessary to kill Gomez?"

"You would not have me do this?" he asked in wonder. "You, who was in love with Hernando?"

"It is because I was in love with Hernando that I am afraid, Manuelo."

"My brother is dead. A coyote killed him and the coyote must die for it. By my hand, Maria, because my hand is just and honorable. This is what Hernando would want me to do."

"There is something else," she said, "even more important." Her voice was very soft and he had never heard it so warm.

"More important? It cannot be, Maria. Perhaps, to your womanly way of thinking, but not to mine. *Ai*, never to mine."

"I carry Hernando's child," she told him gently. "We were to have been married. You know this. I told my parents and they have ordered me out of the house. They do not understand what it is to be in love, Manuelo. Like Hernando and I were in love."

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked at her, there in the semi-gloom. "*Si* . . . you are right, Maria. I say Hernando would want me only to kill this coyote. I still say this is what he would want. But it is different now. There is something else he would want even more."

"I knew you would understand," she said.

"I will marry you," he said. "I will think of the child as my own, for is it not my blood too, as my brother's was my blood? Perhaps one day you will learn I am much like Hernando and you will fall in

love with me. Such things are possible, I have heard."

"Such things are possible," she agreed.

"We shall go then," he said. "Before Gomez comes and forces me to fight with him. I do not wish this now. I have no desire for it. The police say they will take care of him and that is well."

"I did not think you would be so easy to convince, Manuelo," she said.

He took her arm and led her gently to the door. One must be gentle with women who are to be mothers.

"*Ai*, I would not have thought so either. But I have learned much this day, Maria. It began with a funeral, and tears and sorrow and they still linger, but it shall not end in blood and more sorrow, because I have learned to think for myself in this last hour."

"*Si*," she said, with soft satisfaction. "It is true. You have changed."

"I have become a man," he said. "And I am glad, for I was a long time growing up. We shall go now."

They walked out of the empty room.

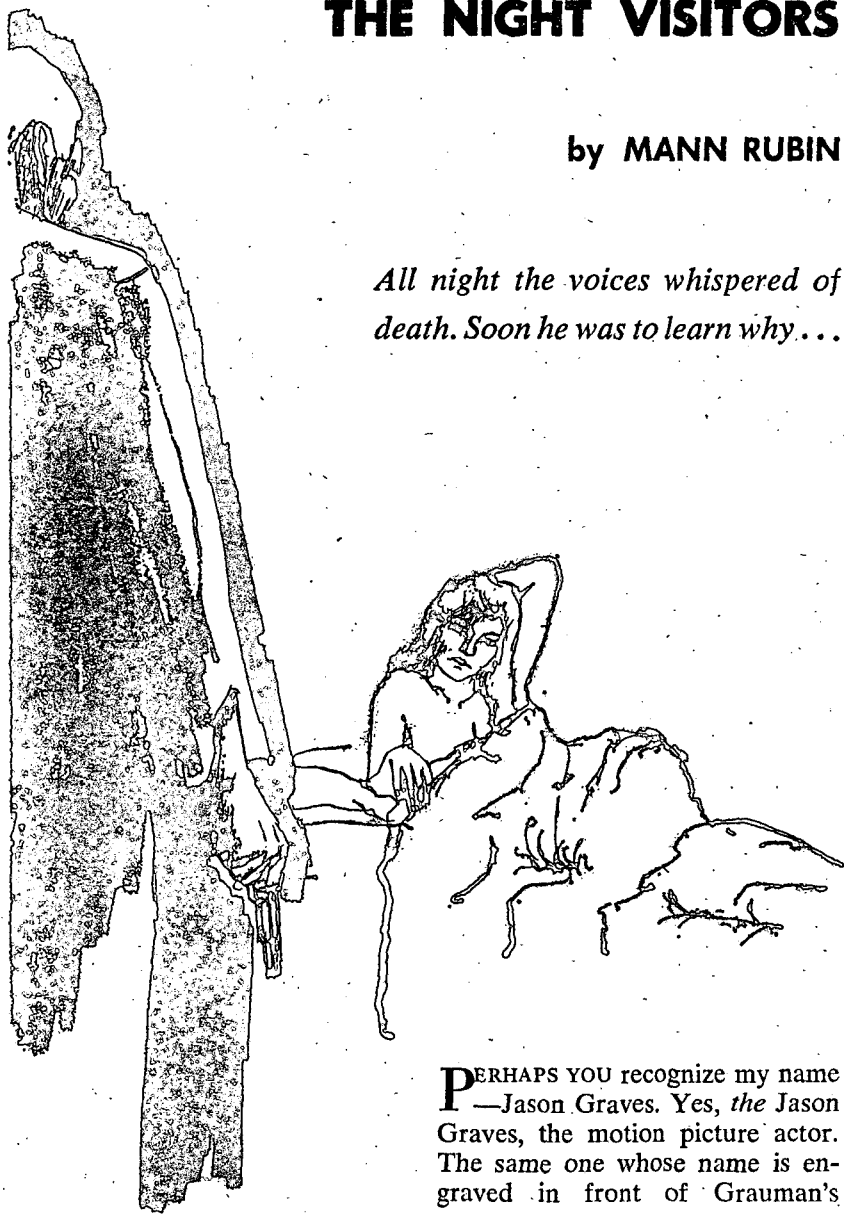


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THE NIGHT VISITORS

by MANN RUBIN

All night the voices whispered of death. Soon he was to learn why...



PERHAPS YOU recognize my name —Jason Graves. Yes, *the* Jason Graves, the motion picture actor. The same one whose name is engraved in front of Grauman's

Chinese Theater, and who owns the mansion in Bel-Air that's always featured in those beautiful home magazines. Thank you. I'm pleased you've recognized me so quickly. It makes it easier to explain why I've come to you at this ungodly hour, and why I'm in this distressing state.

I'm not looking for sympathy. I know exactly what I've done and I'm ready to accept the full consequences. However, I would appreciate a few minutes to put into the record certain facts I feel are tremendously vital to the understanding of this case.

I won't bore you with my background. You can check out the precise number of my films, as well as my Academy Award nominations and the years I've been top box office with my publicity people.

Hollywood's been good to me. All in all, I've been a featured star for almost twenty years. I've wealth, fame, an international reputation, and it hasn't harmed me with the ladies either. In fact, if you care to check back you'll find I've been linked romantically with several of the most exquisite women to ever grace this world. As to all those rumors about the conquests of my various leading ladies—well, I'll leave that to your imagination.

It was pleasant reigning as Hollywood's number one bachelor. It's provided me with many sweet memories. But even the easy, irre-

sponsible life of a famous Don Juan can become dull after a time. One gets bored with ambitious little starlets; wealthy divorcees, and the restless wives of business associates.

In the last few years I found myself tiring of the game. I secretly yearned for something more lasting, a real relationship, a genuine commitment to a woman who would love me, not for my prestige or wealth or celluloid image, but for myself.

And so it was just a year ago that I caused a minor sensation in the film colony by marrying my beautiful young secretary Linda.

I see by your expression that you remember the headlines our elopement caused. My fan clubs, as well as the general public, were astonished that I would give up my title as Hollywood's most eligible man for a girl of twenty-four, so shy and unworldly. And while Linda wasn't as glamorous or sophisticated as most of the women I dated, I found in our relationship a sense of peace and contentment I'd never known before.

You see, the girl adored me, absolutely worshiped the ground I walked on. Right from the beginning she seemed to live for the sole purpose of giving every comfort and tenderness a man could experience. Her eagerness to please was unbelievable. She cooked for me, set up my appointments, answered my fan mail, and ran my house-

hold with a quiet orderliness that even amazed the servants. No wonder that after a tiring day at the studio I raced home to Linda with the delight and fervor of a husband half my age.

Then, a few months ago, our marriage transcended beyond even my expectations when Linda informed me she was going to have a baby. You cannot believe the joy I felt. To think that after so many years of performing as an actor, giving life to other peoples' myths and fantasies, I was finally creating something of my very own!

I, Jason Graves, was going to have a son!

Yes, right from the beginning I knew it would be a boy, a male child cast in my image. Would he look like me? Would he speak like me? Would he follow in my theatrical footsteps? A thousand questions burned at my brain as I prepared for the arrival of my namesake. And Linda—I tell you I couldn't have loved her more. She was everything in the world to me.

Then about a month ago, we had the first inkling of trouble ahead. I remember it had been a very ordinary night for us. Linda and I had dined quietly, watched TV awhile, and then retired early as I was in rehearsal for a new film.

I fell asleep immediately, my arm around Linda, my sleep deep and untroubled, when suddenly I was awakened by someone laugh-

ing and whispering a few inches from my pillow.

Automatically, I threw myself against Linda to protect her from whatever danger lurked there in the darkness. The whispering seemed to grow harsher. I held her tightly, listening, trying to make out the number of assailants there were and what they were up to. Very fortunately, Linda slept on undisturbed.

The sounds continued steadily, hovering above us, breathless, menacing. I was terrified. The last remnants of sleep lifted from my brain and I remembered the revolver I always kept in the drawer of my bed table. Cautiously, I began reaching for it.

By this time I realized that one voice was doing most of the whispering. But who he was speaking to and what he wanted from us remained a mystery.

My hand touched the table and I opened the drawer noiselessly. The voice droned on, so close I could almost feel the man's breath against my ear. Simultaneously, my fingers closed over the hidden revolver and I withdrew it. Now the voice was pleading, desperately beseeching someone to act with valor, to attack. It was all I needed to hear.

I leaped up from the bed, and dashed to the nearest light switch. Instantly our bedroom was flooded with light, the whispering ceased abruptly, and I found myself star-

ing into empty space. There was no one there.

Of course my shouting had awakened Linda. She sat up, blinking and rubbing her eyes. Then she saw me still holding the gun.

"Jason, what is it?"

"Pick up the phone. Call the police," I whispered excitedly. "I think I have him trapped."

There was a partially opened closet door a few feet away, and I moved toward it guardedly. It was the only possible hiding place.

"Darling, I don't understand," said Linda, panic rising in her voice.

"Just do as I say. Hurry. I've captured a sneak thief."

Holding the gun steady, I flung back the door. To my amazement the closet was empty. I stood before it a long moment perplexed. The man had vanished into thin air, for there was nowhere else in the room he could have escaped to, and our bedroom door was still tightly shut. Linda, seeing my distress, left the bed quickly and came to me.

"Jason, what's going on? You look so pale."

I stared at her. "You mean you didn't hear him at all—his mumbling, his crazy laughter? He was right here in the room with us. You must have heard something?"

She shook her head sympathetically. "Darling, you know how well protected this house is. It's impossible for anyone to break in without setting off an alarm. Come back to



bed. You must have had a bad dream, that's all."

Her hand touched my face, cool, reassuring. Suddenly I realized how absurd my behavior was. I kissed her finger-tips.

"You're right, sweetheart. It had to be a bad dream. Forgive me," I said, and let her lead me back to our bed. After all, people do have occasional nightmares; it was the only explanation. By morning I had dismissed the entire episode from my mind.

How I wish I could say that was the end of it, that after another tough day at the studio, I again retired early and soon drifted into a slumber that lasted through the night.

But no. Once again my sleep was penetrated by the constant, gnawing sound of whispers, hissing at me from the darkness with an urgency and terror that made my skin crawl. This time the voice was different; I detected a slight cockney accent as the intruder moved stealthily around me, cajoling some subordinate to carry out

his mission of murder as quickly as possible.

My first impulse was to laugh. Someone was playing a joke, things like this didn't happen in Bel-Air. Yet the more I listened, the more frantic and hysterical the ranting became, until I had no alternative but to shout a warning to Linda while jumping from the bed and racing to the light switch.

You guessed it. Once again I was facing an empty, undisturbed room.

I ran to Linda. "You heard him, too, didn't you? Tonight you must have heard. The man was practically screaming into our ears. Tell me you heard him!"

Tears welled in her eyes. She looked at me as if I were a stranger.

"Jason, I heard nothing. I swear it."

"You're lying," I shouted, shaking her angrily. "You couldn't have slept through all that turmoil. The man was threatening to kill us. Why can't you admit you heard him as clearly as I did?"

I looked down and saw the tight grip I had on her arm; my fingers were actually digging into her flesh. At once I released her, dismayed at my loss of control.

Linda's face lifted to mine. "Oh, darling, how awful for you. Surely, you must be working too hard. Promise me you'll call Dr. Devlin in the morning for some sleeping pills. Jason, this isn't good—not for

you, not for me, and especially not for the baby."

"Yes, above all the baby," I said, holding her gently. "Linda, this is the last time I'll ever disturb your sleep. Do you hear me? I give you my word you'll never again hear anything about my voices—my silly, imaginary voices."

And I kept my promise—even though from that time on, I was never again to know a night in which my tormentors did not visit me and turn the darkness into a living hell. Night after night, week after week they returned.

It didn't matter how many sleeping pills I took or how many times I checked the locks or hired extra security guards to patrol the grounds, somehow an insidious visitor always managed to break into our darkened bedroom and continue his grim cycle of torture and mayhem with more cries, more baffling whispers, more diabolical ranting, until the first light of dawn again drove him into hiding.

At the beginning, when I was still naive enough to think that this nightmare would go away of its own accord, I would simply lie rigid, eyes closed, feigning sleep, in the hope that whoever or whatever was present would soon tire of the game. But I had not reckoned with the patience of my adversaries, nor their cunning.

For you see, it quickly became apparent that it wasn't only one intruder I was dealing with, but an

entire group who took individual turns persecuting me night after night. It was their voices that gave them away; one night the words taunting me would be high-pitched and hurried, the next night the tone would be low and soothing, other times I'd distinguish a cleverly concealed accent, French, Spanish, German.

And so the visits became a ritual, a ceremony of torment, as though each intruder knew instinctively that no matter how passive and detached I pretended to be, his objective was being accomplished. He was striking terror into the deepest crevices of my mind.

Yet, I endured. Night after night, for more than a month, I stood up to every evil connivance and trick they used against me. I absolutely refused to crack. For always lying beside me was Linda, her face so delicate and serene that I would have died a thousand deaths before ever again ruffling the sweet sanctity of her sleep.

And so it would have gone on and on, this twisted, agonizing marathon, and I would have suffered silently and told no one, if it weren't for the thing that happened tonight.

For tonight, finally, it all fell into place and I recognized my nocturnal visitor—his words, his heavy accent, everything about him was identifiable—and suddenly I understood precisely why he was there and what he and his de-

praved company of sycophants were after all along.

Yes, there was no mistaking the arrogance of the man or his soft, mocking laughter. It was Count Vincent Scarbow, himself, lurking there in the darkness, whispering, baiting me, trying to crush out the last of my resistance.

Yes, yes, without a doubt it was him, every syllable he spoke only confirmed his identity more. And who was more qualified to know him better than I? For you see, Count Vincent Scarbow was the villainous character I portrayed in the film I was presently shooting, and he was reciting the same emotional diatribe that I had spoken earlier today before the studio cameras.

At any rate, as soon as I was convinced of the count's identity, it immediately became clear who my other nightly tormentors had been all this time—they were all the other characters I had played during my long film career. They had all joined together secretly to harass and annoy me, each one of them acting out a scene in which I had given them their finest, most dramatic moment.

Well, sir, once I realized that and saw what each of them had hoped to accomplish, why, of course, I put an end to their little game as fast as possible.

And that's why I'm here, Sergeant, to purge myself by confessing to you the murder of my dear

wife. You'll find her body still in our bed.

She suffered no pain. I shot her before she even knew what was happening.

Why are you staring at me so strangely? It was the only way; I had no alternative. You see, it was her fault all along. She and that unborn child, they're the ones to blame. Don't you understand? They were making my film characterizations compete against each other, forcing them to perform, auditioning each one for the role of the child I was bringing into the world. They wanted me to select one of

them as the personality of my unborn son, and they were leaving the final decision up to me.

Now do you see? I had to kill Linda, because if it wasn't for her there'd be no need to make a choice, to pick out one of my performances above all the others. It was asking too much of me. I'm an artist; I don't play favorites. Linda should have understood that. But I guess that's what I get for marrying someone less sensitive than I happen to be.

Oh, yes. Before the reporters get here, I wonder if I might borrow your comb?



MIKE SHAYNE presents:

Next Month's Three Headliners

●
DIE IN HASTE by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

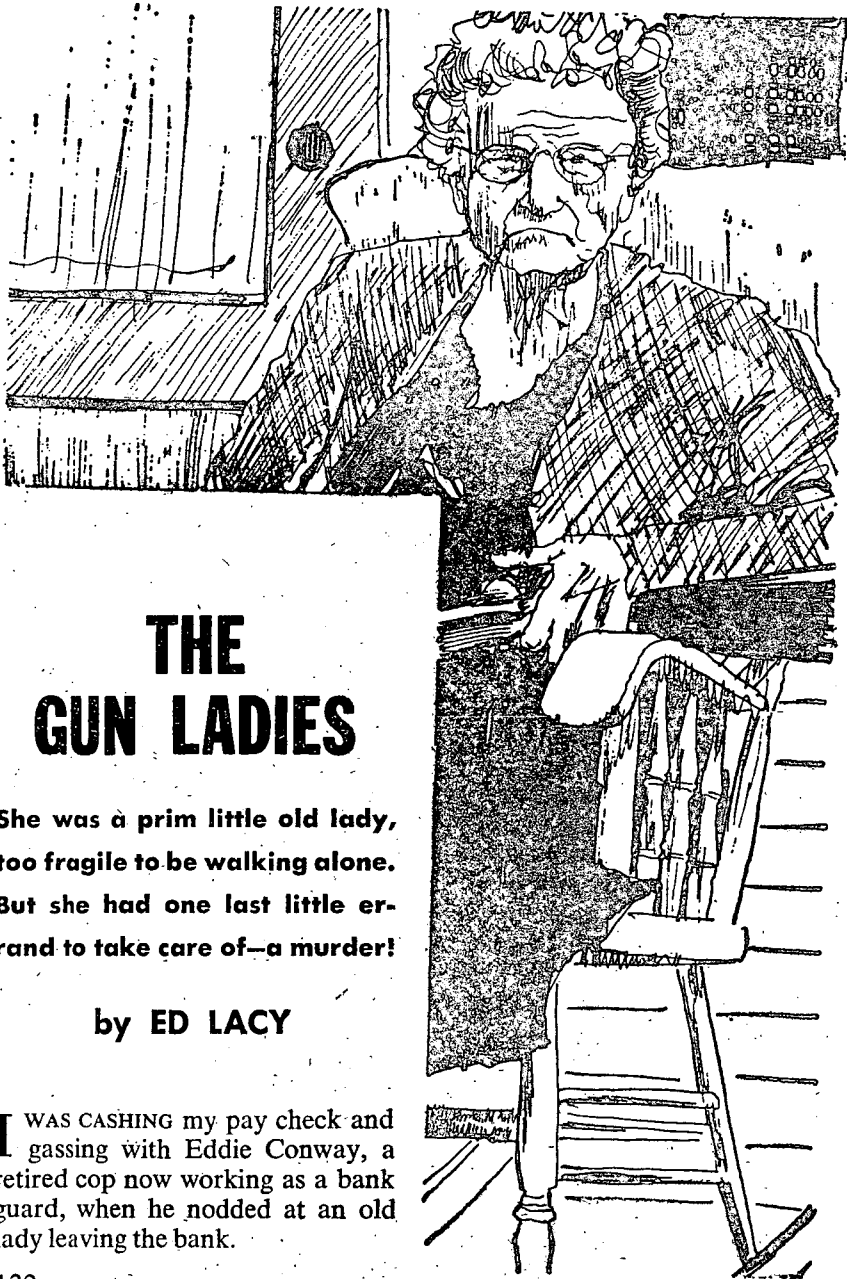
The New Mike Shayne Short Novel

●
THE CONCH HORSE CAPER by **ED LACY**

An Exciting Novelet

●
A HEART CASE by **BRYCE WALTON**

An Extraordinary Novelet



THE GUN LADIES

She was a prim little old lady,
too fragile to be walking alone.
But she had one last little er-
rand to take care of—a murder!

by ED LACY

I WAS CASHING my pay check and gassing with Eddie Conway, a retired cop now working as a bank guard, when he nodded at an old lady leaving the bank.

She was the complete old gal bit — snow white hair, clothes which were 'in' around World War I, too much white powder on her liver-spotted, waxen face.

Eddie said, "There's a weird case, maybe something for your detective squad to keep an eye on. That's Miss Beatrice Simpson, one of our oldest depositors. She and her sisters are rich, the generation-from-generation kind of money."

"So what? That a crime this year, Eddie?"

"Come on. Listen to this: for the past six months or more, once or twice a week, about eleven in the morning, Miss Simpson deposits seven hundred dollars in singles. This is in addition to any other deposits she or her sister may make. Now, I sometimes have lunch with Burl Swan, who works in the Trust Bank over on Broadway, two blocks away. He tells me Miss Beatrice Simpson has a joint account there, too, with her sisters.

"Once or twice a week, in the mornings, she withdraws this seven hundred dollars in singles, walks over here to deposit it. In the meantime she mails the Trust Bank a check for seven hundred dollars, drawn on our bank. He once told her not to walk around with so much cash and she told Burl to mind his business. Ain't that nutty?"

"You mean she takes the dough out of one bank, walks over to put it in an account here, then gives

the Trust Bank a check drawn on this account?"

Eddie nodded his big head. "Yeah, like taking money from one pocket and putting it in another pocket, then switching it back. But, get this other crazy angle: Burl tells me another sister, and they're all over seventy, follows Beatrice Simpson as she carries the seven hundred dollars between banks, but this other sister is driving an old Buick they own. Real senile stuff."

"Yeah. Why should my detective squad be interested?"

"You know the two blocks between here and Broadway are kind of tough. It's a wonder the old babe hasn't been held up. You never know when there's somebody pretending to make out a deposit slip and all the time casing people leaving the bank with a big chunk of green."

"She doesn't need the police, just a head doc," I said. "She's just one more nut."

But riding back to the precinct house, the name Simpson rang a faint bell in my skull. I have that kind of memory.

In the detective squad room, when I had some free time, I went through our files and there it was eleven months ago, at eleven on a Wednesday morning, a Miss Rose Simpson, sixty-seven, had been mugged after withdrawing several hundred dollars from the Trust Bank, while walking toward the

bus, which would be in the direction of Eddie's bank.

She had been hospitalized with a severe concussion, nearly died. There had been plenty of witnesses: she'd been assaulted by a man about five feet, ten inches, twenty-five years old, white, heavy build, dark, bushy hair, wearing slacks and a windbreaker. After striking the old lady from the rear, with a piece of pipe, he'd snatched her purse and ran off.

I wondered why Miss Beatrice Simpson was making these senseless trips between banks, followed by her sister in a car, for a few days. On the third day I made a point of being outside the Trust Bank at eleven A.M. I didn't see the old babe. But the next morning she walked into the bank and came out a few minutes later, her large, old, pocketbook looking stuffed.

She headed toward Amsterdam Avenue, and the other bank, as I followed her. There was this heavy old Buick about twenty feet behind her and the white-haired woman at the wheel was obviously a Simpson sister.

Miss Beatrice Simpson walked slowly through the crowded street; it took her about fifteen minutes to reach Eddie's bank. She went in and the sister in the Buick parked outside the bank, waiting for her.

Puzzled as to why she wanted singles, making such a large money bundle, I walked casually by the car. On the front seat, next to the

sister at the wheel, I saw an old double-barreled shotgun! I waited until Miss Beatrice Simpson left the bank, her purse looking empty now, got in the rear seat of the Buick.

Then, flashing my badge, I told them, "Police," as I reached in through the window and picked up the shotgun.

The Miss Simpson behind the wheel said, almost primly, if sharply, "You leave that gun alone, officer! We know our Constitutional rights. That is not a concealed weapon!"

I broke the gun. It was loaded. Not wanting to draw a crowd I slipped on to the front seat. "You have the right to carry a rifle on the streets, but it's against a city law to carry a loaded rifle. Let me see your driver's license, please."

As she dug through the bag on her lap, her sister said from the back seat, "Keep calm, Emily."

"I am calm, Beatrice," Emily said, handing me her license.

Going through the motions of reading it, I returned it, asked, "Why are you carrying a loaded shotgun, Miss Emily Simpson?"

"To finish the job you police didn't do!" Beatrice Simpson snapped from the back seat. "And let me see your badge again, officer. It looked odd."

I held up my shield again. "I'm a police lieutenant. What job didn't we do, miss?"

"Nearly a year ago our baby

sister, Rose, was beaten and robbed on leaving the Trust Bank. The poor child has been invalided ever since. I've been walking between banks, carrying money, for the last six months, just hoping the same dirty thief will try it again."

"Then I'd blast the skunk with my shotgun!" Emily Simpson said quickly. "I've done some skeet shooting in my day, know how to use a gun!"

"I recall that case," I said slowly, thinking the 'baby' had to be close to seventy by now. "The police did all we could; the assault had already taken place by the time we got there."

"We gave the police time, but they never caught the skunk. We pay plenty of taxes; you should have staked the street out!" Beatrice said.

"Be reasonable, lady; there's a robbery every minute in a big city. To stake out each mugging would call for a million cops and you'd be taxed one hundred fifty per cent. Do you realize what would happen if you fired this gun, Miss Emily? You'd probably have killed your sister and also wounded or killed a dozen other people on the crowded street."

"Beatrice was to fall to the sidewalk. As for hitting others, the cowards never raised a finger to help poor Rose! We decided to take the law into our own hands. If you want to arrest us, go ahead!

I assure you we shall hire the best lawyers, claim the right of self-protection. If the police can't rid the streets of that skunk, we will!"

"Take it easy, both of you. I can understand how you feel, but enforcing the law is a police job. Ladies, I'm going to forget you have this loaded shotgun, but I don't want to see you carrying it again. Nor have either of you act as bait. It's not—"

"We know our rights!" Emily shrilled. "If you could see poor Rose, a bed case for life, why—"

"I'm sorry about your sister," I cut in, "but this gun act is not only breaking the law, it isn't necessary. We caught the man who assaulted your sister."

There was a moment of silence in the Buick. "You—arrested the rat?" Emily asked. "When?"

"Oh, about seven or eight months ago. A white man, about five feet ten inches, heavy build, dark bushy hair and—"

"That's the skunk!" Beatrice wailed. "Why weren't we informed? Where's the rat now? Out on bail, I suppose, free to attack other women!"

"He's dead. His name was Frank Owens. He was shot in a gun duel with a patrolman, downtown, while robbing a liquor store. Before he died, he confessed to a long list of muggings and other crimes, including robbing a Miss Rose Simpson."

Emily Simpson began to weep

softly, streaking her over-powdered face. Beatrice Simpson asked in a trembling voice, "My God, why weren't we informed, officer?"

"We're busy, haven't time to inform all his victims. And what would be the point? The punk was dead. Of course I was informed, since the assault happened in our squad area and we could close the case." I removed the two shells from the shotgun. "I want you ladies to keep this rifle in your house and stop this act. It's over. Do you understand?"

They nodded. Beatrice handed Emily a lace handkerchief then started sobbing herself. "Thank God it is over! It's been so nerve racking. You don't have to worry about us, officer. Now that we know the skunk got his due, we shall be glad to stay home."

"Fine. Can you drive okay, Miss

Emily? Or shall I drive you home?"

"Thank you, officer, but I can cope. Oh thank you very much and may God bless you!"

I stepped out of the Buick, tipped my hat as they drove off.

I stared at the two heavy gauge shotgun shells in my hand, dropped them into my pocket. A shotgun has a wide fire pattern; both barrels would have wounded dozens of people, started a riot on the crowded street. Man! Two sweet-looking old ladies, acting like teenage punks.

Walking back toward the precinct house, I felt pretty good. Of course the jazz about 'Frank Owens' was a lie. We never bagged the mugger. But crime prevention is the most important part of police work.

Certainly a little white lie wasn't a bad way of stopping a massacre by these biddies.

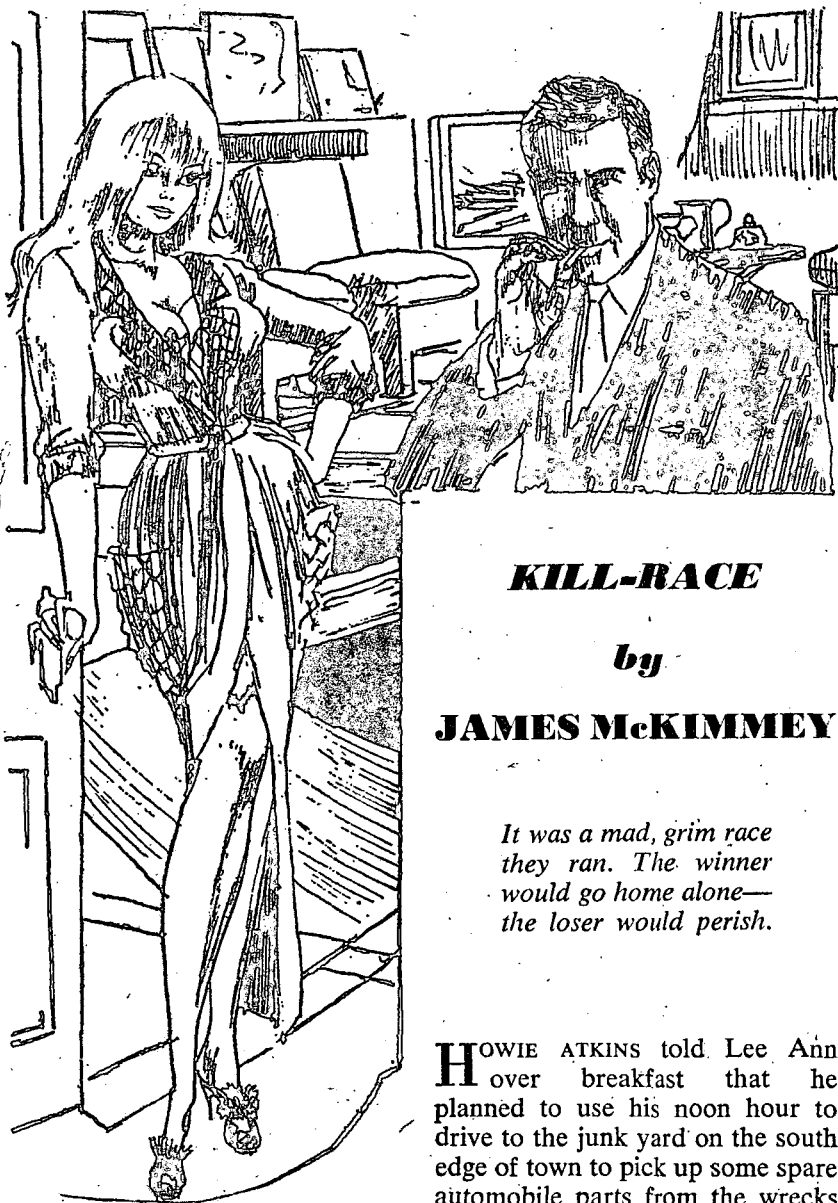
Complete in the Next Issue:

THE CONCH HORSE CAPER

An Exciting Novelet

by ED LACY

Somewhere on that island paradise a slim girl was waiting. And somewhere between us, a death trap—baited for me. I sighed. Business before pleasure. And, one way or the other, this business had to be death . . .



KILL-RACE

by

JAMES McKIMMEY

It was a mad, grim race they ran. The winner would go home alone—the loser would perish.

HOWIE ATKINS told Lee Ann over breakfast that he planned to use his noon hour to drive to the junk yard on the south edge of town to pick up some spare automobile parts from the wrecks

there. But instead, at a minute past twelve, he was driving toward home in his ancient rebuilt Studebaker.

Short, slight, with heavy-lensed glasses seeming to obscure his eyes, owning features that strangers never remembered, he felt his heart thudding furiously.

He knew that this was one of Verne Perry's days off from his duties as a sheriff's deputy. He didn't want to find Verne's Jaguar parked on the narrow road behind his house. Yet he was quite certain that he would.

Cool River lay quietly near the foot of the Sierra Nevada on the California side. It was June and the sun was hot. The hills surrounding the village were richly green from the winter's rains and light snows. When Howie reached that dirt road and began driving slowly between the trees clustered thickly at the sides, his glass-packed mufflers created a sound like the distant roar of lions.

He braked in the shade of a tall oak just short of where the road bent in a tight curve, got out. He was wearing a checked wash-wear shirt, whipcord slacks and leather shoes with crepe soles that cushioned his feet during the stand-up hours he worked in the post office.

The time, he thought, had finally come. He'd realized how much Lee Ann had changed. He'd seen the way Verne looked at her whenever they met on the street or in

the Cool River Tavern. He'd finally overheard the whispering in the post office. Now he would find out for certain.

He strode around the bend and saw the red Jaguar shining in the sunlight. His expression did not change. He was twenty-two years old, and no one had ever seen him lose his self-control.

But his father had often told his mother, "That boy wouldn't let go of his temper if a bulldog was to take hold of his britches and hang on for ten hours. But you mark it—something'll do it, and when that comes he'll blow his cork so it'll shake up the countryside."

A small, curling path ran through the trees toward the rear of his property. Howie trotted along it and stopped when his house came into sight. He crouched behind wild bushes to look at the place he'd learned to love so much.

It was a five-room cottage, well away from the nearest houses, with the big separate garage where he'd been able to set up his tools and bench and machinery and make all the noise he'd ever wanted without bothering anybody, except Lee Ann.

Howie was an amateur mechanic. He spent almost every minute of his spare time fixing up parts, sometimes just for the sake of doing it, but usually to improve that old Studebaker—especially lately. He'd bought the car from

an old-timer who had not driven it all through World War II and not much after that.

In the years he'd owned it, he'd repainted it black and waxed it a thousand times. He'd torn down and rebuilt the engine so that now he had enough horses under the hood to take on almost anything on the road. He'd put in a new heavy-duty frame, engine mount, prop shaft, rear suspension, stabilizer shaft, front and rear shocks. He'd tricked it up by creating a dual exhaust system with chromed tail pipes and installing interior controls which worked the windows up and down. There was even a button on the dash that made the lid of the trunk fly up. He'd put so much into that car—

He trotted to the back of the garage, then around the corner. He went along the side of the house to a kitchen window where a light breeze moved the leaves of an elm over his head. He listened and heard nothing.

He was thinking how, when he'd first seen Lee Ann after he'd got back from the Army, he'd been surprised to see her looking so grown-up. He'd decided then that he wanted to marry her as soon as she finished high school. He had and now that was almost three years ago. She'd been skinny at first, but she'd rounded out, her body becoming ripe and ample. She started using heavier make-up. She even began walking different-

ly down the street, so that men would stop and watch her in a manner they never had before. She wasn't shy any more.

Then Verne Perry had come to town—a tall, muscular man in his late twenties, with a too-handsome face. He was confident and swaggering with a big booming voice. And when Howie had seen how Verne looked at Lee Ann the first time they'd met, he'd felt the only sting of jealousy he'd ever known until then. Now that sting had grown into a feeling like a hot knife thrust into his midsection.

He went on and stopped again under a bedroom window, finally hearing the resonant voice of Verne: "He won't come home. If he said he was going down to the dump, that's where he's gone. That's all the junker's good for, picking up scraps and banging on them."

"Bang, bang, bang!" Lee Ann's voice was shrill. "It's like your eardrums'll bust."

"We're going to do it."

"We can't!"

"I hate this town. So do you. The junker's got ten thousand in GI. He's got another policy for fifteen grand. With double indemnity, that's fifty thousand! We can live anywhere we want."

"But killing him . . ."

Howie sat down on the grass under the window and looked out across the lawn past the trees at the mountains in the distance.

"Listen to me, Lee Ann," Verne demanded. "Tomorrow it's going to get done!"

"But they'll suspect us! Some people have already got to know that you and I—"

"So what? They also know how old that car of his is. Something goes wrong, that's all. By the time he gets done rolling, there won't be enough left to tell what. Who'll do the investigation, anyway? Me!"

"Verne," she breathed.

"You fix it so that you both go into the tavern when he's done work tomorrow. I'll come in after. I'll edge him into testing that Studebaker against the Jaguar, up Highskill Road to Bird's Peak. You'll ride with me, on account of you don't want to ride in that heap of his. When we get up to Bird's Peak, I'll give him one on the head, then send that Studebaker over with him in it. We'll say he didn't make the last turn. That's all there is to it."

"Maybe he won't want to race," she said worriedly.

"He's hated my guts ever since the day he saw me. He's hated me even worse since I bought that Jaguar. He'd like to own one so much he can taste it. The reason he keeps banging away on that antique of his so much lately, is because he figures if he could ever beat me and the Jag in a race, he could breathe again. A reason for living. Don't worry."

Howie left the window and re-

turned to where Verne Perry's Jaguar was parked. This was the car he had really wanted all these years, all right. And it was like Verne had just said: he'd tried to make up for the lack by putting so much work into the Studebaker. But Verne was the one who owned that beautiful thing.

How? On a deputy's pay? Verne had bought the car three months ago, a week after the Cool River Bank had been robbed. The front safe had been blown open and sixteen thousand dollars removed. The sheriff's office owned a key to the bank; there had been no alarm when the person who stole the money entered the bank.

The sheriff had simply stated that someone had used a skeleton key on that old lock in the back door. There had been gossip that Verne Perry had done the job, then split the money with the sheriff. Howie had never believed that before. Now he did.

He went back to his old car, his expression unchanging. Despite dreaming of owning a Jaguar one day, he'd grown to love this old machine. And it would be something to live for if he could beat Verne Perry in a race up Highskill Road . . .

They were planning to kill him?

He drove to the highway, a four-lane breadth of thoroughfare moving upward in wide sweeping curves. Traffic was light; and he pressed his foot hard against the

accelerator pedal. He listened to the muffled roar of the exhaust. The needle of the speedometer moved past ninety. Then he slowed. He touched his upper lip with his tongue, remembering how much he had loved Lee Ann.

He rolled on to a turn-out, stopped, then turned the car around and drove back to Cool River at a careful fifty miles an hour. When he returned to the post office he discovered that an unusually heavy amount of mail had been deposited. He swiftly arranged letters, then ran them through a cancellation machine with driving speed, looking entirely peaceful.

When he'd put the car in his littered garage after work, he walked into the kitchen, to find Lee Ann poking a spoon disgustedly into a pan. There was a smell of char in the air. She said, "The macaroni's burned."

"I'm not hungry anyway."

"Good for you, because now there's only a can of soup in the house."

"You can have it. I'm going out and work on the car."

"No kidding?" She looked at him coldly. He walked out to the garage. The pounding began, vigorously and loud; it didn't stop until after midnight.

She overcooked his eggs the next morning, then sat down to stare indolently out a window. When he'd finished eating, she



said, "I'll ride downtown with you, then bring the car back home. I want to do some shopping."

"I've got to pick up some stuff over at the dump at noon."

"I thought you did that yesterday."

"I didn't get around to it."

"What did you do?" she asked apprehensively.

"I went over to the auto store and looked around."

"Oh." She looked relieved.

"Then I'll bring the car back to the post office at noon and go out to the dump with you."

Maybe, Howie decided, Verne had decided to do something to the Studebaker, after all. "I thought you hated to go out there. Snakes and rats and all."

She blinked—nervously, he thought. "Well, okay. But I wanted to have a beer with you at the tavern after you get done work. Don't you want to?"

"Sure," he said.

"I can walk downtown this afternoon and meet you that way. It'll be nice, getting out."

He nodded, thinking that she had never willingly taken a walk anywhere for as long as he'd known her.

That noon he drove to the dump, where he made his way through cans, discarded bed springs, boxes, old newspapers and all the rest of the junk to where the remains of several automobiles rested. Sweating, he carried back to the car a collection of parts: carburetor, header, distributor, filter, a dozen other items.

He loaded them onto the wooden rack he'd fitted in the trunk to bring the carrying surface up level so that he could slide the heavy stuff in and out more easily. As he drove away, the rear end was visibly weighted.

He returned to the highway, then drove upward until he reached a narrow side road labeled by a wooden sign: *Highskill Road*. He sent the car flying up the curling, twisting route. Great yawning drop-offs showed as he came around the rock-faced bends. He raced all the way to the top where the road curved around a granite face of the mountain and then straightened with sheer drops on either side. He stopped, jarringly, and looked out across a void, knowing that if a car went over anywhere from this ridge it would roll for a long time.

He drove forward and stopped again just in front of a narrow bridge. He got out and looked to the right at a small flat plateau covered with rocks and boulders, feeling the cooler temperature of the high, clear air. He opened the trunk and began carrying the collected parts over there.

At four minutes after five that afternoon he was seated with Lee Ann at a small round table in the beer-fragrant interior of the Cool River Tavern. Several customers were lined along an old-fashioned bar; there was a scattering of others at the tables. The owner, fat and white-shirted, brought over two dripping fired-clay mugs filled with foaming beer.

Verne Perry walked in at five-ten. He was wearing his deputy's uniform: mother-of-pearl gabardine shirt and trousers, white Stetson, intricately tooled Western boots. He touched his holster arrogantly and flashed a white grin at everyone. He was excited, Howie thought. So was Lee Ann, who looked at Verne with very bright eyes.

"Hey," Verne said, coming over. "Trying to drink the joint dry?"

"What do you say, Verne?" Howie asked quietly.

Verne turned a chair around and sat down, straddling it. "How are you, Howie? And Lee Ann! Haven't seen you in quite a time."

"That's right," Lee Ann giggled nervously.

"You are a very lucky man, Howie."

"I know that."

"Still working on that old car you've got parked outside?" His voice echoed through the room as though amplified by a sound system.

"Now and again."

"You ought to buy something like I've got."

Howie looked down at the surface of the table whose laminated plastic had been stained by wet glasses. "Couldn't afford it."

"What are you trying to prove with that Studebaker anyway, Howie?" Now his eyes were bright too.

"Not trying to prove anything."

"I mean, how many hours have you got in it?"

"Quite a few."

"So what have you got?"

Howie looked up slowly and realized that everyone was watching them. "Maybe could take your Jaguar with it."

Muscles flickered beside Verne's eyes; they shone with cool pleasure. It had been easier, Howie thought, than Verne had expected. "You wouldn't," Verne said carefully, "want to back that up, would you?"

"Might."

"Race?"

"Why not?"

Verne smiled, shaking his head. "You're crazy, Howie."

"Maybe. But I can take you."

"Like Highskill Road up to Bird's Peak?"

"Good enough."

Verne slapped a broad palm against the table. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Howie. But underneath that shined-up metal, all you've got is junk!"

Howie stood up. "I'll show you."

Verne stood up with him. He was no longer smiling; there was a mean look in his eyes. "Your funeral, Howie."

"You coming along?" Howie asked Lee Ann.

"In that old car? I'd just be scared something might fall off!"

"Ride with me, Lee Ann," Verne said too casually. "You won't have a thing to worry about."

"Go with him," Howie nodded. "I'll be waiting at the top when you get there."

Verne's laughter thundered. "How do we run it?"

"Start side by side at the bottom next to the highway. Honk your horn when you're ready." He looked very calm.

When they arrived at the junction where the narrow road began, Howie stopped his car on the left side of Verne's. He touched a button and ran the right window down. Verne and Lee Ann looked at him with merry eyes.

Verne said, "The way that old clunk's resting down in the rear, she looks about ready to give out."

"Beep your horn. You'll see."

They laughed; Howie knew

how much they were enjoying this. Verne's horn sounded.

Howie kicked the old car forward, tires screaming. As the cars ran ahead, Verne stayed even. Howie knew now, no matter how he might have deluded himself in the past, that Verne could turn it loose and leave him behind as though the Studebaker were standing still. But he didn't.

They speeded, side by side, until the first turn, where they couldn't see if anyone might be coming down. Verne dropped back. Playing with him, Howie thought, doing it exactly the way he'd figured he would.

Howie took the curves so hard that the car swayed dangerously. Twice he nearly lost control. But Verne stayed behind him easily. He wouldn't try to get around, Howie thought, until they'd rounded the last curve at the top. Then he would bullet ahead to cross the point where the marker announced Bird's Peak, winning easily. When they had stopped, he would try to kill him.

All right, Howie thought . . .

As they approached the final curve, Howie saw that Verne had dropped back six car lengths, confident in the last-moment clutch power of the Jag. Howie rammed his foot to the floorboard, swerving

wildly around the bend. The Jaguar went out of sight.

Then he hit the brake pedal, coming to a smoking stop. He looked in the mirror and saw the red car plunging into view.

Expression changing for the first time in his life, feeling his lips peeling back, Howie sent the Studebaker forward with that lion's roar and rubber-scream. He jammed his thumb against the control button, to send the trunk's lid flying open. The round boulder that he'd placed on the wooden rack flew out like a shot cannon ball.

"See?" he shouted, as he watched the boulder smash into the sports car to send it over the edge.

Howie slowed then, face resuming its normal placid look. He stopped short of the bridge, then got out into the cool air and walked up to the rocks, where he'd hidden the spare parts. He returned them to the trunk, closed the lid, then turned the car around and drove slowly down the mountain.

When he walked into the sheriff's office to tell him that Verne hadn't made that last curve and gone over with Lee Ann, his expression didn't change. It didn't surprise the sheriff, who decided that, even in grief, Howie Atkins was bound to go on looking just as he always had.

Continued from other side)

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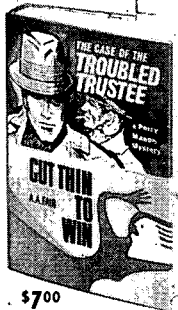
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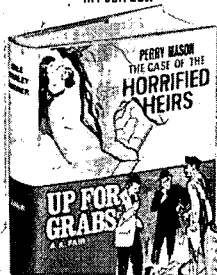
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