

# MIKE SHAYNE

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL 1980

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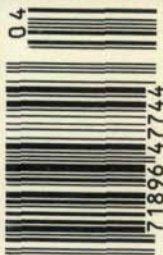
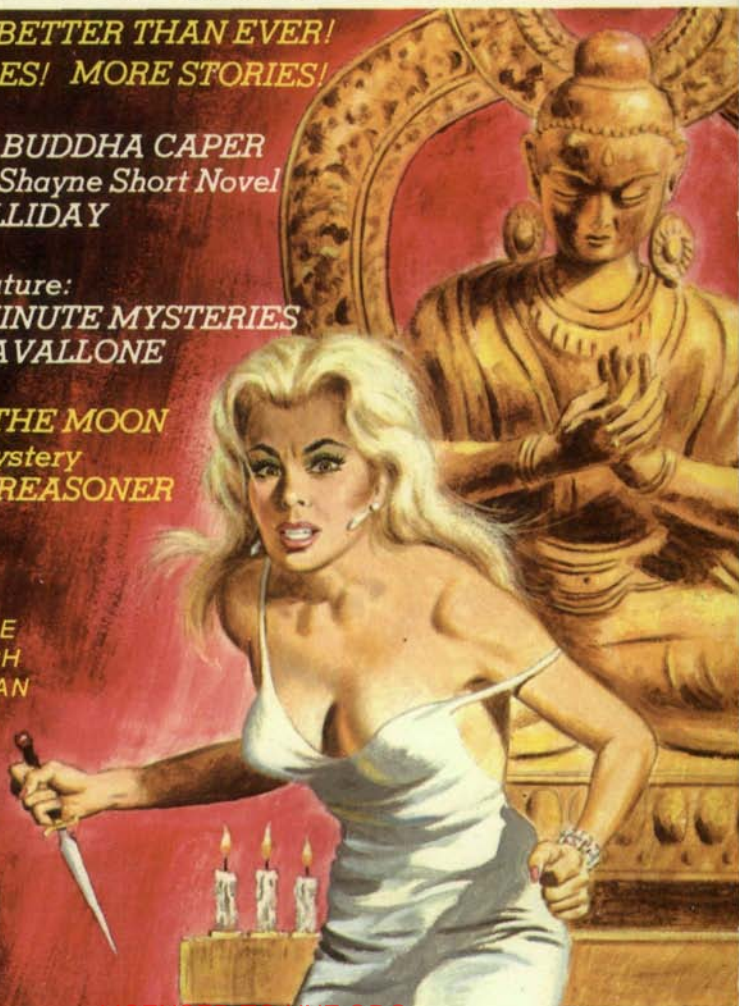
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# MIKE SHAYNE

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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### THE GOLDEN BUDDHA CAPER

by Brett Halliday

*Guard the Golden Buddha? It seemed a simple enough task to the redheaded detective — until he found himself a prisoner on a mountain in Taiwan, with a beautiful blonde Caucasian and a blind Chinese girl — and keeping them company, mean-looking guards armed with machine guns! . . . . . 5*

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# MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAKERS

A newcomer to our Mystery Maker ranks is the multitalented and prolific WILLIAM F. NOLAN, whose story *A Real Nice Guy* appears in this issue. NOLAN is the author of the best-selling *Logan* novels — *Logan's Run* (now in its 16th printing from Bantam, an MGM film, and a CBS television series for which NOLAN wrote the pilot script), *Logan's World*, and *Logan's Search*, but he has demonstrated his remarkable range in many fields, including mystery-suspense, biography, auto-racing, fantasy, and show business. Over the past 25 years, he has sold more than 600 short stories, articles, essays, reviews and profiles — to 150 publications, from Mickey Mouse adventures for Walt Disney to epic verse in *Prairie Schooner*.

As co-founder of the Dashiell Hammett Society of San Francisco, he received the Maltese Falcon and has lectured on Hammett for U.C. Berkeley. NOLAN's biography of Hammett won the Edgar Allan Poe Special Award from the Mystery Writers of America in 1970. He repeated this win in 1972 for his novel, *Space for Hire*, a delightful mix of science fiction and hard-boiled detective fiction, which NOLAN is currently scripting as a major film for Triton Productions.

In 1976 two of NOLAN's films — *Logan's Run* and *Burnt Offerings* — were voted Best Science Fiction Film and Best Horror Film by the Academy of Science Fiction and Fantasy in Hollywood. *Burnt Offerings* also won a Gold Medal in Spain, at the Tenth Annual Festival Internacional de Cine Fantastico. In television, NOLAN's *Trilogy of Terror* won the Golden Medallion at the Fourth International Festival of SF and Fantasy Films in Paris.

NOLAN now has 32 books to his credit, fiction and non-fiction, and his work is represented in 100 anthologies and school texts around the world. He has served as MWA chairman of the Motion Picture Awards Committee. For six years he was science fiction book reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, has edited many anthologies. His work has been printed in eighteen countries in translation and has been adapted for stage and radio in Europe.

This incredibly active literary career hasn't prevented WILLIAM F. NOLAN from racing sports cars and acting in films and TV. An ardent film buff, he sees at least two films a week.

*Continued on page 45*

# THE GOLDEN BUDDHA CAPER

By BRETT  
HALLIDAY





MIKE SHAYNE bought the early morning edition of the *Miami Daily News* at the corner stand a block from the Tamiami Coffee Shop.

"Don't bother with the change, Carl," he told the blind news-dealer. "That's only a one spot."

"Thank you, Mr. Shayne. How are things with you these days? You haven't been by for awhile."

"Short vacation, Carl. I went down to Key West for a little fishing with a friend of mine, Pete Foley."

"Any luck?"

"A little," Shayne told him. "We went for tarpon and then drifted out in the gulf stream for a few days after broadbills. Pete and I landed a 150-pound beauty. But you should have seen the one that got away. He was a monster!"

Carl laughed. "When I was a kid and could see, the biggest ones always got away."

Shayne quickly changed the subject to cover his slip. "How's the wife?"

"Ailing a little, complaining a lot, but that's the way it goes when you're married, Mr. Shayne. We get along. How's a big red-headed fellow like you escaped matrimony so long?"

Shayne chuckled. "Just lucky I guess."

"One fine day your matrimonial luck is going to run out, Mr. Shayne."

"I'll be past tomorrow," Shayne promised Carl and went along to the Tamiami.

He settled in a booth and ordered ham and eggs, hot biscuits, a side of hash brown potatoes and told the pretty

Cuban waitress who usually waited on him, "Keep the coffee coming."

"Where is it you have been lately?" the waitress asked in careful, nearly unaccented English. "Me and our cook, George, have missed you."

Shayne grinned. "I'll bet. Tell George I'd like those eggs over easy, and you'd better bring me a glass of orange juice to start. How have you been, Dolores?"

"*Muy bueno, Señor Shayne.* Very good. It is the next week when Ramon and I finally marry. He has received the promotion and a raise."

"Good for Ramon," Shayne said. "Give him my congratulations, will you?"

"That I will do, Mr. Shayne," Dolores said. "I will squeeze the oranges for your juice myself."

"Thank you," Shayne said and unfolded his copy of the *Daily News*.

He read Tim Rourke's column first. Shayne's reporter friend was deploring the rise of street crime in the seedier sections of Miami and Miami Beach and praising a system of neighborhood patrols being organized by some of the young men in those sections.

Shayne chuckled. Tim he knew would get a blast about that from Chief of Police Will Gentry who had the professional's dislike of anything resembling citizen vigilante action.

"Damn it, though," Shayne

muttered to himself. "Somebody has got to look after these elderly people getting mugged just about every time they venture out into the streets."

He wished the young citizens' patrol luck.

Shayne read his morning paper as he did just about everything else, in a hurry, scanning heads and subheads, snatching a vital paragraph here, another there, scanning the obituaries. But one head deep in the paper caught his full attention.

#### TAIWAN'S GOLDEN BUDDHA COMING TO UNITED STATES

Later Shayne would try to explain to Lucy Hamilton, his long-time secretary, confidante and alter ego, why that particular article alerted him.

"I suppose the word *golden* did it," he told Lucy. "With people buying gold bars as if they were pancakes as an inflation hedge and rumors going around that the OPEC oil sheiks are thinking of taking gold instead of dollars for their damned oil, it couldn't miss catching my eye."

"I take it, Michael, you still refuse to believe there is such a thing as Extra Sensory Perception?" Lucy said with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Shayne stretched lazily. "Do you know what I'm thinking right now?"

"You want me to mix drinks."

"Bullseye. Now is that or is it not E.S.P.?"

"It is not," Lucy said. "Call it telepathy if you wish. Now if you knew I'm not about to mix the drinks ..."

"Got the message." Shayne grinned. "It's my turn."

"Over and out," Lucy said. "Out to the kitchen and hit me lightly."

That morning, after his breakfast at the Tamiami Coffee Shop, Shayne drove to his East Flagler Street office wondering what the new day would bring. After a week's vacation something interesting, he decided, should be on his desk. The last two cases the big detective had worked before leaving for Key West had been dull and routine.

Dull and routine paid bills, and that was good. But tracing an absconding bank official to the gaming tables of Reno and Las Vegas, and finding a man's missing wife honeymooning in Acapulco instead at the bottom of Biscayne Bay hadn't been the sort of challenges Shayne liked.

"Hello, fisherman," Lucy greeted him when he reached his office. "You look bright and bushy-tailed this morning. You forgot to call in yesterday."

While fishing on Pete Foley's boat Shayne had kept in touch with Lucy and office routine by radiophone.

Shayne patted her cheek,

then kissed her. "Missed you, Angel."

Lucy returned his quick kiss, then said in a brisk voice, "Urgent telephone call for you yesterday afternoon." She looked at her notes. "A Dr. Feldman from the Institute of Oriental Studies, and that's out at the University of Miami in case you didn't know. He comes across as a very nice man. I've made reservations for you to fly out of here tomorrow for Los Angeles and from there to Taiwan. Your passport is in order and on your desk."

Shayne scowled. "You know I seem to have missed something. You'd better run that past me again, Lucy."

"All right. You had an urgent phone call yesterday from a Dr. Feldman. I've made reservations for you to fly ..."

"Hold it right there." Shayne held up his hand. "I'm to fly to Los Angeles and from there to Taiwan. My passport is in order and on my desk."

"You really are a quick study," Lucy said.

"And you are sending me up," Shayne said in a good-natured voice. "You haven't mentioned why I'm on my way to Taiwan tomorrow."

"Didn't I?" Lucy was all innocence. "How very careless of me. It seems Nationalist China has an extensive collection of early Buddhist art that has been loaned to Dr. Feldman's department for a

tour of the United States."

"As a cultural counter to the recent warm-up of relations between United States and Communist China and withdrawal of diplomatic recognition of Nationalist China," Shayne told Lucy while she gaped at him. "Among the collection is the famous Golden Buddha carved from solid gold to resemble the original Hsinkao Shan temple Buddha cover with gold leaf. It is reputed this collection may outshine the recent King Tut artifacts sent to tour this country." He grinned at her astonishment. "So what else is new?"

Shayne reached across the desk and gently raised Lucy's lower jaw. "It was my turn to be a smart aleck," he told her. "Now tell me what I'm supposed to do when I reach Taiwan."

Lucy had recovered and glanced at her notes again. "The collection will be coming by ship and accompanied by a Dr. Scott. It seems Dr. Scott wants someone with your accomplishments to accompany him and the collection until it is safely here in Miami to begin the national tour. I take it there are rumors adrift that somebody, somewhere, isn't pleased with the publicity Nationalist China is about to receive."

"I'm in the picture," Shayne told Lucy.

"Tim Rourke wants you to meet him for lunch at the Scotch and

Sirloin," Lucy said. "He wants a favor so the lunch is on his expense account."

"I have a sneaking hunch what he wants, Lucy. Can't you phone him that I'm still fishing?"

"Michael ..."

Shayne shrugged his wide shoulders. "Okay, okay. I'll meet him at twelve thirty."

He went into his office, closing the door behind him, and cleared a space on his littered desk for his feet. Rolling back in his swivel chair, he picked up the phone. Because Lucy was phoning Tim, he had to wait a minute before she answered.

"Angel, get me this Dr. Feldman who sounds so nice on the phone," Shayne told her. "By the way, you've arrived at a fee with him?"

"Certainly."

"Any complaints?"

"He haggled a bit. Pled departmental budget, but I strongly suspect the Nationalists are picking up the tab."

"Glad that's taken care of," Shayne said. "Now ring him for me, will you?"

Shayne heard the call go through the university switchboard before a cultured voice said, "Yes?"

"Shayne here." Studying the toes of his oxfords, Shayne decided he'd better get them shined. "Miss Hamilton has made all the arrangements for me to fly to Taiwan, Dr. Feldman. I thought

you might want to fill me in on a few more details. I understand that I'm to accompany Dr. Scott back with the Buddha exhibit."

"Ah yes. Just a moment." Shayne could hear the murmur of Dr. Feldman's voice as he spoke to someone in his office before he came back on the line. "Yes," he said again. "Can we meet somewhere for lunch? There's a rather decent cafeteria here on the campus."

"I have a lunch date," Shayne said. "Can I run out there this afternoon?"

"I'm afraid not," Dr. Feldman told him. "I have a seminar on oriental art scheduled and then a faculty meeting, the bane of a cloistered existence, I assure you, but it can't be helped. Since we're to deal with budgetary matters it will last into the evening."

"What can you tell me over the phone that I should know before I leave?" Shayne asked.

"You'll meet Dr. Scott at the International Hotel in Tapei. We are informed there are some very ugly rumors circulating."

"Rumors of an attempted hijack?" Shayne asked.

"I believe so. Our phone connection was not very good and Dr. Scott is dedicated but somewhat of an alarmist. So much is involved, however, that we don't dare take any risks. Direct orders and more information will come from Dr. Scott when you reach Tapei."

"Just out of curiosity," Shayne said, "what is this Golden Buddha part of the exhibit worth?"

"It weights more than five hundred pounds and is pure gold," Dr. Feldman told Shayne. "Divide that by troy ounces at \$400 each, or whatever the world price is at any particular time, and you have the intrinsic value of the Golden Buddha, but that's like figuring the true worth of a Rembrandt by calculating the cost of paint and canvas. Let's just say that it's priceless in the true sense of the word."

Shayne whistled softly. "I begin to see why your Dr. Scott is worried."

"We all are," Dr. Feldman assured Shayne. "By the way, I'm in charge of the exhibit when it arrives safely, with Dr. Scott as my assistant, but the financial backing of the project for the most part comes from the Seberg Foundation."

"That's a new one as far as I'm concerned," Shayne said. "Who are they?"

"I don't really know for certain," Dr. Feldman admitted. "I've only met their emissary, a young Chinese. I suspect, despite the name, it is a foundation of wealthy Nationalist Chinese here in the states. I wasn't encouraged to ask too many questions. But I've cleared the matter with our Department of State. Everything is in order."

"How is the material including the Golden Buddha being shipped stateside?" Shayne asked.

"By ship. Dr. Scott has made all the arrangements. It will be unloaded in San Francisco and brought in trucks here to Miami. It is far too bulky for air shipment." Dr. Feldman added as an afterthought, "My department here at the university is defraying part of the shipping cost and paying your fee."

"What about insurance?" Shayne asked.

"Even Lloyd's of London won't touch it," Dr. Feldman said. "You see the Republic of China, so-called, claims the Golden Buddha as part of their national treasure. Should they somehow get their hands on it ..."

"I get the point," Shayne said.

"Luck, Shayne," Dr. Feldman said.

Shayne chuckled. "Sometimes I have to make my own luck. But your Golden Buddha and the rest of the material for exhibit will be delivered to you here in Florida. One more thing. Advise your Dr. Scott that I'll listen to suggestions, but taking orders is something else again."

"Well now, Shayne." Dr. Feldman was obviously disturbed. "You have been hired ..."

"I like *retained* better," Shayne interrupted. "I'm taking full responsibility and I'll have to handle security in my own way. If this isn't a satisfactory relation-

ship, you'll have to get someone else. I can name a few reliable private investigators who will jump at the chance to go to Taiwan, all expenses paid."

There was a pause. Shayne pictured the scholarly man on the other end of the line scratching his head as he tried to make up his mind."

"All right, I accept your conditions," Dr. Feldman finally said, "but you'll have to handle matters with Dr. Scott."

"I'll manage," Shayne promised and hung-up. He pressed the button that rang the phone on Lucy's desk. "Angel, do me a favor," he said. "While I'm wading through this mail and the reports on my desk that stacked up last week, try to get a line on this mysterious Seberg Foundation Dr. Feldman tells me is popping for the Golden Buddha exhibit to tour this country."

"I never heard of that one," Lucy said.

"Neither have I, and Dr. Feldman knows precious little about the people bankrolling his pet project. I don't want to find out I'm working as an agent for a foreign power without registering with Uncle Sam until it's too late."

"I'll get back to you," Lucy promised. "Tim will meet you at the Scotch and Sirloin at twelve thirty. He said you'd find him at the bar."

Shayne laughed. "Where

else?" How Tim wraps himself around all those boilermakers and stays reasonably sober I'll never know."

"He says it's a thin man's knack," Lucy said. "By the way, you're booked first class all the way through to Taiwan and back."

"You can cancel that return reservation," Mike said. "I'll be coming back to San Francisco on shipboard."

"Sometimes I think you have all the fun, Michael," Lucy pouted.

## II

AN HOUR BEFORE he was to meet Tim Rourke at the Scotch and Sirloin, Shayne rolled down his sleeves and shrugged into his sportscoat tailored to conceal the bulge of a shoulder holster and .45 automatic. He had two reasons to visit Will Gentry on his way to meet Tim.

One one thing he was going to need special permission to board an air carrier carrying a weapon or packing one along in his suitcase. Will Gentry had made arrangements with the airline before for Shayne.

But another reason was the neighborhood patrols Tim was touting in his column. Shayne owed the reporter a favor. He was certain this luncheon date was Tim's bid to collect.

Will Gentry and Tim, as a reporter, had an uneasy relationship. Covering the crime beat

Tim needed the cooperation of Will from time to time. Yet Rourke was an investigative reporter and stepped on official toes when he had to do so in order to get a story.

Shayne suspected his would be the role of peacemaker. Tim's column that morning was certain to have raised Will's blood pressure. Gentry was a sometimes irascible man. The suggested citizens' patrols in high crime areas of Miami Beach, Gentry's jurisdiction, was certain to have sent Will Gentry through the ceiling of his office.

Will was a good cop who'd reached his present job by coming up through the ranks, but he had a tendency to go by the book. It had taken him quite awhile to get used to some of Shayne's more unorthodox methods.

"No problem," Will Gentry said when Shayne asked him to intervene with airline security. "We'll do it the way we did it last time. You're on special assignment for the department."

"I am?" Shayne said. "What am I supposed to be doing this time?"

"Before you get out of San Francisco I want you to check in with a Lieutenant Francis of the SFPD. He has a prisoner out there we may want back here when the State of California is finished with him?"

"Who would that be?" Shayne asked.

"A two-bit grifter named Tully

Franco. We think he offed a character named Fritz the Fixer over a slight disagreement. I'll give you the file. You question him. Francis has him for some scam or other. When you've read the file on the plane tomorrow, question the punk. If you think he may be guilty and we have a chance of putting him away for murder one, I'll try to get him extradited."

"Have a heart, Will. I only have a few hours in San Francisco between planes," Shayne said.

"Then you'll have to work fast," Gentry said with a smug grin.

Shayne pointed to the morning paper on Gentry's desk. "Have you read Tim Rourke this morning?"

The police chief reddened and bit hard on the stub of a cigar in his mouth. "I've read it and it stinks. I need more uniforms. Tim knows it, you know it, everyone but the city council knows it. As the crime rate rises, inflation paints me into a corner, and any chief of a city this size will tell you the same thing. Uniforms, Shayne! Not a bunch of half-baked ghetto kids playing vigilante."

"It's working in the New York subways," Shayne said in a mild voice. "The Red Berets are making a real difference."

Gentry regarded Shayne with a steady stare. "Yeah, so I've heard," he said finally.

"The cops felt exactly as you do before these subway patrols started."

"If you're trying to make a point, come to it," Gentry said. "We've known each other long enough to speak frankly, haven't we?"

"All right, it's none of my damned business, you're the head cop, but if I were in your shoes I'd handle these do-good ghetto kids with kid gloves. That way you can keep them under police scrutiny, if not supervision."

"You're saying I should go along with this citizens' patrol idea?"

"Would it hurt?"

Gentry scowled. "I'll think about it."

Shayne glanced at his watch and got up to leave.

"How about a Dutch Treat lunch in the police canteen?" Gentry asked. "I want to hear about all those big fish that got away from you and Pete."

"I'm meeting Tim in half an hour at the Scotch and Sirloin. Come along, Tim's buying."

"I haven't that much time today," Gentry told Shayne in a gruff voice. "By the way, I forgot to ask. What sends you to Taiwan?"

Shayne quickly filled Gentry in on the details of what he'd come to think about as the Golden Buddha Caper.

"You have yourself a piece of cake with chocolate frosting,"

Will Gentry grumbled. "Why don't we swap jobs one of these days, Shayne? I get all the trouble while you're having fun."

"Will, good friend, without you shuffling paper behind that desk nobody would sleep soundly at night in Miami Beach. You are their White Knight in the battle against crime and corruption. I'm just a peasant gumshoe in your fief."

Gentry cocked an eyebrow as he lit a fresh cigar. "Get the hell out of here, peasant, and take your blarney stone with you," he said before he choked on cigar smoke. "Tell Rourke to come see me," Gentry went on when he'd recovered his breath. "I have a message for his ghetto kids on the side of law and order."

SHAYNE FOUND the lanky reporter for *Miami News* slouched on a barstool in the Scotch and Sirloin, owlishly regarding his first boilermaker of the day.

"In these pensive moods, Tim," Shayne said, sliding onto the adjoining barstool, "has anyone ever told you there is a marked resemblance between you and a basset hound who has just had his tail caught in a crack?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Shayne," Rourke said without looking around. "I'm contemplating with my inner eye the injustice of Big Government and the IRS."

"Don't tell me you've been

audited again," Shayne said.

"No. I got a raise."

"Hurrah."

Tim finally looked around. "It's moved me into a higher tax bracket."

"Not good?" Shayne asked.

"Very ungood," Rourke said.

"If my figures don't lie, and I'm afraid they don't that raise amounts to exactly \$1.69."

"Why complain?" Shayne asked. "That should buy you a cup of coffee, a pack of cigarettes and maybe a morning newspaper."

The bartender, with a cheerful, "Good to see you again, Mr. Shayne," served the big detective a Martell's on the rocks.

Shayne nodded his thanks. "I read your column this morning," he told Tim.

"The question is, has Will Gentry read it yet?"

"Affirmative," Shayne said. "I stopped by to chat with him on my way here."

"And?"

"Go see him. Those ghetto kids have a good idea and I believe Will Gentry can be a lot of help getting them organized," Shayne said.

"That's welcome news. What about you? I had in mind you helping them out, they've all heard about you one way or another. This is why I'm breaking a precedent and popping for lunch."

Shayne finished his drink;

Rourke ordered another boiler-maker.

"I've talked with some of the victimized elderly people trying to make it on fixed incomes," Tim went on to say. "It's one hell of a problem! Half the muggings never get reported for fear there will be retaliation. These people can't afford the rents in better sections of this town and Miami."

"I know," Shayne said, scowling. "I wish I had the time right now to help out, but I'm off to Taiwan tomorrow morning. When I get back let's talk about it again. Okay?"

"Taiwan?" Tim Rourke was wide awake now. "What takes you out there?"

"A security job," Shayne said. "I'm to babysit the Golden Buddha and some other valuable bric-a-brac being shipped by the Nationalists for a tour of this country."

"Can I print this?"

"Talk to a Dr. Feldman out at the university," Shayne told him. "He's the honcho who retained me for the job. A certain Dr. Scott expects a little dirty work at the crossroads before the Golden Buddha arrives here in Miami."

"Who's Dr. Scott?"

"Some fusty old antiquarian I suspect," Shayne said. "The nervous type, from what I hear. I'll be meeting him on Taiwan."

Tim finished his boilermaker. "Let's eat."

"Suits me," Shayne said.

Rourke ordered corn beef and cabbage, which he stated was his idea of health food. "We're having one of our periodic health fads at the newspaper," he told Shayne. "Just about everybody is jogging and eating wheat germ on organic lettuce."

"Sounds great for rabbits," Shayne said. "I think I'll stick to meat and potatoes."

A man of his word, Shayne ordered an extra-thick sirloin with baked potato, sour cream and chives.

"Did you ever hear of the Seberg Foundation?" Shayne asked while they were eating.

"Seberg?" Rourke scowled. "I don't think so. Why do you ask?"

"They're sponsoring this Golden Buddha thing," Shayne said. "Dr. Feldman either doesn't know much about the foundation or isn't saying."

Long ago Shayne had discovered a question such as the one he'd just hazarded aroused the bloodhound in Tim Rourke, the instinct that made the man the good investigative reporter he was. He was certain before tomorrow morning and his departure on a flight to San Francisco that Tim would have some information for him. Added to what Lucy Hamilton would be able to garner — and she was no mean investigator herself he'd learned. By the time he was on the plane, Shayne expected he

would have a fairly complete picture of the mysterious Seberg Foundation.

Shayne's insatiable curiosity about everyone and everything involved in whatever case he happened to be working had more than once been the difference between success and failure, sometimes life and death.

"I'll do some snooping," Tim promised.

"I'd appreciate it."

When he returned to his East Flagler Street office Shayne was surprised to see a puzzled expression on his secretary's pretty face.

"I've tried the library here in town, the Library of Congress, even the IRS, Michael," she said. "Nobody seems to know much of anything about this Seberg Foundation."

"Are they listed in Miami Beach, Miami or anywhere else here in Florida?"

Lucy had been poring over telephone directories. "I don't think so."

"Will Gentry called. You're cleared to carry a weapon aboard tomorrow's flight."

"That's good. You know I'd better get packed for this junket. Can you hold the fort here if I take you out to supper this evening?"

Lucy smiled. "That's what you pay me for, Michael. Supper would be a nice perk, however. Any special place in mind?"

"You decide."

"There's a new Cantonese restaurant over on Biscayne Boulevard," Lucy said tentatively. "Maybe we'd better tune your taste buds for Taiwanese cooking. What do you say?"

Shayne nodded. "Sounds good, Angel."

"I'm glad you approve."

"By the way," Shayne said. "I mentioned this mysterious Seberg Foundation to Tim Rourke at lunch and he's promised to come up with something."

"You're a bit worried about this Golden Buddha thing, aren't you, Michael?"

"No more than I usually am tackling something like this," Shayne told her, "but a few things don't make sense ... yet. For example, why *me*?"

"What do you mean?" Lucy asked.

Shayne sat on the corner of her desk. "The Nationalist government has plenty of security people. They could guard the shipment until it reaches San Francisco."

"I asked Dr. Feldman that question," Lucy said. "While we were haggling about your fee. He said this Dr. Scott had already talked with officials out there and they weren't willing to guard the shipment."

"Did he say why?"

Lucy shook her head. "No."

"Maybe they're miffed about withdrawal of diplomatic recognition," Shayne said; "and then,

again, maybe there's more to it than that."

"I've done some figuring," Lucy told Shayne. "Do you have any idea how much 500 pounds of gold is worth?"

"A heap, I'd say. How much?"

"Well, there are twelve troy ounces to a pound when you're weighing gold."

"I never realized that."

"So now you know," Lucy said pertly. "When you multiply by the 500 pounds, and say gold is now \$400 an ounce, a troy ounce, you're talking about \$2,400,000."

Shayne whistled softly. "We're sitting into a high stake game, aren't we?"

"You and this Dr. Scott are," Lucy pointed out. "I'll just be sitting here working my fingers to the bone while you skylark in the Far East."

"Come along then," Shayne invited.

"I can't and you darned well know it," Lucy said. "Somebody has to watch the store."

Shayne leaned over, raised her face and gently kissed Lucy Hamilton.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"Just a passing fancy," Shayne teased. "Now I'd better move along and let you get some work done. Is it all right if I pick you-up about six thirty?"

"Make it seven. I need to wash my hair."

"Will we need reservations?" Shayne asked.

"I made them this morning just in case you should ask me to dinner," Lucy said. "Don't forget to pack a toothbrush."

WHEN HE REACHED his apartment, Shayne discovered his Cuban cleaning woman had been there before him. The bed was made up and everything was in apple pie order.

Shayne took down a blue flight bag from a closet shelf and, whistling to himself, packed extra shirts, pajamas, a sweater, and toilet articles (not forgetting a toothbrush).

For the cruise from Taiwan to San Francisco he would have to buy additional wardrobe in Taiwan before embarking, but Shayne looked forward to bargain prices on that island.

Tim Rourke called about the middle of the afternoon. "Hey, Mike," he said, "I really had to dig to find out about this Seberg Foundation, so you owe me one now."

Shayne chuckled. "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, so what do you have?"

"It was founded in 1950 by Joseph Seberg, a Swiss citizen. It's rumored he made his fortune by smuggling gold out of Nazi Germany into Switzerland. Also works of art. That last is documented. Recently he's paid

a visit to both mainland China and Taiwan."

"This gets interesting," Shayne said when Tim paused. "Do we know the purpose of those two visits?"

"No," Tim told him. "But Joe gets more interesting. He's one of these multimillionaire sleepers. Nobody really knows a hell of a lot about the man himself."

"Where is his foundation registered?" Shayne asked.

"It isn't," Tim said. "My main source says it's a front, but he hasn't any real proof."

"A front for what?" Shayne asked.

"Your guess is as good as anyone's, Mike. The thing is, whatever Joe backs turns him a very neat profit. Sweet charity for charity's sake is something the Seberg Foundation knows nothing about."

"Thanks, Tim. Anytime you need a good backscratch you know where to find me."

"That's for sure," Tim said. "I'll be around, don't worry." Then he dropped the bantering tone. "Be careful out there, Mike."

"You can depend on that," Shayne told the reporter. "I know better, but maybe you'll tell me who your main source is?"

"You know better," Tim said and broke the phone connection.

Shayne went to his bar and poured himself a brandy on the

rocks. He sipped it thoughtfully, staring out the window of his apartment.

As a member of the International Association of Private Investigators, or AIAI, Shayne given time could have cabled a Swiss, Antoine Teller, and asked about Seberg. From time to time Shayne supplied information for other association members in all parts of the western world. But he had never had occasion to contact Teller, nor had the Swiss ever needed his services.

Shayne decided whatever scam Joseph Seberg was up to this time was none of his business. He'd been retained to see the Golden Buddha and the rest of the exhibit from Taiwan to Miami.

He did pull a reference book covering China and the Far East from his shelf to learn that the highest peak on the large island off the coast of China was Hsinkao Shan, towering 13,113 feet, and correctly assumed the Hsinkao Shan Buddha came from some ancient temple on the slopes of that mountain.

Chilung was Tapei's port, so the Golden Buddha would be shipped out from there.

Bathed and shaved, Shayne selected a gray suit that had just come from the cleaners and a light blue shirt with a dark blue tie. He also remembered to shine his shoes. Addicted to slacks and sports coats, Shayne had only recently begun to style up his

wardrobe, gently prodded by Lucy Hamilton. It would be a long time, however, before the rugged red-head would vie for the distinction of the Best Dressed Man in Miami Beach.

When he called for her, Lucy was ready and waiting. She'd donned a smartly-tailored pants suit that exhibited her fine figure to the best advantage, and wore a white silk scarf knotted loosely about her throat.

It never ceased to amaze Shayne how much Lucy changed when one of their nights on the town rolled around.

"You're a walking dream," Shayne complimented Lucy. "What did you do with your hair?"

"Washed it, silly." Lucy's quick smile sparkled. "Shall we go?"

### III

PRESSED DUCK, Cantonese style, with various candied vegetables and brown rice, accompanied by cups of warm rice wine as well as tea, left both Shayne and Lucy in a mellow mood when they'd finished their dinner in the small private dining room shut off from the rest of the restaurant with delicately painted screens.

Demure young Chinese girls had served their meal. It had been a leisurely dinner and Shayne had become accustomed to sitting

on a mat to eat from the low table. He stretched and sighed.

"Now this is living," he told Lucy. "Maybe we should move our office to Taiwan."

Lucy laughed.

"What's funny?" Shayne asked.

"I was picturing you in a kimona."

"Don't the Japanese men wear those at home?" Shayne asked.

"I don't know what Chinese men wear."

Lucy shrugged her slender shoulders. "You could be right."

"What should we do with the rest of the evening?" Shayne said.

"I just happen to have wine chilling, my stereo stacked with the kind of music we like and a cold late supper ready to serve," Lucy told him. "But if you have something more exciting in mind..."

"Bite your tongue," Shayne said. "You're pure and unadulterated excitement with your womanly wiles and ways. Let's get out of here."

Lucy sighed. "I thought you'd never ask."

Shayne grinned. "Like hell you didn't."

THE NEXT MORNING Shayne took a taxi to the airport to catch his early flight. "So you're Mr. Shayne?" the pretty young woman at the check-in counter said.

"It's early to tell," Shayne

said, "but I think I am."

The woman smiled and reached to the cubby holes behind the desk. "Message for you, Mr. Shayne."

*Tully Franco now charged with murder one in California, Shayne read. Never mind contacting Francis. Have a good trip and bring me back a Geisha girl.*

The message was from Will Gentry.

"Do they have Geisha girls on Taiwan?" the uniformed woman behind the counter asked.

"Not to the best of my knowledge," Shayne told her with a grin.

She made a note on his boarding pass. "This gets you aboard armed," the woman told him. "Just don't hijack us please."

Shayne's flight was abroad a 747 with its two layers of passengers, non-stop to San Francisco. The extra roominess in the first class section was a relief for Shayne after his last tourist flight. Folding his big frame into tourist section seats had been a harrowing experience! When he arrived at Miami International he complained to Lucy about having high-altitude bends. He silently blessed his secretary for booking him through to Taiwan as a first class passenger.

Shayne had only three hours between planes when he reached San Francisco International, so he was relieved Will Gentry had changed his mind about ques-

tioning Tully Franco in the SFPD's custody. He ate a hearty meal in one of the terminal restaurants to fortify himself for the long hop to Honolulu and on to Tapei.

Shayne had his boarding pass and was waiting for his flight number to be called when the PA system announced, "Mr. Michael Shayne, please report to the Orient West counter."

"What next?" Shayne grumbled to himself. He hoped Chief of Police Will Gentry hadn't changed his mind.

When Shayne had identified himself the man clerk said, "Mr. Shayne we have a rather extraordinary request." He pointed toward a slender Chinese girl sitting on a bench near the counter. Dark glasses with their wide oval lenses couldn't disguise the fact she was a beautiful young woman. "She is on your flight as another first class passenger."

"Do you have her name?"

The clerk glanced at a slip of paper. "Dr. Mary Su Lin of the University of San Francisco," he said. "She wants you to look after her on the flight. Her destination is the same as yours."

Shayne looked around at the Chinese girl. She sat as she had before, looking into space, hands folded in her lap.

"I don't quite understand this." Shayne frowned. "She seems perfectly capable of taking care of herself. If she isn't, flight attendants will be aboard. I have

no idea how she got my name or knew I would be taking this flight."

"The girl is blind, Mr. Shayne."

"Oh. Well, in that case ..."

The clerk was relieved. "Thank you, Mr. Shayne. Have a most pleasant flight."

Shayne approached the seated Chinese girl. "Hello, Dr. Su Lin. I'm Michael Shayne."

She turned her face in his direction and held out a slender hand. "Good of you to help me," she said in a soft voice.

Shayne gently shook her hand. "They are about to call our flight and open the gates."

When Mary Su Lin arose from her bench, Shayne discovered the top of her head didn't quite reach his shoulder. She took the arm he offered.

"This is good of you, Mr. Shayne," she said. "I suppose I could have managed alone, but since we have a common interest I decided you might not mind being burdened with a sightless person."

As they walked, Shayne, matching his usually long strides to Mary's short steps, said, "What is it we have in common?"

"The Golden Buddha."

THE LONG HOURS ahead crossing the Pacific would be time enough to find out her interest in the Golden Buddha of Hsinking Shan, Shayne decided; and

concentrated on leading Mary through the crowded air terminal to their boarding gate.

Aboard the plane Shayne helped Mary fasten her seatbelt. As the 747 moved out and down the blacktop alley for the head of the runway the pilot would use for take-off, Mary Su Lin seemed to shrink in her seat and Shayne noticed that her hands were trembling.

"Are you afraid to fly?" he asked.

"Always." She managed a stiff smile, but her olive-skinned face was pale.

Shayne put an arm around the slender Chinese girl's shoulders. "Satchel Paige had something to say about flying," he told her, then decided against quoting Satchel to the frightened girl until they were safely airborne.

"Sat-chel? What an extraordinary name. Who was he?" she asked.

"You'd have to be a baseball fan to remember Satch," Shayne told her. "He was a pitcher in the black leagues who finally made the majors at the end of his career."

The pilots had been cleared for take-off. As the huge plane gathered speed the jet-engine whine rose to a banshee scream.

"What did he say?" Mary asked.

"Tell you when we're in the air," Shayne said.

The plane's nose tilted and the 747 went into a 45 degree climb,

the maze of criss-crossed runways quickly dwindling until San Francisco International looked like some sort of board for a child's game.

Finally the captain announced on the PA that they were at 33,000 feet, doing 500 knots with good weather—predicted between the west coast and Honolulu.

Shayne helped Mary unbuckle her seatbelt and tuck it away.

"Now tell me what it was this Satchel person said about air travel?" she insisted, no longer pale and trembling.

"Oh?" Shayne was wishing she'd forget what he'd started to tell her. "The airlines ain't goin' to hurt you! he quoted, 'but they may kill you.'"

To his surprise Mary laughed, and her laughter was as sweet as a tinkling temple bell. "Your Mr. Satchel could have been Chinese with that sort of philosophy," she told him. "Fatalism is our defense against fear, but I'm too Americanized to be a good fatalist."

San Francisco's famous skyline rode on a pillow of clouds behind them, a toy city, and the blue Pacific below was dimpled and flecked with tiny crests of white foam.

"How do you feel now?" Shayne asked the girl.

"Much better." She gave him a fleeting smile. "Forgive me for being such a coward."

"On one condition."

"And what is that?"

"Tell me two things; why we have a common interest in the Golden Buddha; and how did you know I was booked on this flight?"

A pert stewardess picked that moment to ask, "May I serve you something to drink, Miss Su Lin and Mr. Shayne? Luncheon will be served in half an hour."

"What will you have?" Shayne asked Mary Su Lin.

"A gimlet please."

"Make mine a double brandy, Martell's if you have it aboard," Shayne ordered. "Just ice."

"I believe we have your brand," the stewardess told Shayne, and disappeared into the dim after-reaches of the 747.

"The size of these double-deck birds always amazes me," Shayne told the girl.

"Me too," she said. "It's as if we were a small airborne world."

"It's question and answer time," Shayne reminded Mary.

"Dr. Feldman, when I called him yesterday, referred me to your secretary," she told him, "so that answers your last question first."

"You're with the Seberg Foundation?"

The girl frowned slightly. "In an advisory capacity only. My field is Oriental art and philosophy."

"My interest in the Hsinking Shan Buddha is to see it reaches Miami safely," Shayne said.

"But Dr. Feldman must have told

you that. Now tell me why you're flying out to Taiwan?"

Mary laughed. "Don't you enjoy a good puzzle, Mr. Shayne?"

"I'm Mike to my friends," Shayne told her.

"Mike it is then."

"I don't like puzzles," Shayne said. "Not when I have a job to do."

"Perhaps my mission is the same as yours," Mary Su Lin said in a teasing voice.

The stewardess brought their drinks. Mary sipped her gimlet. "Excellent."

Shayne ignored the Martell's on the rocks on the small fold-down tray in front of him. "Stop playing the role of an Inscrutable Chinese, Mary," he said. "If we're to deal in *perhaps*, maybe you're a mainland Chinese agent." Shayne said it blandly, but looked for an answer in his companion's expression.

Mary sobered. "I hate the Communists!"

"And love the Nationalists?"

"No. Love isn't the right word. Let's say I respect them for standing up against the Communist terror ... and stupidity," she added.

Shayne finally sipped his drink.

"That isn't your brand," Mary said.

"How would you know that?"

"When you can't see nature compensates by making your hearing, sense of smell and taste

more acute than the average person's," she told him. "One of my uncles owns a Chinatown bar in San Francisco. While I went to school I worked as one of his bartenders so I could pay my readers. I became quite good at distinguishing brands of whisky by sniffing the corks."

"I seem to be learning everything about you except why you're on your way to Taiwan," Shayne told the girl.

"Do you suppose we could have another drink before lunch?" Mary Su Lin asked.

Shayne rang for the stewardess. "Do you know this Dr. Scott?" he asked.

"No Dr. Scott is the reason I'm flying to Taiwan."

When the stewardess came she brought with her their fresh drinks.

"Do you read minds?" Shayne asked.

The stewardess smiled. "It comes with the job. By the way, I haven't served you Martell's. We're out of that brand."

Mary Su Lin's was a knowing smile.

While they sipped their drinks, the Chinese girl explained, "The Hsinkao Shan Golden Buddha is an important national treasure for the Taiwanese. Dr. Scott isn't completely trusted by the Nationalist government. They have been in touch with Joseph Seberg and he cabled me to assume her responsibilities. That is as much

as I know, Mike."

"Does Dr. Feldman know about this?" Shayne asked.

"I don't believe so. Mr. Seberg can be a very capricious man and many times his left hand doesn't know what his right is doing."

"This leaves me in a rather odd position," Shayne said. "I was hired to work with Dr. Scott."

"We'll sort things out quickly enough in Tapei," Mary told him. "I'll deal with Dr. Scott."

Their layover at Honolulu International was a brief one. There was a short refueling stop at Midway, then a night flight on to Taiwan. Mary Su Lin, in response to his questions, filled Shayne in about the stormy history of the island, once Formosa, 100 miles off the South China coast.

"The original Formosans," she told him, "were a brown-skinned people, probably Malays. The Dutch first conquered the island and held it against the Spanish."

"After them the Japanese?" Shayne asked.

"No. Koxinga or Cheng Ch'eng-kung drove out the Dutch and brought Chinese to Taiwan. It was a refuge back then in 1662 from the Manchu rulers of China. From the island Cheng, like Chiang Kai Shek, tried to drive the Manchus from the Chinese mainland. In 1682 the Manchus seized the island and then the Chinese migration increased."

"What happened to the original Taiwanese?" Shayne asked.

"As the saying goes, they took to the hills," Mary Su Lin told him. "Three quarters of the island is mountains you know. On the east they drop a sheer 6000 feet into the sea. The western coastal plain is about twenty miles wide and ninety long. That is where the Chinese live and farm. The Japanese had the island ceded to them in 1904 after the Sino-Japanese war and, as you probably know, held it until 1945 when it was returned to China."

She went on to mention that the native Formosans in their mountain strongholds were head hunters until shortly before World War II.

"Should history repeat itself, as it has a way of doing," Mary Su Lin told Shayne, "we can expect the Communists, like the Manchus, to make an all-out effort in the not too distant future to invade Taiwan, especially since the Nationalists can no longer be certain of United States support."

"Flying into the dawn, Shayne first saw the towering mountain spine of the island. As the plane closed the distance the cliffs Mary Su Lin had mentioned came in sight. Minutes later, they landed at the Tapei air terminal.

An official of the government, a young Chinese in a business suit, was waiting for them at customs. He introduced himself as Chung Lee and shook Shayne's hand, then bowed to Mary Su Lin.

"Please be welcome to Free

China," Chung Lee said in unaccented English. "I have the honor of being your friend and guide while you are our guests here on Taiwan."

"Then you can guide us to the International Hotel," Shayne told him. "We're to meet Dr. Scott there."

"Chung Lee frowned gave his round face a pained expression. "Dr. Scott today is in Kaohsiung, our other port city," he said. "She is making final shipping arrangements for the Golden Buddha there. She is sorry not to honor your arrival with her presence."

"Did you say *she*?" Shayne asked. "Dr. Scott is a woman?"

Chung Lee nodded. "A most beautiful woman in western eyes. I'm sure you will agree."

Mary Su Lin asked, "You mean Dr. Feldman didn't tell you?"

"No, he didn't. In my rush to get away we spoke on the phone for only a few minutes."

"It's Dr. Stephanie Scott," Mary Su Lin told Shayne. "You might remember that she was a rather prominent campus activist in the 1960s. She's a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley."

Shayne shook his head. "There were too many to remember them all."

"Please come," Chung Lee said. "A car is waiting."

Shayne, with Mary Su Lin's arm tucked under his elbow, followed the Chinese through the crowded

terminal to a side door. Two husky Chinese with shaved heads, in chauffeur's livery, took their baggage and loaded it into the trunk of the black Mercedes.

Shayne noticed both men were armed but, in a foreign country, thought nothing of it.

The jammed city streets fascinated Shayne. It wasn't the sort of first glimpse at an Oriental city he expected. With its gleaming high-rise buildings and smart shops, Tapei could have been any other new western city if it weren't for the signs in incomprehensible Chinese.

He became so much a tourist, as a matter of fact, that he didn't notice the Mercedes was moving through thinner traffic as it neared the edge of the city.

"Is this your first visit to our island?" Chung Lee asked Shayne.

"As a matter of fact it is," Shayne told him.

Mary Su Lin touched his arm. "The International Hotel didn't used to be this far from the air terminal, Mike."

The car was spinning along a wide road that skirted the mountains, and rice paddies stretched away on either side of them.

"Where are you taking us?" Shayne asked their guide.

Chung Lee smiled. "You and Dr. Su Lin are honored guests of the Red Brigade, Mr. Shayne." He extended his hand. "You will please give me the weapon you

are carrying."

Shayne considered the odds.

The chauffeur not driving had an arm hooked over the back of the front seat and a machine pistol in his other hand.

"Your weapon please," Chung Lee said.

#### IV

"WHAT IS HAPPENING?"

Mary Su Lin asked Shayne.

"We've been suckered and shafted," he told her in an even voice that had a bite. Carefully removing his Colt .45 from the shoulder holster, he passed the weapon to Chung Lee. "This is one hell of a welcome to Taiwan! What sort of game are you and the goons up front playing?"

"It was the Manchus who stole the Hsinkao Shan Golden Buddha from the people of China," Chung Lee told him. "The Red Brigade will return it to its rightful owners, the People's Republic of China. Unless the Nationalists do this, and promptly, you and Dr. Su Lin will be executed."

Mary Su Lin's hand found Shayne's, but she said in a cool voice, "Your grasp of Chinese history, Mr. Chung, leaves something to be desired."

"You, a woman, choose to enlighten me?" Chung asked in a sarcastic voice.

"Someone should," Mary Su Lin told him. "I know more than you do about Oriental objects of

art. It was Cheng Ch'eng-Kung who commissioned the Golden Buddha to honor his favorite wife who was Buddhist. That was here on Taiwan in 1664 and when the Manchus invaded the island it was hidden in a mountain cave. Later the shrine on Hsinkao Shan was rebuilt and the Golden Buddha restored to his rightful place, only to be hidden again during the Japanese occupation. Your Red Brigade should try to keep their facts straight, Mr. Chung."

"Does that straighten you out?" Shayne asked Chung. "Chairman Mao, if he was still alive, would be ashamed of your ignorance."

Chung Lee's mouth was a straight line and anger glinted in his eyes but he said, "No matter. Whatever is Chinese belongs to the Chinese people who followed Chairman Mao instead of that traitor, Chiang Kai Shek."

"Communist rhetoric isn't easy to understand, Mike." It was Mary Su Lin's turn to be sarcastic. "To put it simply, what belongs to them is theirs and what belongs to you is also theirs."

The black Mercedes was laboring up a steep slope in the mountain road, vertical cliffs on either side. At each sharp curve the car's tires spit gravel over the sheer drop on their right. They were climbing so fast Shayne fished a stock of gum from his

pocket to ease the popping of his eardrums.

"Where does Dr. Stephanie Scott fit into this clever little plot of yours, Chung?" Shayne asked the Chinese. "Is this kidnapping for ransom *her* bright idea or did you think it up all by yourself?"

Chung Lee stared straight ahead, Lips pursed, and refused to answer Shayne's question.

"Uncle Sam isn't going to take to this kindly," Shayne went on. "At this juncture in their international relationships, trying to cozy up to the decadent capitalists of U.S.A., I doubt your mainland friends will pat you on the back and strike a medal either."

"Running dog imperialists!" Chung Lee spat at the pair.

Shayne grinned. "Flattery is going to get you nowhere, friend."

They were finally coming to the end of the narrow mountain road. Shayne estimated from his shortness of breath that they must be at least 9000 feet. They could see through misty clouds to the western ocean cliffs, and the eastern lowlands checkerboarded with small fields and what looked like toy houses.

The air was clean and crisp.

Beyond the end of the road, on a mountain-side plateau, was a rustic lodge built of bamboo. The mountain retreat, Shayne speculated, of some minor government official anxious to escape the humid lowland part of the island during the monsoon season.

On the porch were another pair of shaven-head Chinese, or perhaps Mongols, Shayne thought. Like the two stolid chauffeurs they were armed with machine pistols. They stood more or less at attention as Shayne and Mary Su Lin followed Chung Lee out of the backseat of the black mercedes.

The two chauffeurs got out of the car, too, and Chung Lee slid under the wheel. "You will be guarded by these men until the Golden Buddha is on its way to Canton," Chung Lee told Shayne and Mary Su Lin. "I would not advise any attempt to escape from them. Their orders are to shoot to kill under such a circumstance."

Shayne stretched and yawned. "Wouldn't think of such a stupid move, Chung," he said. "We rather like it here with your thugs. Do any of you cretins speak English?"

Chung Lee's was a mocking smile. "Of course not. They know better than to accept any sort of bribe anyway, so save your breath. Red Brigade discipline is very strict."

"I'm sure it must be," Shayne said. "By the way, how are you going to negotiate for the Golden Buddha?"

Chung Lee couldn't resist a smug smile. "It is with *me* the Red Brigade will barter," he boasted. "This sort of thing comes within the jurisdiction of my department.

Just say your prayers that my immediate superiors will strike a swift bargain."

Shayne shook his head sadly. "A traitor in high places."

"A patriot!" Chung Lee insisted with some heat.

Shayne had found out what he needed to know. The Red Brigade had no plans to set either himself or Mary Su Lin free. Chung Lee would never risk being exposed as an agent of Red China.

This information the Chinese had given so carelessly narrowed Shayne's options.

He would have to figure some way to escape their captors, and quickly, then manage to get down the rugged mountain and back to Tapei. The blind girl would be a burden when they got free — and Shayne didn't consider *if* they managed to elude the four guards — but she was game. If he had to, Shayne would carry her down the rugged slopes piggyback!

Shayne set a forty-eight-hour deadline for them to make their escape. He had a strong hunch Chung Lee wouldn't dare keep them alive any longer than that. It would be too risky.

"I suppose this is your place," Shayne said, gesturing at the mountain lodge.

Chung Lee nodded. "My duties are rigorous. I need somewhere I can relax."

Shifting gears, Chung Lee drove away and one of the guards gestured Shayne and Mary Su Lin

to enter the bamboo lodge.

Shayne smiled at the man. "You're a yellowskinned son of a bitch," he told the guard in a pleasant voice. "Which doesn't reflect much credit on the maternal side of your family tree."

The man blinked but the expression on his sullen face didn't change.

The other three guards showed no indication that they understood English either.

"Would you say they don't understand what I just said?" Shayne asked Mary Su Lin.

"I'd have to see their faces to be sure," she told him, "but insulting that man's ancestral mother should have earned you a cracked head."

The four men were talking among themselves so Shayne asked, "Do you understand them?"

"They speak a Mongol dialect," she told him. "I can only catch a familiar word here and there. I'd say they come from the Gobi Desert of Outer or Inner Mongolia."

"That's great!" Shayne said. "Cousins of Ghengis Kahn."

Shayne and Mary Su Lin were on the porch of the lodge. One of the guards opened the door for them. Inside, they found themselves in a room that ran across the front of the small bamboo building. It was sparsely but tastefully furnished. At one end were sleeping mats for the guards,

and stacked against the wall were AK47s with clips of ammunition.

There was a brazier set up on the floor where the guards cooked their meals.

The stolid guards herded Shayne and Mary Su Lin down a narrow hall to a room at the back of the lodge. As soon as they'd stepped inside the room the door behind them was bolted.

"Hello." The calm, husky voice belonged to the woman sitting in a dark corner, hugging her knees. "Nice to finally have some company. I was getting lonely."

Mary Su Lin's head swiveled in the direction of the voice, as Shayne's eyes adjusted to the darkness after bright sunshine outside he discovered the owner of the voice had honey-gold hair and, as she rose, a ripe, shapely body.

"Who the devil are you?" Shayne asked in a blunt voice.

"Dr. Stephanie Scott."

With a blink Shayne absorbed this information. "Meet Dr. Mary Su Lin of the University of San Francisco," he said, nodding toward the Chinese girl. "I'm ..."

"Mike Shayne," Dr. Stephanie Scott finished for him. "If he fooled you two, I don't feel too badly about falling into Chung Lee's trap. Clever people, these Chinese. Begging your pardon, Dr. Su Lin."

"If no offense given, none is taken," Mary Su Lin said. "You two fell for his plot with your eyes

open. In my case the seeing led the unsighted, to garble a biblical passage."

Shayne detected a sharp edge to the Chinese girl's voice he hadn't heard before.

"You're *blind*?" Dr. Stephanie Scott asked.

"Unsighted," Mary Su Lin corrected. "We like that term for our handicap better."

The small room was Spartan, with only sleeping mats and, in a far corner, screened sanitary facilities. There was a single window. Shayne prowled to it and tugged at the cord that raised the bamboo blind. It was glazed with oiled paper. Shayne slid the window open.

The lodge was poised on the brink of a steep cliff and provided a breath-taking panorama of the Taiwan mountain spine with its snowy peaks. The lodge was only a foot or two from the edge of the precipice.

Shayne could see down into a deep, rocky valley more than 2000 feet below.

Dr. Stephanie Scott joined Shayne at the window and her shoulder rubbed his.

"That one is Hsinkao Shan," she told Shayne, pointing to a peak glistening with white snow in the middle distance. "A sacred mountain to the ignorant and superstitious Buddhists. From it they believe one can commune with the Lord Buddha, wherever he may be these days."

Shayne craned his neck from the window to study the precipice on which they were poised. An expert mountaineer, he decided, could probably go down that cliff, given the proper equipment. With a woman and a girl, and no equipment, it was an impossible task.

And if it was possible, the guards could easily pick them off as they tried to make the descent. So that avenue of escape was closed.

Shayne moved away from Dr. Stephanie Scott. Mary Su Lin had calmly seated herself on one of the sleeping mats, naturally assuming the Lotus position.

"Penny for your thoughts, Michael Shayne," the woman said.

"Chung Lee doesn't plan for us to leave this place alive," Shayne told her. "My thoughts start with that premise. He'll keep us among the living until and if he can strike some sort of deal, but after that," Shayne said with a grim smile, "we become very poor life insurance risks."

Dr. Stephanie Scott extended a slender hand. "Nice to meet another pragmatist," she said, her blue eyes studying Shayne's craggy face. "What do you suggest we should do? Prayer to an almighty but unseen God isn't exactly one of my fortes."

"There's only one thing to do," Shayne said.

"And what would that be?"

"Break out of here and get back down the mountain to Tapei, what else?"

"So we can blow the whistle on Mr. Chung Lee, honorable gentleman that he is," Dr. Stephanie Scott said in a sarcastic voice. "You've come half way around the world at some expense to Dr. Feldman's department to state the obvious. Congratulations, Mike Shayne, but I wish Feldman had sent a contingent of U.S. Marines instead."

Shayne ignored the woman's sarcasm. "Chung Lee has my Colt .45," he said. "Did he happen to leave you any sort of weapon?"

Dr. Stephanie Scott was wearing a rather tight slit skirt, in the Chinese fashion, with a loose silk blouse. She turned her back and raised the blouse. Tucked into the top of the skirt was a dagger.

The handle nestled in the small of Dr. Stephanie Scott's back and Shayne mentally complimented her on knowing the best way to conceal a weapon, but at the same time wondered where she had learned. When he reached to draw the dagger from its soft leather sheath his fingers brushed the woman's warm skin, and she shuddered slightly.

Shayne found himself looking at a needle-sharp double edged dagger. He carefully returned it to its sheath and Dr. Stephanie Scott let her loose blouse tail fall back in place.

"Why did they leave you with

that?" Shayne asked.

"Three of our Mongol friends planned to conduct a most complete body search," she told him with a slight flush. "The fourth saved me from being stripped and raped. He repeated the name Chung Lee several times during his tirade, so I assume my eventual ravishment will be carried out by that son of a bitch ... before he kills me."

Shayne was thoughtful. "When will we be brought something to eat? he asked the woman.

"Like an animal in a zoo I'm fed boiled fish and rice once a day in the evening. The priggish Mongol I've mentioned seems to be the chief cook and bottle washer around this lovely mountain retreat. At any rate he serves my food. I'd assume they won't vary the routine for two additional guests. Why do you ask? You getting hungry? I hope you like fish and rice. I don't."

"For Mike to get us out of this mess he needs to know the routine they follow," Mary Su Lin told the woman.

Dr. Stephanie Scott raised an eyebrow. "Is Miss Know-it-all your mistress, Shayne?"

"I am not!" Mary Su Lin said hotly. "I came along with Mike as a watchdog for the Seberg Foundation. It seems Joseph Seberg doesn't trust you."

"Well, now that's nice!"

"What we don't need is for you two to get into a hair-pulling con-

test," Shayne said in a crisp voice, "so knock it off."

Dr Stephanie Scott took a deep breath. "So all right. You've made your point, Shayne."

"I hope so. We hang together or be hanged separately, as the cliché goes. What happens while you're eating, Stephanie?"

When Shayne used her first name, it seemed to touch a cord that dissolved the woman's brash manner. She'd used it to cover the squirming worms of naked fear assailing her.

"They leave the door open." Stephanie's voice dropped to its normal husky register. "When I've finished eating the cook, or whatever he is, comes back to make sure I haven't eaten the plate and chopsticks too. God knows I stay hungry enough to do that if I could!"

"What are you given to drink?" Shayne asked. "I've noticed we're not left any water."

"Green tea and that's all. Water up here is either bad or scarce. It's bitter stuff served in a glass."

"Bitter?" Mary Su Lin asked.

"Yes. Very."

"Green tea shouldn't be," Mary Su Lin told Stephanie. "Not if it's made properly."

"Or drugged," Shayne said.

Stephanie's eyes widened. "Why didn't I think of that? I've been sleeping like a baby since they brought me up here. Usually I have to take a pill."

"Drugging the victim is S.O.P. with kidnappers," Shayne told the woman and the girl. "Where's the guard while you eat with the door to this room open?"

"Out in the hallway."

"All right," Shayne said. "Here's the way we make a break this evening."

V

"VERY WELL AND GOOD," Stephanie said when Shayne had laid out their course of action, "but what then? We're stranded on a mountain somewhere in Taiwan. What do we do, hitch-hike?" She nodded to where Mary Su Lin was sitting quietly. "And what about her?"

"What about me?" Mary Su Lin spoke up.

"You're blind. It's going to be hard enough for Shayne and me to scramble off this mountain without having to play seeing-eye-dogs to you."

Before Mary Su Lin could speak, Shayne said, "Just knock it off, both of you!" He turned to Stephanie. "Let me have that dagger."

Without a word she handed it, in its soft leather sheath, to him. Shayne raised the left leg of his pants and tucked the sheathed dagger into his sock, but not without first testing its edge with his thumb.

"Where in the world did you get the dagger?" he asked Stephanie.

"I found it in a shop in Tapei when I first came to the island," she said. "I bought it for a friend back in the states who collects weapons, but decided I'd better carry it until you came."

"Why?"

"My hotel room was rifled twice shortly after I arrived," Stephanie explained. "And there have been some other suspicious things happening."

"Such as?"

"I've been followed wherever I go. That's why I asked Dr. Feldman to send someone like you out here."

"Where is the Golden Buddha now?" Shayne asked.

"Aboard a ship named the *oriental Trader* with the rest of the exhibit. It's docked at Kaosiung on the southern end of the island instead of Tapei's port, Chilung. I checked out of my hotel to stay aboard ship until you arrived. I thought I'd be safer there."

"How did Chung Lee grab you?" Shayne wanted to know.

"He offered to drive me down to Kaosiung," Stephanie said. "Instead I wound up here."

"Did you leave a message for me at your hotel?" Shayne asked.

Stephanie made a wry face. "Our dear Chinese friend said he'd take care of that."

Chung Lee's plotting was clever, Shayne realized. The American consul on Taiwan would have no reason to believe anything

was wrong and institute a search for them.

The ship now in Kaosiung, if the Nationalists took Chung Lee's bait, would be on the high seas for a southern mainland port before Americans on Taiwan knew three of their citizens were missing. And he suspected Mary Su Lin, Stephanie Scott and Mike Shayne, when they didn't appear, would be implicated by Chung Lee in the plot. Shayne was certain the man was clever enough, and had the connections, to cover himself in that way.

THE SUN WAS DOWN and darkness was coming quickly. The aroma of cooking fish and rice had invaded the room where they were held captive half an hour ago. Shayne had rehearsed both Mary Su Lin and Stephanie Scott in the roles they were to play.

"Don't spare your lungs," he'd warned the woman.

"Not to worry," she'd told him.

Shayne stood at parade-rest facing the bolted door, Stephanie was by the window, ostensibly admiring the view, Mary Su Lin was behind the corner screen that hid the sanitary facilities.

The dagger was clasped in Shayne's right hand behind his back.

The bolt on the outside of the door was shot by a guard with a machine pistol dangling from a

strap over his shoulder. Shayne heard the footsteps of the man bringing their food. He would have his hands full.

When that guard was framed in the doorway, Shayne stepped aside, ostensibly to let him pass. Unsuspecting, the Mongol stepped into the room.

Shayne brought his left fist around in a sharp arc, catching the guard carrying their food on the nape of his neck. As the man went down, Stephanie let out a piercing shriek. It was enough to confuse the guard in the hallway fumbling for the machine pistol he was carrying. Shayne had that weapon, slashed it loose with the knife, then drove the dagger into the Mongol's throat, jerked it free as blood spurted, stabbed him a second time just below his rib cage to pierce the heart.

The guard he'd struck was on his hands and knees. The running feet of the other two guards shook the lodge floor as Shayne kicked the kneeling man over on his back and drove a foot into his exposed throat.

The other two were pounding toward the room from the front of the lodge.

"Out!" Shayne ordered Stephanie.

She scrambled through the window to crouch on the narrow ledge overlooking the cliff. She screamed again.

Shayne had the machine pistol cocked and ready. The first guard

to arrive stumbled over the body in the hallway, slipped in the pool of blood widening around it. A burst from Shayne's weapon slammed him back against the opposite wall. His machine pistol clattered to the floor as he crumpled at the knees, then pitched headlong into the doorway of the room.

Shayne stood back and stitched the thin hall partition, hoping a lucky shot would down their fourth captor now that he'd lost the element of surprise. He heard the Mongol yelp with surprise then the sound of his pounding feet as he retreated toward the front of the lodge.

"Damn it!" The machine pistol in his hand was empty. Dropping it, he went after the weapon of the man he'd dropped in the doorway. "Back in," he ordered Stephanie. "The shooting is over here."

She came squiming through the window to stare at the three Mongols Shayne had just killed. She paled and a hand jumped to her throat.

"You play for keeps, Shayne!" Stephanie said.

Mary Su Lin had ventured forth from behind the corner screen, hands held out in front of her. The room reeked with the smell of cordite and freshly spilled blood. The girl bent over, retching.

Shayne pushed Stephanie toward her. "Keep her down flat and you stay on the floor too," he ordered. "These flimsy parti-

tions wouldn't stop a BB pellet."

"What are you going to do?" Stephanie asked.

"Stalk Number Four, what else?" Shayne said, and in two quick strides was at the window. "You two stay low and quiet, understand?"

It was a close fit but Shayne squeezed out the window onto the narrow ledge. Back to the house wall, in the quickly gathering dusk, he sidestepped toward the back corner of the house, reasoning the surviving guard would circle around and come in that way.

As Shayne sidled along, stones dropped off into space and once he almost slipped. Somehow he managed to keep his balance without dropping the machine pistol in his sweaty hand. There was a cold bite to the evening breeze at that altitude but Shayne's shirt was soaked with sweat.

He was thankful the sheer drop in front of him was to a valley floor already flooded with inky darkness.

Shayne paused when he reached the corner, holding his breath and listening. The sound he was waiting for, when it came, was *behind* him, at the front of the house! It was the distinctive snick of another machine pistol being cocked.

Shayne swung himself around the corner a split second before the space he's occupied was

shredded with the scream of bullets.

Turning the corner, he'd dropped his weapon.

It lay out on the edge of the precipice. If he reached for it a burst of fire could cut off his arm. Now sweat was blinding him. Shayne wiped his eyes with his forearm, and the pounding of his heart was like a drum in his ears.

"Don't panic now," he told himself, taking a deep breath.

The guard he hoped would expect him to come around the house. Shayne waited in the gathering darkness. Finally he made his move. It was to reach for the fallen machine pistol. There was no burst of fire. Tucking it in his belt, Shayne started sidling back along the ledge, having removed his shoes. As he approached the front corner of the lodge he eased the pistol from his belt and made sure the safety was in the off position. It was already cocked.

Shayne made it to the corner, and jumped out into the open, fully expecting to be fired at by his waiting antagonist. He was just in time to see the Mongol making a stealthy approach to the far corner of the house.

"Back here!" he shouted.

As the man spun around, Shayne nearly cut him in half.

Pausing, Shayne sucked in deep breaths of the cold mountain air, waiting for his heart and pulse to slow. Then he entered the lodge

to face Mary Su Lin and Stephanie.

The woman and the girl were backed into a corner of the room, huddled against each other, Stephanie's arm around Mary Su Lin's slender shoulders.

"It's finished here," Shayne answered the question in Stephanie's eyes. It was dark now so Shayne lit the oil lamp in the room. He lit a cigarette from the same match and inhaled deeply. "We'd be damned foolish to blunder around this mountain in the dark. Why don't you two move up to the front room while I do something about ... " Shayne indicated the three bodies with his hand. "You might try to rustle up something for us to eat."

When they were gone he used one of the sleeping mats to roll each body for carrying. There was no shovel and the soil was rocky. For quick disposal he threw the bodies over the cliff, then walked around the house to do the same with the last Mongol guard he'd dropped.

It was grisly work and twice Shayne had the dry heaves before he finished. He'd found and jammed a fresh clip into the machine pistol tucked under his belt. Shayne didn't intend to be surprised by the return of Chung Lee.

The moon was high. There was a narrow path leading away from the lodge toward the sound of rippling water. He went up on the

porch and thrust his head in the doorway.

"Get me a bucket," he called. Mary Su Lin was fanning the charcoal fire under the brazier on which their fish and rice would be cooked.

Stephanie found one somewhere and brought it to Shayne.

"Back in a minute," Shayne told her.

A short distance down the path Shayne found himself in a sort of grotto that sheltered a deep spring and the stream flowing from it. When he'd drawn a bucket of water he stripped and forced himself into the bubbling ice-cold water. Jumping out he shivered until his big, scarred body was partially dry, then pulled on his slacks and shirt. His teeth were still chattering, but it felt good to be clean!

As best he could Shayne inspected his shirt and pants for bloodstains. It seemed as if there were a few, as careful as he'd tried to be.

What he'd done had to be done, with three lives at stake. Too often killing became part of his job. Taking a human life was something he could never quite accept as routine. What had happened here, Shayne knew, wouldn't stay buried in his subconscious; there would be dreams, sometimes nightmares. But that, too, came with the territory.

Shayne's mind was already worrying about the problem of

what to do next. He forgot the bloodstains on his clothing.

When Shayne returned to the lodge, Mary Su Lin had prepared broiled fish, instead of boiled, to be served on mounds of brown rice carefully fried. Stephanie had made tea. The three of them settled down to a feast.

It was a quiet meal. No one had anything to say because the girl and woman were drained by the experience they'd just been through; Shayne was busy figuring their next move.

"I see it this way," he said when they'd finished eating. "There's no telephone, no radio, so Chung Lee has to come back either tomorrow or the next day. When he does, he'll bring us wheels."

"What do we do about him?" Mary Su Lin wanted to know.

"We'll let the American consul earn his pay trying to figure that out," Shayne told her. "We need to get aboard the *Oriental Trader* and out to sea as soon as possible. Chung Lee didn't try this caper alone."

"The Nationalists lead a nervous political life," Stephanie told Shayne and Mary Su Lin. "They're paranoid about infiltration into Taiwan's bureaucratic infra-structure by Communist agents. And I'd guess they should be."

"What of the men you had to kill?" Mary Su Lin asked Shayne.

"When their bodies are found,"

Shayne said, "with any kind of luck we should be back in the states."

"God willing!" Stephanie breathed.

"Amen," Mary Su Lin murmured.

"You two try to get some sleep while I wait up for our friend Chung Lee," Shayne told the woman and girl. "I doubt he'll try to come up this mountain road in the dark, but I want to be bright and bushy-tailed just in case he does. Is there any tea left?" he asked Stephanie.

"A little. You sleep," she told Mary Su Lin. "I'll keep Shayne company."

"I'm sure Mike will be very grateful," the Chinese girl said in a sarcastic voice.

## VI

IT WAS THREE O'CLOCK in the morning and Shayne was alone on the porch of the mountain lodge with the machine pistol across his knees. From where he sat he could see the narrow mountain road that wound down the steep slope. The headlights of any automobile negotiating that road would be visible a mile away.

Shayne was smiling to himself because Stephanie had given up trying to come on to him half an hour ago and bedded down with Mary Su Lin.

"Damn it all, Shayne!" Stephanie had finally exploded.

"I'd rather be sitting up with a cigar store Indian than you."

"Why don't you get some sleep then?" Shayne asked. "We've had a busy day here and tomorrow may be just as busy."

"I'm not used to being sent off to bed alone," Stephanie sulked.

Shayne gave her bottom a sharp pat. "Have sweet dreams."

"You're impossible!" Stephanie said.

"That's because I try harder," he told her.

Stephanie had flounced into the lodge.

There were no familiar night sounds this high on the mountain. No birds rustled on their perches; if there were crickets they were silent. The only sounds were the low whistle of the night wind and the just-distinguishable murmur of the spring and creek. It was a moonless night with unblinking stars punched out of the dark sky canopy.

Shayne's thoughts wandered back to Miami Beach and Lucy Hamilton, Will Gentry and Tim Rourke. He wondered whether it was day or night there, yesterday or tomorrow.

Far down the road he saw two tiny spots of light. They disappeared, appeared again, were gone, then resolved themselves, when he saw them once more into automobile headlights.

Shayne was on his feet. Was it Chung Lee and if so would he be coming up the mountain alone?

Shayne moved from the porch to the turn-around in front of the lodge.

Crouched on his heels, he watched the car coming closer. It was coming up the final grade in low gear. Shayne moved back to the edge of the turn-around where the headlights wouldn't catch him in their glare.

With a final surge the black Mercedes made it onto the gravel turn-around and stopped, the headlights bathing the empty porch in front of the lodge.

The driver stayed in the automobile, evidently puzzled by the absence of the guards, at least one of whom should have come out to meet him.

Shayne silently approached the car at an angle and from behind, careful that his image wouldn't be caught in the rearview mirrors. There was only the driver in the Mercedes.

The headlights were turned off.

"Just keep both hands on the wheel," Shayne ordered in a low voice, pressing the machine pistol's cold muzzle to the driver's right ear.

There was a startled gasp.

"Now get out from behind the wheel," Shayne told him, "but keep your hands in sight. I have a very itchy trigger finger."

The driver did as he was told, drawing quick breaths but moving deliberately, while Shayne pressed the machine pistol muzzle

against his spine between the shoulder blades.

"Hands on top of your head now," Shayne snapped. "No wrong moves."

The man obeyed and stood quietly while Shayne frisked him to find his own .45 Colt carried in its underarm rig. Shayne was glad to have the familiar heft of his weapon back in his hands and tucked the machine pistol in his belt.

"Can I turn around now, Governor?" the driver asked with a plaintive British accent.

Shayne had been so certain it was Chung Lee who'd driven the Mercedes up the mountain that he nearly dropped his .45.

"Just who the hell are you?" Shayne wanted to know. He found himself facing a slight man with pleasant snub-nosed features and a blond moustache. "What's happened to Chung Lee?"

"Donald Forbes-Robertson is my name, or I guess you Americans would call it my moniker." The Englishman eyed the weapon Shayne still leveled at him. "Do you mind very much, old boy?" he asked. "Firearms pointed in my direction make me nervous and always have."

"Let me have the shoulder rig," Shayne said.

"Of course. I'll have to slip out of this coat you know."

"Go ahead."

When Shayne was adjusting the straps to his larger frame with the

.45 nestled in its worn holster, Forbes-Robertson said, "Chung Lee, I'm afraid has been a very naughty boy. By the way, I'm British Intelligence on loan to the Nationalists here on Taiwan. I've had a weather eye on friend Chung for quite sometime. This latest little ploy of his brought things to a head, as you Americans would say."

"Where is he now?" Shayne asked.

"Unfortunately he's flown the coop, as you ..."

"Americans would say," Shayne finished for Forbes-Robertson. "How did he manage to do that?"

"Hopped aboard a junk, as ..."

Forbes-Robertson's quick grin was engaging. "I rather like the way you Americans express yourselves, as you may have gathered." He lit a cigarette with a gold lighter. "That heathen Chinese must be half the distance to the mainland by this time. We do have a few failures in British Intel, although I must say our track record is much better than your CIA. That Bay of Pigs fiasco for example."

For the moment Shayne was satisfied that Forbes-Robertson was who he said he was, and he could ask later how he just happened to have the Colt .45 Chung Lee had relieved him of, as well as the black Mercedes.

And why he'd come alone to the lodge when he must have known

they would be well guarded.

"Where are the birds?" Forbes-Robertson asked.

"Sleeping," Shayne said.

"The guards?"

Shayne pointed to the lip of the precipice on which the lodge perched and the dark valley below.

Forbes-Robertson whistled softly. "Good show! We'll talk later about how you managed that, Yank. Now let's whistle-up the birds and be on our way to Kaosiung. I'm sure all three of you are ready for a sea change."

"You can say that again," Shayne sighed. "You driving us there?"

Forbes-Robertson shrugged. "It's the least I can do, old boy. The Nationalist Intel apparatus wants a low profile for Chung's attempted coup. They have enough on their plate since you Americans pulled out of their corner. Rather alarming, that, if you're a Nationalist Chinese. My orders are to get you and the birds aboard ship as soon as possible. Do you mind?"

Before Shayne could answer that question Stephanie joined them in the cool morning darkness. "Who the devil is this?" she asked Shayne.

"Forbes-Robertson is the name he's given me," Shayne answered.

Stephanie brushed blonde hair away from her face to peer at the slight Englishman. "Haven't we met somewhere?" she asked.

Forbes-Robertson grinned. "That we have, dear. At the cocktail party Chung Lee threw when you first arrived here in Taiwan."

"Oh yes," Stephanie said in a flat voice. "You were drunk and almost fell into the punchbowl."

Forbes-Robertson winced. "I've been telling Shayne here that Chung Lee is ... how do your American gangsters put it?"

"On the lam?" Shayne said.

"That's it."

"Why are you here?" Stephanie asked bluntly.

Forbes-Robertson told her what he'd just told Shayne. By that time Mary Su Lin had joined them. She took Shayne's arm. Drawing him apart she whispered, "I don't like this."

Shayne considered, then asked, "Any specific reason, Mary?"

"Not yet." She hesitated. "Call it my feminine intuition."

What Mary Su Lin had just said triggered a faint alarm bell at the back of Shayne's mind, and reminded him of his own questions about Forbes-Robertson, but it was too soon to panic.

"We'll play along," he told the Chinese girl in a sotto voice. Trust me."

"I do, Mike," she said.

IT WAS THE MIDDLE of the morning before they reached the dock in Kaohsiung harbor where the *Oriental Trader* was moored.

The rust-streaked freighter with a slight list to port was Liberian registry, Shayne noticed, but flew the Nationalist flag.

It had been a strange trip the length of the island down the flat east coast plain. There was a main highway, but Forbes-Robertson used back roads.

"Nationalist security forces have their wind up," he explained to Shayne who rode beside him on the front seat of the black sedan.

"So?"

"Have you ever tried to talk your way through a Chinese roadblock?" Forbes-Robertson asked. "It can be sticky."

On the dock Forbes-Robertson parked the Mercedes out of sight behind a warehouse. He accompanied Shayne, Mary Su Lin and Stephanie Scott aboard the ship.

No sooner were they aboard than deckhands began to unmoor the tramp steamer, pulling aboard the gangplank.

"Do you swim ashore?" Shayne asked the Englishman.

"Didn't I mention that I'm coming along with the three of you?"

"You sure as hell didn't," Shayne said.

The ship was chugging toward the harbor entrance.

"A last minute decision, old boy," the Englishman said. "You and the birds have state-rooms aft." Forbes-Robertson beckoned to a deckhand standing nearby and spoke to him in

Chinese, then turned back to the trio. "The coolie will show you to your quarters, old man ... you and Dr. Su Lin."

They were finally at sea and the ship paused to drop the pilot down a rope ladder to the bobbing pilots' boat that had followed in their wake from Kaohsiung harbor. The South China Sea rose and fell in oily swells.

"I need a word with our captain," Forbes-Robertson told Shayne and Mary Su Lin. "You'd like to make sure our Golden Buddha is still aboard," he said to Stephanie Scott. "We'll have a look-see, as you Americans put it."

Shayne watched the pair move forward toward the bridge superstructure, speaking to each other as they went.

"I get the feeling those two know each other better than they've said," he told Mary Su Lin.

"Word reached Joseph Seberg in Switzerland that Dr. Scott was on intimate terms with a person on Taiwan involved in art thefts," the Chinese girl told him. "That was why I was sent out here."

The coolie seaman, grinning, waited to show them aft to the staterooms.

"Did you catch anything of what our English friend said in Chinese?" Shayne asked Mary Su Lin.

"Just a little," she answered. "It was in Cantonese dialect and

I only speak Mandarin fluently, but I believe he instructed the coolie to lock us into one of the staterooms."

"We'll see about that," Shayne said.

They followed the Chinese into a narrow and drafty passageway leading toward the stern of the freighter. Mary Su Lin guided herself by placing a hand on Shayne's arm.

It was becoming obvious to Shayne that Forbes-Robertson wasn't who he said he was. He was also now convinced that the Englishman and Stephanie Scott not only knew each other well but were planning to double-cross Mary Su Lin and himself. But what sort of game they were playing he couldn't be sure.

Mary Su Lin's temporary safety, however, must be his immediate concern.

The seaman, still grinning, opened the steel door to the left hand stateroom. It was sparsely furnished with a single porthole in the hull of the ship — there was no deck outside — but the double bunks were made up, there was a washstand, a toilet and the stateroom, unlike the rest of the rusty tramp steamer, was relatively clean.

The steel door, he noticed, had a new bolt affixed so it could only be locked from the passageway.

Shayne took Mary Su Lin's elbow and guided her over the threshold but stayed in the

passageway himself. He gave her a brief hug and whispered, "I've work to do, honey, but you'll be safe here."

She nodded understanding.

The stocky seaman's grin faded to a frown. Shayne swung around to face him. "Do you understand any English?"

The man shook his head, obviously undecided what to do. Shayne closed and bolted the stateroom door, then asked, "Pidgin?"

"Me catch small pidgin."

During the Korean War Shayne had picked up "small pidgin" himself on the Pusan docks. He opened the door of the opposite stateroom and waved the seaman to step inside.

"You good fellow, no want to be kill-kill." Shayne's Colt was in his hand. "Other fellow tell you lie."

The seaman's dark eyes focused on the weapon in Shayne's hand, then widened with fright. Shayne's free hand on his chest gently pushed him deeper into the stateroom.

"By-and-bye you fellow stay here," he said. Reaching into his pocket he pressed a handful of silver into the seaman's hand. Tenting his hands against his cheek Shayne said, "You fellow sleep?"

The seaman bobbed his head, his grin back.

Shayne closed the stateroom door and heard the Chinese sea-

man bolt it from the inside. He moved forward in the passageway until he stepped out on the amidships deck.

From the position of the sun Shayne realized they were now on a western course toward the Chinese mainland. Other Chinese crewmen were about their business securing the ship now it was at sea and paid no attention to him as he prowled toward the bridge, certain he would find Forbes-Robertson and Stephanie up there, as well as the ship's captain.

Shayne climbed the outside ladder to the starboard flying bridge and found that he had been correct. Forbes-Robertson and Stephanie Scott had their backs to him and were holding a rapt conversation.

As Shayne stepped through the open doorway, the pair spun around to face him, consternation printed on Stephanie's face, a startled look on Forbes-Robertson's.

"Shayne, old chap!" Forbes-Robertson regained his composure first. "We were just talking about you."

Shayne's hand hovered near his holstered weapon. "I find that interesting," he said in an even voice, but Forbes-Robertson caught the glint of anger in the big detective's eyes. "What did you have in mind for me, a third share when you sell the Golden

Buddha in Macao or Hong Kong?"

Forbes-Robertson smiled brightly. "That is our general idea, old fellow."

"The hell it is!" Stephanie flared.

The *Oriental Trader's* captain was framed in the doorway to the chartroom behind the bridge. He was a powerful man with a full black beard and, to Shayne's surprise, an occidental.

"You're on my bridge without permission," the captain growled at Shayne. American, Shayne decided, from his accent. "What is your business here, sir?"

"I request permission," Shayne said.

Stephanie was livid with anger.

"Granted," the captain said, glancing from Shayne to Forbes-Robertson to Stephanie, then back at the detective. "What is your business?"

Forbes-Robertson was discomfited and Shayne realized they'd probably conned the captain into taking his ship to a mainland port instead of San Francisco.

"Where are we bound on your present course?" Shayne asked the captain.

"Macao. My first port of call."

"Shayne, for God's sake! Let's discuss this privately," Forbes-Robertson pleaded. "He doesn't understand our last minute change of plans," he told the captain.

"Damn you!" Stephanie lunged toward Shayne before either the

captain or Forbes-Robertson could intervene, the dagger was in her raised hand.

Shayne had only time enough to sidestep her charge and missed catching her wrist when she stumbled past him. Stephanie spun around, sheer madness staring at the three men through her eyes, and they backed away.

The frightened helmsman stared over his shoulder.

"Bloody hell!" Forbes-Robertson backed toward the open doorway leading to the port flying bridge. "She'd gone stark, staring mad!"

Backing out onto the bridge he slammed the door shut. The captain had retreated to the chartroom doorway. Shayne, poised on the balls of his feet, confronting Stephanie, said, "I'd better handle this, captain."

His eyes stayed locked with Stephanie's.

Nodding quickly, the captain backed into the chartroom. The helmsman, a Chinese, stared at Shayne and the woman, letting the ship drift off course.

"Damn it, Lee, watch your course," the captain roared at the helmsman.

Lee spun the wheel a few spokes, then huddled as close to the wheel as he could get, eyes fixed on the compass.

Stephanie, crouched, with the knife now ready for a gut-splitting upward slice, circled the bridge as Shayne did.

"The caper's finished," Shayne said in a soothing voice. "You and Forbes-Robertson planned it, using Chung Lee and then double-crossing him, isn't that the way it was?"

Saliva dripped from the downward curve of Stephanie's lips and her face was an ugly mask of fury. "A million dollars in gold!" she spit at Shayne. "We had a buyer. The deal was made."

Shayne held out a hand. "Let me have the knife, Stephanie. Cutting me isn't going to help. Come on now."

She threw herself at him. But this time Shayne was ready, anticipated her move, thrust out a foot and tripped the woman. She went headlong to the steel deck. Face down, knife arm pressed under her body, she raised her face to stare into his as Shayne knelt beside her.

"I ... stabbed ... myself." Stephanie said it in a wondering voice and the madness faded from her eyes. Her head fell forward and her forehead bumped the deck.

Gently Shayne turned the woman over on her back to feel for the pulse in her neck. There was no pulse. Stephanie's sightless eyes stared up at the overhead.

Forbes-Robertson came back into the wheelhouse, staring at Stephanie's body with a horrified expression on his face. "The bird killed herself!"

Shayne faced the Englishman across Stephanie's limp body.

He saw Forbes-Robertson through a red haze of hate. His seduction of Dr. Stephanie Scott and tempting her with a million in gold had led to this.

"You killed her," Shayne accused.

"How can you say that, old chap?" She was a greedy bitch. Now you and I can make a deal."

Shayne took a quick step toward the man and pumped his right fist into his smug face. All Shayne's weight and muscle was behind the punch.

Forbes-Robertson slammed back against the steel bulkhead behind him. The hollow thump of his head striking the bulkhead muffled the sharp crack of his neck. Glassy-eyed and gaping, the Englishman pitched forward to fall across the dead body of the woman. His legs kicked convulsively once, twice and then he was still.

Shayne stared down at the bodies, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand. Then he looked up at the captain.

"Take us back into port," Shayne ordered.

MARY SU LIN AND SHAYNE were aboard a return flight to San Francisco. At Shayne's suggestion the American consul in Tapei, Joseph Beardsley, had arranged for the Golden Buddha and the rest of the exhibit to be flown

directly to Florida aboard an Air Force C130 as a good-will gesture toward the Taiwanese.

After what they'd been through together, Shayne had become more than just fond of the slim Chinese girl, yet he couldn't find

words to tell her how he felt.

Mary Su Lin touched his arm. "If you're too bashful to say it I guess I must, Mike," she told him with a sigh. "I want you to spend some time with me when we reach San Francisco."

#### MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAKERS

*Continued from page 4*

Moving right along, we come to RICHARD REINSMITH, who has published 25 novels and 600 short stories since 1949, more than a million words under his own name and 15 pseudonyms. Born in Pocomoke City, Maryland, REINSMITH studied at Goldey Business College in Wilmington, Delaware. He joined the 101st Airborne Division, and after being given special training at the former Japanese Naval Academy in Eta Jima, he was assigned to the Eighth Army during the Korean Conflict, in which he received the United Nations Service Medal and the Korean Service Medal with two Bronze Stars.

As a civilian, DICK REINSMITH worked for construction and chemical companies, started writing part time and then full time in his Maryland farmhouse. When not in his hermitage, he enjoys yachting on Chesapeake Bay, fishing for blues and marlin in deeper waters, collecting money, and looking at beautiful women — though not necessarily in that order of importance.

DICK's story in this issue is *How To Kill A Hostage*, and if you've got to go, well . . .

Well, it had to happen. Rents, food prices, the cost of gasoline, the basic stuff we need to live on, keeps going up, along with bus and airplane fares, movie tickets, and so forth. At MSMM we got another increase in the cost of producing your favorite mystery magazine. We absorb as much of the rising costs as we can, but there comes a time when we've no choice but to raise the cover price. Sorry about that. BUT there's a silver lining — *MSMM is now 32 pages thicker!* Don't ask me to explain that. I'm just an honest, sincere, hard-working editor. I leave the economics of publishing to the experts.

# WHO WAS THE KILLER?

by Sandra W. Stange

The rich old miser was killed for his money.

The police discovered a number of clues.

Two men and two women were suspects, for sure.

The red-haired lawyer had dozens of shoes.

The blond and the doctor were both the same sex.

The professor was the female scientist's brother.

The brown-haired man was wed to the doctor,

Though each of them thoroughly hated the other.

Black was the color of the murderer's hair.

Name the killer's profession; that is, if you dare.

## SOLUTION

Scientist/blond/woman

Lawyer/red hair/man

Doctor/black hair/woman

Professor/brown hair/man

The professor was a man (brother) and the scientist a woman. The doctor had to be a woman (married to a brown-haired man). That left the red-haired lawyer to be the second man. Thus, the brown-haired man was the professor. The doctor and the blonde were the same sex (but not the same person) so the blond was the scientist. That left the doctor to be the black-haired killer.

# THE MAN IN THE MOON

by James M. Reasoner

Markham was just passing through — until he saw the runaway children with bruises on their bodies!

I ALMOST DIDN'T SEE the kids in time. They popped up in the glare of the headlights on the side of the road. I hit the brakes and swung out into the other lane to miss them.

I got a pretty good look at them as I went past. There were two of them, a boy and a girl, and neither one could have been more than ten years old. I wondered what the hell they were doing trudging along a lonely state highway in the middle of the night.

After spending the day in Arizona telling a grand jury all about a case I had been involved in several months back, I had decided to drive all night and try to make it across the desert while it was still cool. I had opted for this state road instead of the interstate because I hadn't felt like fighting the traffic.

The car came to a stop several yards past them. I put it in park and opened my door. When I got

out and turned toward the kids, I saw in the glow of the taillights that they had stopped and were regarding me warily.

The boy was older, eight or nine maybe, wearing tennis shoes, blue jeans, and a tee shirt. His light hair was tousled and grew down to a slight widow's peak.

His sister, which she unmistakably was, was two or three years younger, with the same light hair, cut short. She wore a sleeveless knit top and bright yellow shorts. She looked cold. Nights on the desert are like that.

I tried to make my voice as calm and reassuring as I could. I didn't want to scare them. "Hi. Do you guys need some help? A ride maybe?"

The boy said, "No, thank you. We were taught not to accept rides from strangers."

He was putting on a nice polite front, but I could tell that he was scared. I guess I would have been,

too, in his place. There was no telling how long they had been plodding along in the darkness.

"Listen, kids," I said, "my name is Markham. What's yours?"

"Cindy," the girl piped. "I'm cold."

"I told you to be quiet, Cindy." The boy was all business. "I'm John Wheeler, Jr., sir."

"I'm glad to meet you, John and Cindy."

"Everybody calls him Jackie," Cindy told me seriously.

Before he could shush her again, I went on, "All right, now that we know each other, we're not strangers, are we? How about if I take you home?"

Jackie was still suspicious, no doubt feeling responsible for his sister, but he was obviously tired and wanted to turn the both of them over to some sympathetic grown-up. He hesitated, then said, "Well ... all right. If you take us straight home."

"Sure. I'll be glad to."

I opened the door on the passenger side and held it for them. The girl got in first, and I could see the goose bumps on her arms and legs. She must have been really chilled.

It was when Jackie stepped into the illumination of the dome light that I had trouble concealing my surprise. Bruises covered his arms, and the vestiges of a black eye darkened his face. There was

something that looked very much like a cigarette burn on the back of his left hand, and his right hand was swollen and bruised.

I had heard of abused children, of course, just like everybody else, but this was the first hard evidence I had seen. I felt a tightening in my stomach, but I didn't say anything.

Instead, I got in the car myself and then, keeping my tone fairly light, asked, "Where in the world did you kids come from?"

"Back there." Jackie pointed in the direction from which I had come.

"Are you sure you're not the Man in the Moon?" Cindy asked. "My daddy says that the Man in the Moon gets little girls who don't do what their daddies tell them to."

I smiled and ran a hand over her hair. "I'm not the Man in the Moon."

"Good. 'Cause I think he's bad."

I looked over her head at Jackie and asked, "Where were you going? Do you live around here?"

"Up the road, in Dunes," he answered.

I remembered Dunes vaguely from earlier trips. It was a little place on the road about five miles up ahead. A long walk for two little kids. I put the car in gear and said, "I'll take you there."

As I drove through the night toward Dunes, I did some hard thinking. There were no marks

on Cindy that I could see, but Jackie had definitely been through the mill. If he had gotten treatment like that at home, I wasn't so sure it was a good thing to take him back. But that wasn't really up to me to decide. Still, there was nothing to stop me from having a long talk with the parents when I got there.

It didn't take us long to reach the little town. The gas station and the few stores were dark, as were most of the houses. I asked Jackie, "Where to now?"

"We live in a trailer." He pointed to the left. "Over there."

There was a trailer park a couple of blocks off the highway. I turned toward it and then saw the county sheriff's car parked in front of one of the trailers. All the lights were on inside, and I knew without asking that this was where Jackie and Cindy lived.

Cindy confirmed that with a pointing finger and a high-pitched, "There's our trailer!"

I came to a stop behind the sheriff's car and killed the engine. Almost before it quit turning over, the kids were out and scrambling up the wooden steps to the door of the trailer.

Someone inside heard them coming. The door was flung open. A woman stepped out and uttered a nearly hysterical cry, then swept the two of them up in her arms. As I got out of the car, I could hear her sobbing, "Oh my God ... You're all right, you're all right!"

A tall man stepped out behind the woman and looked past the reunion at me. He came around them and down the steps. He was holding his hat in his hands, but I didn't have any trouble recognizing the uniform or the holstered revolver at his hip.

He nodded as he came up to me. "Howdy. I'm Sheriff Cartwright. Where'd you find the kids?"

"On the highway about five miles out," I answered. "They were coming in this direction already, so I thought I'd give them a ride. A couple of runaways who changed their minds?"

"Nope." I couldn't see his eyes in the darkness, but I could tell that they were taking a long hard look at me. "Could I see some I.D.?"

I got out the leather folder with both of my licenses in it and handed it to him. He turned slightly so that the light from the trailer would fall on it and then studied the contents. "Private detective," he grunted. "What are you doing around here?"

"Just passing through on my way home. I was in Arizona testifying about a case." I didn't really have to volunteer that information, but I didn't see any harm in it.

"Were the children by themselves?"

"Yeah. I didn't know where they came from, but I wasn't going to leave them out there."

"Do you know John Wheeler?"

"The father?"

Cartwright nodded.

"The only Wheelers I know are Jackie and Cindy. Like I said, I'm just passing through."

Cartwright nodded again and handed the folder back to me. He didn't say anything, just stood there with a speculative look on his weathered face.

"What's going on here, Sheriff?" I asked. "Has there been some trouble?"

"Yes, there was. The Wheelers are separated, and Mrs. Wheeler has custody of the children. John Wheeler came over earlier tonight and took them away."

"That's kidnapping."

"It sure is. And before he came over here, he burglarized his father-in-law's business. I've got men out looking for Wheeler right now. I guess the kids slipped away from him somehow. I'm right glad you found them."

I said, "You and me both."

Mrs. Wheeler set the children down and seemed to notice me for the first time. She came down the steps and almost ran up to me.

"Thank you," she said, grabbing my hand. "Thank you for bringing them back." Emotion choked her voice.

Effusive gratitude was not what I wanted. To get back home was, now that the kids were safe. I took my hand back gently and said, "I was glad to do it."

Cartwright put a hand on Mrs. Wheeler's arm and said, "Don't

you think those children should be getting into a warm bed, Elaine?"

She turned to him and said, "Don't you want to question them, Sheriff? I want you to find John."

"That can wait."

"No it can't." Elaine Wheeler's voice had risen slightly, as if in anger. "I want you to find him tonight. I want you to find him and do something to him. Punish him."

I told myself to get in the car and be on my way. But I made the mistake of taking a closer look at Elaine Wheeler.

She was in her late twenties or early thirties, not a bad-looking woman, with short, curly blond hair and a sturdy but well-formed figure. The thing that bothered me about her was the note of viciousness in her voice as she spoke about her husband.

Cartwright was saying, "There'll be plenty of time to worry about that in the morning —"

"No! I want him caught tonight! He can't steal my children and get away with it."

The two of them seemed to have forgotten about the kids and me. I left Cartwright to wrangle with her and strolled over to the porch of the trailer. Jackie and Cindy were still standing there, watching the goings-on intently.

I went up the steps and said, "Come on. Let's go inside where it's not so chilly."

I herded them into the cheaply furnished living room and then asked, "Are you guys hungry?"

Cindy said, "I'm thirsty."

Jackie nodded and said, "There's milk in the refrigerator, but we're not allowed to get it for ourselves."

"I'll get some for you. While I'm doing that, why don't you get into some nice warm pajamas? Where do you sleep?"

Jackie told me that they shared a bedroom and pointed down the hall. I said, "You go ahead and get ready for bed. I'll get the milk."

I went into the tiny kitchen and found a couple of clean glasses in a cabinet. I poured them full of milk from the jug in the refrigerator and then carried them down the hall to the kids' room.

The two twin beds nearly filled the little room up. An unshaded light bulb cast a harsh glare. Jackie and Cindy had put pajamas on, and they were both sitting on one of the beds.

I sat down on the other bed and handed them the milk. As they started on it thirstily, I asked, "Who was it that hit you, Jackie?"

He wouldn't meet my eyes. He swallowed some more milk and then said quietly, "Mama. But it was my fault. I was bad. I played too loud."

"Did your daddy hit you, too?"

"Sometimes. Before he went away."

My fists wanted to clench, but somehow I kept them lying flat on

my knees. I was way out of my depth here. I knew something about how to handle con men and blackmailers and straying spouses, but nothing in my line of work had prepared me for a couple of battered kids.

"What about you, Cindy?"

She was embarrassed by the whole thing and wouldn't look at me, either. She said in almost a whisper, "They pinched me when I was bad. But I try real hard not to be bad."

I took a deep breath. "What happened tonight?"

"Daddy came and took us," Jackie said. "He said we were going to live with him. But he was acting funny. He scared us. When he stopped the car, we ran away from him."

I was going to ask more questions, but the squeal of tires outside interrupted me. I heard the slam of a car door and then a harsh voice barked, "What the hell are you doing here, Cartwright? Why aren't you out hunting that no-good jackass who stole my grandchildren and robbed my place?"

Cartwright's answer was loud enough for me to hear it. "The children are all right, Ralph. They're inside. And there'll be plenty of time to find John in the morning."

The kids were finished with their milk. I stood up and said, "You guys had better try to get some sleep." I reached over and

flipped off the light.

"Can I stay here with Jackie?" Cindy asked.

"I think that would be all right."

As I turned to go, Jackie said, "Thank you for helping us, Mr. Markham. Will you come back to see us?"

I paused in the doorway and then said, "Sure, Jackie. I'll come back to see you, maybe tomorrow. Good night."

"G'night," Cindy said sleepily.

As I stepped out into the hall, I heard her say to Jackie, "Do you think the Man in the Moon got Daddy?"

When I stepped out of the trailer, I saw the pudgy, middle-aged man who was lambasting Cartwright about catching John Wheeler. Wheeler had certainly aroused the ire of a lot of people.

The new arrival was chunky and balding and had a gray moustache under a jutting nose. Cartwright was reassuring him that John Wheeler would be caught and dealt with according to the law, but it wasn't appeasing him.

The man spotted me coming down the steps of the trailer and swung toward me. He snapped, "Who the hell are you?"

Cartwright answered for me. "He's the one who found your grandchildren out on the highway, Barrett. Name's Markham."

Ralph Barrett still had a truculent look on his face, but he

stuck out a big paw and said, "Thanks, Markham. We appreciate the help."

I returned the handshake and said, "I didn't want to leave them out there."

Cartwright asked, "You didn't see anybody else around where you found the children, did you?"

"No. I don't know where they came from. That bothered me ..."

"Well, we'll find Wheeler."

"When?" Elaine jumped on him. "I'm not sure you even want to find him."

Cartwright's face tightened, but he kept it under control. After a second, he said, "I'll talk to you again in the morning, Mrs. Wheeler. I'm glad the children are all right." He turned and walked toward the car.

I followed him. Elaine Wheeler and her father went into the trailer. Before Cartwright got into the car, he paused and leaned a hip on the fender. He evidently wanted to talk to me as much as I wanted to talk to him.

He started it off. "Do you know anything else about all this?"

I shook my head. "Nothing that'll help you find Wheeler. What's the situation here, Sheriff? Are those kids safe?"

He rubbed his lantern jaw. "I wish I knew, Markham?"

"You know they've been abused?"

"I suspected as much. I saw that the boy had a black eye."

"Did you see the cigarette burn

on his hand?"

"No ... I didn't," Cartwright's voice hardened. "It's damn tough, Markham. I've heard rumors about how the Wheelers treated them, but without some hard evidence, there's nothing the county can do."

"How much more evidence do you need?"

"I don't know. I'll have a talk with the child welfare people first thing in the morning."

I asked, "How about some background? Who are these people?"

"Not meaning to sound rude, Markham, but what business is it of yours?"

"I found those kids and brought them back here. I feel a little responsibility."

He nodded and I knew he understood. "Elaine is a local girl. Her father has a big trucking business. He about disowned her when she married John Wheeler a few years back. Wheeler wasn't from around here, and what made it even worse as far as Ralph Barrett was concerned, he didn't have any prospects. He took what odd jobs he could find, which aren't many in a county like this, but mostly he wanted to be an artist. Of course, none of his paintings ever sold, and the family had to live in this little trailer and just scrape by, but that didn't seem to bother Wheeler."

"It bothered his wife and father-in-law, though, didn't it?"

"That's what brought on the

separation. That and Joyce McCormick."

"Another woman?"

"Yep. Wheeler started carrying on with her about six months ago, and Elaine threw him out. She's filed for divorce, but the case hasn't made it through the courts yet." He paused and gave me that long hard look again. "You're not planning to get mixed up in this business, are you, Markham? There's nothing in it for you."

"You're absolutely right, Sheriff. I just wanted to know a little more about it before I headed on back to L.A. I was just worried about the kids."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Well, now that they're safe, I'm going to call my boys in. No telling where Wheeler is by now, and I'm not going to stay up all night just to satisfy Ralph's and Elaine's vindictiveness. You don't have to tell anybody I said that."

"I won't." I handed him one of my cards. "If you need any more information from me, you can reach me at that number."

He got in his car and said, "Be seeing you, Markham. Take it easy."

I waved at him and then walked back to my own car as he drove off. Before I could get in, though, the door of the trailer opened and Ralph Barrett hurried out. He caught up to me and said, "Wait a minute, Mr. Markham. I want to talk to you."

I didn't want to talk to him, but

I didn't have the energy it takes to be rude. I said, "Yes, Mr. Barrett?"

"Elaine heard the sheriff say you were a private detective. I want to hire you."

"To do what?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"To find my son-in-law and bring him back to me. I don't trust Cartwright."

"He seems to be a good man. I don't want to step on anybody's toes, Mr. Barrett."

"Wheeler has to be punished for what he's done."

"There are courts to handle that sort of thing, you know."

He didn't catch the sarcasm in my voice. He said sharply, "This is wide country, Markham. Some things we handle on our own."

"I get it," I said, not bothering to keep the rough edges out of my voice. "I find Wheeler and bring him back here, and you beat him half to death. Is that it?"

"Maybe not just half."

I opened the car door and got in. "Good night, Mr. Barrett. I'm glad the children are all right." It seemed like I kept saying that, but no one was listening. Like the children weren't the main concern.

I didn't give him a chance to say anything else. He opened his mouth, but I cranked the engine and put the car in gear before any words came out.

The last hour had taken a lot out of me, and I wasn't as determined

to drive all night now. I kept seeing Jackie's face and hearing Cindy's giggle. And as soon as I did, I thought about the marks on them, the ones that showed and the ones that didn't.

I came into a larger town about twenty minutes later, found a motel with its vacancy sign lit up, and turned into the lot gratefully.

THE NEXT MORNING found me heading back toward Dunes. After a few hours of fitful sleep, I had decided I wanted to see how things turned out. There were no cases waiting for me at home, and every so often, you have to indulge your curiosity.

On the highway the night before, I had noticed Ralph Barrett's trucking operation. It was a big fenced yard with several buildings and some trucks inside, and at the time, it had been dark and quiet. Now, as I passed it this morning, it was bustling with activity.

When I came into Dunes, I spotted Sheriff Cartwright's car parked at the gas station. I pulled up behind it and got out. Cartwright came out of the office, followed by the station attendant.

"Didn't expect to see you again," he said.

"I decided to stick around and see if I could be any help to you," I said. He frowned, so I hurried on, "I mean I thought I could take you out to the exact spot where I found the kids. Have you talked

to them this morning?"

"Yeah, I got their story, what there was of it. The little girl didn't remember much, and she was kind of confused about what she did remember, but Jackie told me what he could. It seems Elaine left them playing by the trailer yesterday evening while she walked down to the store. Wheeler drove up while she was gone, grabbed both kids, and put them in the car. They drove around for a long time, Jackie said, but he didn't know where they were. Wheeler told them they were going to live with him from now on, that they'd never see their mother again. Something happened to the car, and when Wheeler got out to check it, the kids slipped out and ran off. Wheeler couldn't find them in the dark. Jackie found the highway and they started walking. You found them a little while later."

I shook my head. "Hell of an experience for a couple of little kids."

"Yeah. Barrett thinks I don't care if I find Wheeler, but I promise you, Markham, I do. I just don't want Ralph Barrett taking the law into his own hands, that's all."

We strolled back toward the cars, out of earshot of the gas station attendant. I didn't know if Cartwright would answer my question or not, but I asked it anyway. "You don't like Barrett or

Mrs. Wheeler very much, do you?"

Cartwright considered before he said anything. Then he replied, "Barrett is an important man in this county. I can't afford to dislike him, not if I want to stay sheriff. And I *do* want to stay sheriff." After a pause, he went on, "That doesn't close my eyes up entirely, though. Barrett is a hothead, a man who made a success of his business by running roughshod over other people. He won't think twice about violence if that's what it takes to get what he wants."

He paused again and looked reflective, then went on, "Elaine's mother died a long time ago, and Barrett spoiled the girl. She never did grow up, and she blamed Wheeler for getting her into trouble with her father. Sometimes, Markham, I think that boy Jackie is more grown-up than his mother is."

"I got the same impression."

"Of course, Wheeler is no prize himself, but Elaine should have known what she was getting herself into." Cartwright smiled wearily. "Those are damn nice kids. Sometimes I wonder how they turned out that way."

He took his straw cowboy hat off and wiped the sweat from his brow. Even though the day was young, it was already hot. He said, "Well, let's go, if you want to show me where you found them."

I pulled my Ford over to the side

of the lot, out of the way, and then joined the sheriff in his car. It didn't take us long to cover the few miles of highway.

"It was along about here," I said a few minutes later. "Of course, it was dark, but I checked my odometer and this should be the place."

I found marks in the gravel shoulder where I had pulled over, and Cartwright brought his car to a stop across the road.

There was nothing to indicate where the kids might have come from, and since neither one of them could say for sure, that left Cartwright with a hell of a big area to cover. And Wheeler could be long gone from the county.

"Well, I'll just have to put out an APB and bring the state police in on it," Cartwright said. "I don't know what else to do."

I looked out the car window at the flat country surrounding us. Some foothills jutted up a few miles off the road on one side, and on the other, the scrub-covered desert stretched as far as I could see. It was about as desolate a place as I had ever seen, and I thought again about the kids being stuck out here in the middle of the night.

My mind was telling me something about where they might have come from, but I couldn't quite tune in on it. I decided to put it on the back burner for a while and see if anything came of that.

Cartwright dropped me off at my car. Before he drove off, he put his hand out the window and asked, "Are you heading back to Los Angeles now?"

"Maybe a little later. I thought I'd say hello to the kids."

I could tell by the look on his face that he didn't care much for the idea of me hanging around. He seemed to be a good man, and I couldn't blame him for not wanting a stranger mixing in his investigation. But I couldn't just put the situation out of my head, either.

I gave him a little wave as he drove off, but he didn't return it.

Since I was at the gas station, I had my tank filled and then drove the couple of blocks to the trailer park. I didn't see Ralph Barrett's car there, and I was grateful for that.

The kids must have heard the car coming up, because they were outside before I could open my door. As I got out, they chorused, "Hi!"

"Hi. How are you this morning?"

"We're fine, Mr. Markham," Jackie answered. "I'm glad you came back to see us."

"You didn't think I'd go running off to L.A. without seeing you again, did you?"

"We didn't know if you cared enough to come back or not."

There wasn't much I could say to that. This boy had a finely

developed distrust of grownups, and I couldn't very well blame him, considering what he had gone through.

Cindy was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. I swept her up and gave her a hug. I started to rumple Jackie's hair, but a sudden, unexpected recollection stopped me. I had hated it when people did that to me when I was a kid.

Elaine Wheeler appeared in the door of the trailer. She said, "Good morning, Mr. Markham. Did you reconsider my father's offer?"

Evidently Barrett had told her of our conversation. Before I could answer the question, though, Jackie asked, "Does Grandpa want you to work for him?"

"He wants Mr. Markham to find your daddy and bring him back," Elaine answered before I could say anything.

I set Cindy down and asked, "Would you like for me to do that, Cindy?"

She nodded. "I want you to bring my daddy back."

I knew that her motivation was different from her mother's, but the first step of locating Wheeler was the same in both cases. I turned to Jackie and asked, "How about you, Jackie?"

He shrugged, suddenly disinterested, and said, "I don't care." It didn't matter to him one way or the other if he ever saw his

father again, and that was sad. Suddenly, I wanted to find John Wheeler, wanted to find him for myself now, so that I could tell him what he had helped to do to his son.

I said to Elaine, "Can you get in touch with your father?"

"He should be at the trucking yard."

"Thanks. Call him and tell him I'm on my way to see him."

I said goodbye to the kids, and Cindy extracted another promise from me to be sure and come back to see them. Jackie was still rather subdued.

It didn't take long to drive over to Barrett's trucking yard. I turned in at the gate and headed for a building with a sign in it proclaiming it to be the office. Barrett came out of the building before I got there.

"Elaine called and said you wanted to take the job," he greeted me.

"Well, I didn't say that, but ... yeah, I do. I'd like to find John Wheeler."

"Come into the office. We'll talk money."

I followed him into the cluttered office. He sat down behind a big metal desk and told me to have a seat in the room's other chair.

"First, tell me about the robbery here," I said. "Cartwright didn't fill me in on that."

Barrett pointed to a window in the side wall of the office. "He broke the lock and came in

through there. He'd been around here enough to know where everything was. He cleaned out everything of value in the desk."

"How much did he get?"

"About two hundred and fifty dollars in cash, plus some stocks and bonds I kept here."

I raised an eyebrow. "Not a very good place to keep such things."

"I never had any trouble until now," Barrett replied pointedly.

"How do you know Wheeler was responsible?"

"He's threatened to do something like this before. And the sheriff found his pen here. Must've dropped out of his pocket."

"His pen?"

"His sketching pen. Damn fool thinks he's an artist. Always carries the pen and a sketch pad around with him." He took a checkbook out of the middle drawer and asked, "How much do you want?"

"My usual rate is two hundred dollars a day plus expenses. One hundred is good enough for a retainer."

"All right." He picked up a pen and opened the checkbook.

"But there's one thing we have to settle before I take your money."

He looked up in surprise. "What's that?"

"If I find Wheeler, I turn him over to Sheriff Cartwright. That's the only way I'll take the job."

He put the pen down. "I don't know, Markham. There's a few things I'd like to say to Wheeler before he's turned over to the law."

"I'm sure Cartwright would let you visit at the county jail."

"You just don't understand, do you, Markham?" Barrett pushed his chair back and stood up. "It wasn't your office he broke into. It wasn't your grandchildren he stole. And it wasn't your daughter that he married in the first place. He ruined Elaine's life."

"I imagine she was old enough to make up her own mind. Maybe that's why you don't like Wheeler. He's a symbol of Elaine's rebellion against you."

Anger began to turn his face red. He snapped, "I don't need any amateur psychiatry from a private eye. Do you want to find Wheeler for me or not? If you do, I get him first. Those are my terms."

"I want to find him. On my terms."

"Then you won't get any of my money to help you. Get out of here."

Barrett was more of an enemy now than ever, but I didn't care. I stood up and said, "So long, Barrett. I hope I won't be seeing you again."

He started around the desk, fists clenched, and then stopped. I guess he saw that my fists were clenched, too, and that I was two inches taller, ten pounds lighter,

and twenty years younger. He grated, "Get off my property."

"I'm going."

I went. As I left, I saw Barrett talking rapidly to several burly characters who were probably truck drivers or mechanics. Given Barrett's penchant for violence and his need for revenge on anyone he thought had wronged him, it could be that I had made a bad enemy. I wasn't going to hunt Wheeler down just so that Barrett and Elaine could have their vengeance, though.

I would have to do it for Cindy's sake, and for my own.

Joyce McCormick, the other woman in Wheeler's life, might be a place to start. I found a telephone booth with a directory in it and got the first good break in this mess. Joyce McCormick was listed. There was no address, so I dropped coins into the phone and dialed the number that the book gave.

It rang three times before a woman answered, "Hello?" It was a pleasant enough voice, not sounding annoyed at the intrusion of the telephone.

"Is this Joyce McCormick?" I asked.

"Yes, it is. Who's this?"

I told her my name and then said, "I'm looking for John Wheeler. Do you know where I might find him?"

Her voice changed. "Are you a policeman? If you are, you're wasting your time. I've already

told the sheriff everything I know."

"I'm a private detective. I'm not working for the sheriff."

"Then why are you looking for John?"

"It's a personal matter."

"Sure. Well, I'll tell you just what I told the sheriff. I haven't seen John for four days, I don't know anything about what he did last night, and I don't have any idea where he is now. All right?"

"Could I come and talk to you?"

"What for?"

"I want to know more about John and his kids and his wife. And I'd like to meet you."

There was a moment of silence from the other end. Then, sounding puzzled, Joyce said, "What's your interest in this? Who are you working for?"

"Myself. And a little girl named Cindy."

There was another moment of silence, then she asked, "Where are you calling from?"

"I'm at the phone booth in Dunes."

"I live a mile west of town. It's a green frame house."

"I'll be right out."

I hung up and stepped out of the booth as a blue pickup cruised by. I seemed to remember passing a green frame house outside of town. I got in the car and headed in that direction.

Finding the house was no trouble. It sat right beside the highway, behind a neat little yard

that was surrounded by a chain-link fence. I pulled in the driveway.

Joyce McCormick met me at the front door. When I stepped up onto the front porch, I could tell that she was a tall woman, her eyes nearly on a level with mine. She was about thirty-five and wore her hair cut short. It was a pretty shade of brown. I got the feeling that her mouth was capable of a very nice smile, but right now it was set in a tight, stern line.

"You're Mr. Markham?" she asked.

"That's right."

"Come in."

I followed her into the house. She was wearing blue jeans and a man's shirt and making them look good on her.

"Sit down." She gestured at an overstuffed armchair. I took it while she sat on a small sofa. She went on, "Just what is it you'd like to know?"

"I guess you heard what John Wheeler did last night?"

"I know what he's supposed to have done."

"You don't think he's, capable of robbing his father-in-law and kidnapping his children?"

Her mouth became even more stern. "I suppose he's capable of it. The evidence pretty well says that he did it. But I don't think it's his fault."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that whatever John did, he was driven to it."

I sat forward as best I could in the soft chair and clasped my hands together in front of me. "Do you want to explain that?"

She sighed. "People never let John alone. They were always trying to force him into a mold of their own making. Some people just can't stand that kind of treatment. Ralph Barrett did his absolute best to kill John's spirit."

"Right now I think he wouldn't mind killing John."

"That's exactly what I mean. They infected John with their own violence."

I wasn't sure that I bought her theory, but at the moment that wasn't important. I asked, "How did the two of you meet?"

"Before I answer any more of your questions, Mr. Markham, I want to know exactly what your involvement in this is."

"I'm the one who found those two kids wandering around out on the highway."

"And now you feel responsible, is that it? You want to straighten everything out?"

"You're making me sound like a meddler."

"Aren't you?"

She had a point there. I considered for a moment, then said, "I just want to find Wheeler and bring him back here so that things can be cleared up. And Cindy wants me to find him."

"What about Jackie? How does he feel about it?"

"He doesn't seem to care one

way or the other."

Joyce stood up and stalked over to the window. "I'm not surprised. Elaine's ruined him with her constant abuse. I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to go over there and strangle that woman."

"I heard that John was rough on them himself."

"He wasn't always that way ... not at first. He adored those children. But Elaine and her father kept so much pressure on him, trying to make him into something he wasn't, that he couldn't stand it. He lashed out at whoever was near." Her voice choked a little bit. "Sometimes that meant me, too. But I didn't care."

"You still haven't told me how the two of you met."

"I came here from San Francisco about a year ago. My husband had been killed in a car wreck, and I just didn't want to stay there anymore. I sold our house and moved here. I wanted to get as far away from everything as I could."

"You picked a good place for it."

"I got a job at the store in Dunes, and I met John while I was working there. I've always been interested in art, and I saw that he was always carrying a sketch pad around with him. A friendship just seemed to develop naturally between us."

"And it developed into more

than just a friendship?"

"I'm not ashamed of it. I was a lot better for him than Elaine could ever hope to be." She turned away from the window to face me. "I'm not going to apologize for what happened."

"I'm not going to ask you to. Did the two of you ever talk about running away together?"

"We talked about it. I think John was just building his courage up to make the break. Then Elaine found out about us and told her father. He had some of his thugs rough John up and throw him out of the trailer. Elaine filed for a divorce."

"Why didn't the two of you just leave town then?"

"John was afraid to leave the children with Elaine. He was afraid she would really hurt them sometime. He rented a room over the drugstore so that he could be close by and keep an eye on them."

"And then last night he finally got brave enough to go get them."

Joyce nodded. "I wasn't surprised when the sheriff came by and told me about it. I knew that John would strike back someday, if he stayed around here long enough."

"And you don't have any idea where he could be now?"

"John could be almost anywhere in the county, Mr. Markham. He knows this area as well or better than the natives, since he's always out sketching the

landscapes. With time and encouragement, he could become a fine artist."

I stood up. "I suppose I'd better be getting on. Thank you for talking to me."

"Was what I told you any help?"

"I've got a better picture of John and his situation now. It always helps to know as much as you can about a person you're looking for."

As I started for the door, she put a hand out as if to touch my arm, then stopped the motion in mid-air. She said, "Mr. Markham ... If you do find John, what are you going to do with him? You wouldn't take him to Ralph Barrett, would you?"

"If I find Wheeler, I'll turn him over to Sheriff Cartwright. Barrett will have to get his revenge through the courts."

"Ralph Barrett would like to kill him. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded. "I know. And I don't plan to be an accessory to murder."

I thanked her again for her time and went back out to my car. She had given me a good picture of what John Wheeler was like, and I thought it over as I went back toward Dunes.

**THE WHEELER'S MARRIAGE** seemed to be a case of a weak but idealistic man marrying a strong, dominating woman. Elaine and

her father had tried to change Wheeler, but he had been too rigid to conform and too weak to stand up for himself. The strain of being in the middle like that had turned him into a man who hit his kids and looked for comfort to another woman. Lack of power in the marriage had led him to seek it wherever he could. I could have almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Until I thought of Jackie and Cindy.

I turned over Joyce McCormick's information in my head. It made sense, Wheeler knowing the surrounding countryside so well. I figured that he spent a great deal of time roaming around in it, looking for scenes to sketch. That would mean he knew all the back roads, maybe even better than Cartwright and his men. He could be holed up back in the hills where it would take an army to find him.

Something Cartwright had told me earlier popped into my head. According to Jackie's story, something had happened to Wheeler's car and he had stopped it to check under the hood. That was when the kids slipped away. That couldn't have happened too far from where I found them, or they would have been a lot more tired than they were.

It was possible that Wheeler hadn't been able to get the car going again. If he had had to abandon it and strike out on foot,

it was possible that he was hiding not far from the road, waiting for night to fall again. It was too hot to do much walking in the daylight hours.

I drove on through Dunes and headed for the spot where I had found the kids. Once I passed it, it was only another mile or so to the old deserted gas station that I had barely noticed the night before. I slowed down as I approached it.

There was a road there, turning off to the north, toward the foothills. It hadn't registered on my consciousness the night before, and I hadn't been able to pull it out of my subconscious until now. I didn't know whether Sheriff Cartwright had already checked it out or not, but I thought it was worth a try.

It was more of a trail than a road, two dim tire tracks that led off through the mesquite and cactus. I had to watch out for rocks, but other than that, it wasn't too hard to negotiate.

Once, not long after I had turned off the highway, I caught a glimpse of movement in the rear-view mirror, a flash of blue, but when I looked again, I couldn't see anything for the dust that was billowing up behind me. An uneasy feeling wormed its way up my backbone.

The road twisted up the edge of the hills, out of sight of the highway now. The dust was coming into the car and getting into my eyes and nose, and I was rubbing

at my eyes with one hand and steering with the other when the trail turned sharply around a hillock.

I hit the brakes and stared.

There was a car sitting there with its hood up, an old Chevrolet that was covered with dust, just like my Ford was now. I brought my car to a stop behind it.

I got out slowly, looking around to see if anybody was in sight. The whole area seemed to be deserted for miles around.

Then I heard the growling of an engine somewhere behind me.

Someone had followed me out here. I didn't know why, but I knew the reason probably wasn't anything good. I hurried over to the other car. I wanted to check it out quickly and get moving again.

I glanced in and saw the papers and documents scattered on the front seat. Reaching in through the open window, I picked some of them up and saw that they were the stocks and bonds that Ralph Barrett had mentioned. This was Wheeler's car, all right, there was no doubt about that.

I took another step toward the front of the car. That's when I saw the foot.

I moved forward slowly. The foot didn't move. As I stepped around to the front of the car, flies rose in a cloud.

The man was sprawled on the sand in front of the car. His blue eyes were glazed and staring. His hands still clutched at his chest.

where the dark stain had spread on his sports shirt.

I walked around the body and then saw the gun lying in the sand on the other side of the car. I wasn't going to touch it. Cartwright could do that.

I was sure that this was John Wheeler. I could see the resemblance, especially to Jackie. He was lying on his side, and I suddenly noticed a few inches of a leatherbound book sticking out of his pocket.

Something made me reach out and pull it gently from his pocket. Blood had stained one corner of it. I opened it and flipped through the pages hurriedly. It seemed to be a record of shipments of some kind. I wondered if the handwriting was Ralph Barrett's.

There seemed to be something wrong with the shipments listed. They all originated at the border and went to various cities, but there was no explanation of what was being shipped. I checked the dates. They ranged all through the year, so it couldn't be produce. That wasn't an agricultural area, anyway. Nor was it an industrial one.

I ran out of time to think about it. The sound of the vehicle that had followed me was louder now. I stood up just as it rounded the bend.

The sight of the blue pickup didn't surprise me. Now that I thought about it, I remembered seeing it several times since I had

visited Ralph Barrett's trucking yard. I should have picked it up sooner, but I hadn't been expecting a tail.

It came to a stop and two men got out. They were two of the ones that Barrett had been talking to as I left the trucking yard. They wore jeans and tee shirts, and their bare arms bulged with muscle. Long-billed caps shaded their faces from the brilliant sun.

They stopped about ten yards away from me. The one on the left said, "Say, boy, looks like you found what you was huntin'."

"Mighty nice of you," the other one said, "'cause we was huntin' the same thing."

"Let's just gather all this stuff up and go see Mr. Barrett, all right, boy?"

They took a step closer. I knew that I could have taken either one of them on equal terms, but there would be nothing equal about this fight. Barrett wanted what Wheeler had taken from him, and these men would stop at nothing to get what Barrett wanted.

The only thing I had going for me was the gun lying in the sand. They couldn't have known it was there, and it was out of their sight. I had to move before they got any closer.

Holding the book tightly in my left hand, I launched myself into a dive over Wheeler's body. The men yelled and split up, coming around both sides of the old Chevy.

I snatched up the gun and rolled across the sand, coming up in a crouch as the first man rounded the front of the car. I brought the gun up and his eyes widened, but he didn't slow down.

I wished I had had time to make sure the barrel wasn't plugged with sand. I knew what could happen if it was.

But sometimes you have to take a chance. I pulled the trigger.

The gun cracked and the heavy caliber slug plowed into the man's shoulder. He stopped like he had run into a wall and then flipped backwards. His scream cut through the quiet desert air.

The other man stopped in his tracks as I swung the gun toward him. He gulped and cried, "Wait a minute! Don't shoot! None of this was my idea. I just work for Barrett. He's the one told us to follow you!"

"And he told you to recover everything that Wheeler had taken from the office, too, didn't he?" I snapped.

"That's what he said. He told us to follow you, and if you found Wheeler, we was to bring the two of you straight back to him. Honest, we didn't know Wheeler was dead!"

I believed him. I was beginning to get an inkling now of what was really behind Barrett's rage, and it wasn't the kids.

I motioned with the gun. "Get over to the pickup. I want you to take that distributor and rotor

of. Now!"

I watched him with one eye and checked out the other man at the same time. He had passed out from the shock of being shot, but it looked like the bullet had passed through cleanly. The bleeding was already beginning to slow down.

When the second man had the truck disabled, I had him do the same thing to Wheeler's car. Then I said, "You'd better drag your friend over into the shade. You're going to have to wait out here for a while."

"You're not goin' to leave us here?"

"Don't worry, I'll let the sheriff know where you are. It won't be long before he's out here."

He was pulling the wounded man into the shade cast by the pickup as I started back down the trail. The little book was in my pocket, and the gun was on the seat beside me.

I BOUNCED DOWN the rough road, taking it faster than my shock absorbers liked, but I was in a hurry. I wanted to get to Cartwright with this as fast as I could.

When I got back to Dunes, I stopped at the one phone booth and called the sheriff's office. Cartwright wasn't in, but I told the dispatcher who I was and asked that Cartwright meet me at the Wheeler trailer as soon as he could.

Jackie and Cindy were playing in the little yard when I drove up.

They each had a toy car, and they were making highways in the sand. Jackie was using his left hand, as his right seemed to be sore. It was still swollen.

They both smiled at me as I walked over to them. Cindy said, "Jackie was telling me about the Man in the Moon. Do you want to hear?"

I knelt beside them and dug in the sand with a finger. It had been a hell of a long time since I had done that. I said, "Sure. Go ahead, Jackie."

"Well ... " He concentrated, making sure that he was telling it the way he wanted to. "Daddy always said that the Man in the Moon was bad and that he came to take little boys and girls away when they acted bad. I think he was trying to scare us, so that we would behave."

"But it doesn't seem fair that the Man in the Moon only takes little boys and girls. I think he should take bad grownups, too. Doesn't that seem right, Mr. Markham?"

"Sounds right to me, Jackie. Was your daddy a bad grownup?"

"He was sometimes. He didn't use to be, but he started getting mad a lot. He used to take care of us when Mama hit us, but then he started hitting us, too."

I pointed at the burn on his hand. "Did your mother do that?"

He nodded, but he wouldn't look at me now. He was too ashamed.

"The sheriff is coming over here soon, Jackie, and when he gets here, I want you to tell him about how your mother hurts you. Okay?"

Before he could answer, Elaine Wheeler screeched from the door of the trailer, "You bastard! What the hell do you think you're doing?" She rushed down the stairs. "Get away from my kids! You're trying to turn them against me, that's what you're doing! Just like John did!"

I stood up and she aimed a slap at my face. I caught her wrist and clamped down on it, maybe harder than I had intended to. She gasped.

"You leave my mother alone!"

Jackie's little fist pounded against my leg. Cindy began to cry. I said, "Damn," and dropped Elaine Wheeler's wrist.

The sound of a car stopping made me turn. Cartwright was getting out, a tired look on his face. Right behind him was Ralph Barrett, scowling as usual.

"I was over at Barrett's when the call came in that you wanted to see me, Markham," Cartwright said. "What's it about? Have you found Wheeler?"

I jerked my head toward the kids. "Let's take a walk. Why don't you come, too, Barrett?"

The three of us went out into the road. I kept my voice as low as I said, "I found Wheeler, all right, Sheriff, but he's dead."

Cartwright caught his exclamation-in time, but Barrett blurted loudly, "Dead?"

Elaine's head jerked up. I couldn't read the expression on her face. It could have been either joy or grief.

"There's a trail that turns off of the highway at that old gas station," I went on. "Wheeler's body is with the car, a couple of miles up that road."

Cartwright rubbed his jaw. "I'd forgotten all about that old trail. Nobody ever uses it anymore. It just winds up into the hills and then peters out. What happened to Wheeler?"

"He was shot. I've got the gun that probably did it in my car. I'm no expert, but it looks like he's been dead since last night."

"I'll get right up there."

"Something else, Sheriff. There's two of Barrett's men up there, too."

"What are you talking about, Markham?" Barrett blustered.

I swung to face him. "You had them follow me, Barrett, in case I found Wheeler. You were hoping that I would. You wanted somebody besides the sheriff to find him first, so that you'd have a chance to get this back." I pulled the little book from my pocket.

Barrett was surprised and didn't think. He made a grab for it. I jerked it back and then handed it to the sheriff. "I'd be willing to bet that if you took this book and questioned Barrett's men about

those shipments, you'd find somebody willing to admit that Barrett's been hauling illegal aliens. That book is his record of that little sideline."

"You're crazy!" Barrett snapped. "Next thing, you'll be saying that I killed Wheeler."

"No, I don't think you did," I said, hating to admit it. "If you had, you would have taken that book with you and then left the body for Cartwright to find eventually."

Cartwright was flipping through the book. "I don't see where this is proof of anything, Markham."

"What else would Barrett be hauling from the border year 'round? And if it wasn't something illegal, why didn't he keep a record of it with his regular paperwork? I think Wheeler found out about it and took the book to blackmail his father-in-law."

Barrett's fists doubled up and he took a step toward me. "You dirty liar! I'll —"

"You'll shut up and stand still, Ralph," Cartwright snapped. "We'll get this all straightened out, don't worry. If you're telling the truth, I'm sure you won't mind me asking your boys some questions."

Barrett paled. He still wasn't thinking. He lunged for the book in Cartwright's hand. The sheriff moved it out of the way, put his other hand in Barrett's chest, and shoved him back. "Now that wasn't a smart thing to do, Ralph,

not at all. Makes me think Markham might be on to something. Why don't you go sit in the car until I'm through here?"

I could see defeat on Barrett's face now. He took a deep, shuddery breath and trudged slowly back to the sheriff's car.

As Cartwright turned back to me, I said, "I had to wound one of Barrett's boys. I think by the time you get out there, they'll be only too happy to spill all of it to you."

Cartwright frowned. "I've known Ralph Barrett for a long time, Markham, and I can't help but think you may be right about him. I'd appreciate it if you would stay around until we find out for sure, though."

"I didn't plan on going anywhere."

Cartwright wiped away the sweat that was trickling into his eyes. I followed his gaze and saw Elaine Wheeler watching us intently, with Jackie and Cindy peeking around from behind her.

"This leaves us with even more of a problem, Markham. If Barrett or his men didn't kill Wheeler, who did?"

I had been hoping that he wouldn't ask that, but I would have been surprised if he hadn't. I called, "Would you come over here, Jackie?"

Under his breath, Cartwright said, "Oh, now, hell, Markham ..."

Jackie walked up to us slowly. I

said, "You were telling me about the Man in the Moon, Jackie. Why don't you tell the sheriff?"

He swallowed and said, "I just said that the Man in the Moon should take bad people away, even if they're grownups."

"Was your daddy bad last night?"

"He scared us. He said we would never see Mama again. I didn't want to go with him, and neither did Cindy. He said he would hit us if we didn't behave, and then leave us there for the Man in the Moon."

"Did he have a gun?"

Jackie nodded solemnly. "He showed it to us. He said he might even shoot us if we were bad and save the Man in the Moon the trouble."

Cartwright said softly, "Oh, Lord."

Elaine Wheeler had come closer, close enough to hear, and now she said, "Don't listen to him, Sheriff. Don't listen to him!"

"What happened when the car broke down, Jackie?" I asked.

"Daddy got out to see about it. I told Cindy we were going to run away from him. She was afraid. But Daddy had left the gun on the seat. I took it to scare him. I didn't want him to get us ..."

We all waited.

"And then ... and then ... the Man in the Moon came. He got Daddy. That's what happened. The Man in the Moon did it."

Cartwright knelt beside him.

"You did the right thing to tell us about it, Jackie. Now why don't you come for a ride with your mother and your grandfather and me?"

"Can Cindy come too?"

"I think she'd better stay here."

Elaine Wheeler wailed, "Oh, my God!"

I met Cartwright's eyes. "I can stay here with the little girl for a while."

He nodded. "I'll send somebody right away. Then you come on in to the office."

I walked over to Cindy while Cartwright was bundling Elaine Wheeler and Jackie into the car. Then he got the gun out of my Ford and wrapped it up so that

Jackie couldn't see it. I was glad of that.

Cindy asked, "Where's Jackie and Mama going?"

"They're just going for a ride."

"Can I go too?"

I picked her up, struck by the lightness of her, and then watched Cartwright's car disappearing into the dust. "I don't think so," I said, "but you don't mind staying here with me for a while, do you?"

She shook her head. "I like you, Mr. Markham. You won't let the Man in the Moon get me, Will you?"

It wouldn't do any good to tell her that he gets nearly all of us at one time or another.

"No, Cindy. I won't let him get you."

## STRANGE, BUT TRUE

The biggest hero of World War II was a dachshund named Schultzie. When the U.S. ship he was on as a mascot was torpedoed by Japanese submarines, brave little Schultzie leaped unhesitatingly into the water and dragged sixty-seven people, one at a time, to the safety of the lifeboats. For his heroism, Schultzie was awarded the silver star, the bronze cross, and the purple shaft. He was later executed as a German spy.

# "SM--"

by W.L. Fieldhouse

Major Lansing of the Army's Criminal Investigation Department pursues a bloody trail of murder and espionage!

WHAT WAS LEFT of the red Datsun was still smoking as Major Clifford Lansing arrived. He parked his white Volkswagen behind a caravan of MP jeeps that had already assembled behind the headquarters building of Montgomery Barracks. Two attendants were carrying an inert form on a stretcher to the open back of an Army ambulance. They weren't hurrying. A white sheet covered the face of their burden.

Lansing emerged from his tiny car and approached the white-capped military policemen. Seeing the golden oakleaf tacked to the green baseball cap of Lansing's fatigue uniform, the MP's saluted briskly.

"I'm from the Criminal Investigation Department, homicide division," Lansing explained. "What have we here?"

"A car blew up, sir," an MP staff sergeant replied. "*That* car." He pointed at the smouldering wreck.

"That saves me some detective work," Lansing remarked dryly.

"The car belonged to a Lieutenant Benton," the cop said, consulting his note pad, "Apparently he climbed into the car, started the engine and *wham!*"

"Benton is the customer they're loading into the ambulance, I assume. Anyone else in the car?"

"No, sir."

"Did anyone see the explosion, Sergeant?"

"No one *saw* it, sir," the cop answered. "But they sure *heard* it. Spec. Six Daniels from the re-up office was the first person to reach the wreck."

The MP tilted his head to indicate a short, stocky man with dark hair a ski-slope nose bisecting two button eyes. SP6 Daniels saluted as Lansing drew closer.

"I'm from the CID," the Major explained, returning the salute. "I'd like to know what happened here. Will you help me?"

"As much as I can, sir," Daniels nodded eagerly. "I was working in the re-up office, counselling a young trooper who plans to make the Army a career. Nice kid. He wants to re-enlist and remain stationed in Germany. Well, I heard this explosion. The whole building seemed to shake. Everybody in the 'head shed' must have heard it, because people were running into the hallway as I came out of the office. There's a fire escape right next to re-up. So I hurried outside and down those steps."

Daniels pointed to a small wooden fire escape with a flight of stairs extending from the second story to the ground. "The car was on fire," Daniels continued. "It had been blown apart. One tire was rolling down the driveway and a car door was lying at the foot of the stairs."

"Was Lieutenant Benton still inside the wreck then?" Lansing asked.

"No, sir. He was lying on the ground about eight feet from the car. I didn't even recognize him at first, his body was burned so badly. Damn! It was the worse thing I've seen since 'Nam.'"

"He was dead when you found him?"

"Not quite, sir. I knew he'd never make it, though. He tried to talk, but his mouth filled up with blood and he couldn't get the words out. All he could manage to say was ... well, it sounded like 'Sm —'."

"Sm—?" Lansing knitted his eyebrows. "You mean 'S', 'M' ... something?"

"That's what it sounded like, sir," Daniels repeated. "'Sm—'."

"Thank you Specialist," Lansing said. Turning to the MP he said, "I want you to keep everybody away from that car until a team from the CID lab department has a chance to go over every inch of it. Don't let anyone take any metal scraps or mementos from that wreck."

"Yes, sir," the cop replied.

Lansing approached a small group of bystanders. "Are any of you from Benton's section?" he asked, saluting a full-bird colonel even as he spoke.

"I am, sir," said a muscular man dressed in fatigue trousers and an O.D. green tee shirt. Three chevrons with two rockers on his baseball cap revealed he was a sergeant first class.

"I'd like to talk with you privately, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

"Major, I'm Colonel Gibb, post commander of Montgomery Barracks," the full-bird declared. "Aren't you going to discuss this incident with me?"

"Yes, sir. I'll talk to you later this afternoon."

"Major." Gibb spoke with irritation. "This is *my* post."

"I appreciate that, Colonel," Lansing assured him. "But it's *my* investigation."

The Sergeant led Lansing through a side door entrance into

the basement of the headquarters building. Entering a bleak corridor, they walked to an ultra-security door with steel bars and a sign declaring 'S-2'. An S-2 section deals with Army Intelligence. S-2 material ranges from *confidential* to *top secret-crypto*. For this reason, S-2 was guarded by strict security measures.

"Please excuse my appearance, sir," the Sergeant said. "I was working inside when I heard the explosion. Our air conditioning is shot and it gets damn hot in there."

"Lieutenant Benton worked for S-2?"

"Yes, sir," the NCO replied. "Do you think his car was sabotaged or could this just be a freak accident?"

"I'd like to know your opinion, Sergeant."

"I don't know why anyone would want to kill the Lieutenant."

"Benton's last words, actually his last attempted words, were 'Sm—.' Do you have any idea what that might mean?"

"He might have been talking about a certain project."

"What project?"

"I'm really not at liberty to say, sir. You'll have to talk to Captain Cross about it."

"Cross?"

"The officer in charge of our S-2 section. He's not here today. The Captain had to attend a security conference in Bamberg.

He should be back this evening."

"If Cross is the OIC and, I take it, you're the NCOIC," Lansing mused, "am I correct in assuming Benton was the executive officer for your section?"

"Yes sir," the Sergeant shrugged, "The Lieutenant wasn't a bad XO."

"But not your sort of officer?" Lansing guessed from the NCO's tone.

"He was a little too liberal to be a good military man. He thought the Salt Treaty was great and *detente* was wonderful. I figure the only commie you can trust is one that's been dead for ten years."

"You didn't get along?"

"We just didn't discuss subjects that could only lead to an argument," the NCO explained. "We worked together, but we kept our mouths shut unless we had to talk about business."

Lansing nodded. "Who else is in your section?"

"Two clerks. One of them, PFC Dinsdale, is still learning the ropes. His military occupation specialty is 78D20, but Headquarters Battery doesn't need another legal clerk and we lost Spec. Four Lundy last week, so we got him."

"Lost? You mean Lundy's term of service ended?"

"No, sir. We would have broken in a new replacement before he left. Lundy was killed in an accident in the billets. He got drunk one

night, fell down a flight of stairs and broke his neck. Lundy didn't drink much. I guess he wasn't very good at holding his liquor. It's a pity. He was a damn good soldier, by today's standards."

"Interesting," Lansing said to himself quietly. "You said there are two clerks with S-2. If Dinsdale is a trainee, I assume the other has been here longer."

"Yes, sir. Specialist Smothers has been with S-2 for more than five months."

"Smothers?" Lansing raised an eyebrow, "Where is he now?"

"He's also the section driver. He took Captain Cross to Bamberg."

"I'll want to talk with him," the Major said grimly. "His name begins with 'S-M'."

"Yes, it does," the NCO agreed with a nervous wince. "And, as a matter of fact, so does *mine*. My name is Edgar Smith."

CAPTAIN GARRETT W. CROSS arrived two hours later. He was an athletic man in his early twenties with sand-colored hair and hard gray eyes. Although he treated Lansing with proper military courtesy, his manner was still brisk and businesslike.

"Sergeant Smith met me at the gate and explained why you're here." Cross told Lansing as he escorted him downstairs into the basement corridor once more. "We must discuss this matter privately."

The captain moved to the barred S-2 door and unlocked it. He ushered Lansing inside before securing the entrance.

"I didn't think my clearance was sufficient to enter another unit's intelligence section," the Major remarked.

"I'm authorized to clear you concerning a 'need to know' security matter." Cross replied. "However, what I'm going to tell you must be regarded as strictly confidential. Not one word of this can appear in *any* written reports, documents or other official or unofficial papers."

Cross led Lansing through a short corridor to a thick steel door. Unlocking the tomb-like entrance, the Captain and Lansing stepped into a small conference room with four metal chairs surrounding a Plexiglass table. Cross closed the door and slid a thick steel bolt into place before he spoke.

"How familiar are you with ABC warfare, Major?" he asked.

"ABC? That's Atomic, Biological and Chemical, right?" Lansing replied.

Cross nodded. Slowly pacing along the artillery-red carpet, the Captain locked his hands at the small of his back as he continued. "To put it simply, we were conducting an investigation to determine the possibility of a special ABC device to be adopted for USAEUR defense purposes."

"What sort of device, Captain?"

"All I can tell you is its code-name was SMITTEN."

"Germ warfare? Isn't that contrary to the Geneva Convention?"

"Actually, we know the Soviets and the Chinese and many of our so-called allies are working on chemical/biological weapons. However, SMITTEN was not some sort of man-made plague, as one reads about in cheap spy novels. It was a project similar to the proposed neutron bomb."

"You're using the term *was* as if to indicate the past tense."

"Indeed," Cross confirmed. "SMITTEN was abandoned last month. Mind you, we were only considering the *possibility* of SMITTEN. We were not conducting chemical, biological or nuclear experiments in the Federal Republic of Germany or anything like that. To the best of my knowledge, there is no ABC research in progress by the USAEUR."

"But you still believe Lieutenant Benton was trying to say 'SMITTEN' before he died?"

"It does seem the most likely possibility." The Captain shrugged.

"S M' may also mean 'Smith' or 'Smothers'."

"Are you suggesting either of my men would want to kill my executive officer?" Cross frowned. "What reason would they have?"

"You'd have a better idea about that than I," Lansing replied.

"However, it is obvious Lieutenant Benton and Sergeant Smith didn't get along very well."

"No, they didn't," Cross admitted, extracting a pack of cigarettes from his jacket. "Smith tended to regard Benton as a Left-wing radical and the Lieutenant considered Smith to be a Right-wing reactionary."

"Were either of their assessments accurate?"

"Not really." The Captain lit his cigarette with a sleek butane lighter. "They both exaggerated the other's politics. Although, frankly, I'm much more conservative than Benton was, but not to Sergeant Smith's extremes."

"So you were stuck in the middle of their arguments."

"Sometimes, yes."

"What did Benton and Smith think of the SMITTEN project?"

"Well, Benton was horrified by it. He favored an international ban on nuclear weapons and he thought wars should be avoided by special committees in the United Nations." Cross sighed. "Of course, Smith's attitude was exactly the opposite. He favored SMITTEN, considering it a valuable weapon for our NATO and USAEUR defenses. He was very angry when the project was rejected. He accused Benton of undermining SMITTEN, encouraging that it be scrapped."

"How did you feel when SMITTEN was turned down?"

"I was disappointed. From what

we completed of the investigation concerning possible use for SMITTEN, my personal conclusion was very similar to Sergeant Smith's. I believe SMITTEN could have been a useful defense weapon. I think it was more practical and stable than the neutron bomb and many more conventional weapons. However, Lieutenant Benton's attitude had nothing to do with the project being rejected."

"Why was SMITTEN scrapped?"

"Washington killed it," Cross explained, gesturing helplessly with his hands. "Actually, I suppose they were right. The Salt Treaty is supposed to reduce our number of nuclear weapons so SMITTEN may have angered the Russkis. Besides, ever since the Three-Mile Island mishap, public opinion toward nuclear energy is very negative."

"But Sergeant Smith still blamed Lieutenant Benton for SMITTEN's demise?"

"Yes, he did."

"What about Specialist Smothers?"

"He knows there was a project called SMITTEN, but he never really knew what it was."

"I mean, what do you think of Smothers?"

"Oh, he's not a bad kid. Nothing outstanding, but not bad." He came back with me from Bamberg. He's probably put our truck in the motor pool by now."

"Truck?"

"A duce and a half. S-2 goes into the field for training maneuvers just like any other section. More than most. We not only carry radios for communication during war games, we also take along maps, charts, a number of special logs, manuals and other equipment," Cross explained. "After Smothers has finished in the motor pool, he'll head for the billets. That's Headquarters Battery, of course. It's right across the street from this building if you want to go there tonight."

"I'll talk to him tomorrow," Lansing yawned. "We've all had a long day."

"I can expect to see you in the morning then?" Cross inquired as he unbolted the steel door.

"Probably in the afternoon," Lansing corrected. "I'm going to Ansbach first to draw the 201 files of everyone in S-2."

"Including *mine*?" the Captain asked with a start.

Lansing nodded.

"I think you'll discover getting the 201 files of S-2 personnel to be rather difficult, Major."

"Solving a murder case is often difficult, Captain," Lansing replied. "But I *always* solve them."

SP5 WENDY DAVIS, Lansing's personal secretary, was humming contentedly as the Major entered his office at CID headquarters. He glanced at the attractive twenty-

six-year-old WAC with curiosity as he moved to his desk.

"You seem in good spirits this morning."

"We have reason to be, sir." She smiled. "Major Conglose just left. He'll be on leave in France for the next thirty days!"

"I hope he enjoys himself," Lansing commented, trying to conceal his relief. Conglose was also a CID officer, but he regarded Lansing as a rival that somehow threatened his status in the military. Lansing was pleased to hear that Conglose was gone, because the senior Major frequently interfered with his investigations.

"How's your wrist, sir?" Wendy inquired.

"It feels like it was never broken," Lansing assured her as he placed a briefcase on his desk. "I was glad to get the cast off."

"Did you get the 201's from Ansbach?"

"Finally," Lansing replied. "I had to wait to be cross checked by both CID headquarters in Nuremberg and Army Intelligence. Of course, they can't just hand out personnel files concerning S-2 without taking proper security measures."

"Oh, yes!" Wendy exclaimed. "Specialist Woods and Specialist Bartholomew completed the autopsy and lab investigation. Their reports are on your desk."

"Thank you." Lansing fished the file folders from his IN box. The autopsy revealed no sur-

prises. Lieutenant Benton had died from numerous injuries caused by the explosion. His lungs had been ruptured, his spinal column severed, and he'd suffered considerable internal bleeding from "lesser" injuries. The lab report, however, was more provocative. "This is interesting," Lansing muttered. "Bartholomew believes the explosive was an RDX composition, possibly C-four."

"What's that mean?" a confused Wendy inquired.

"It means two things. First, Benton's death was no accident and second, the killer used plastic explosives." Lansing continued to read the lab report, then added, "There was bits of primacord and fragments of two timing devices found in the wreck. That means the bomb wasn't supposed to go off as soon as the ignition was switched on."

"Why would the killer use two timing devices?" Wendy asked. "In case the first one failed?"

"Perhaps," Lansing mused. "But Bartholomew's report suggests there were actually two explosions, *two bombs*. I suspect the first was intended to disable Benton's car, probably after he'd driven off post, to make him lose control of the automobile. The second bomb was to make certain he didn't survive the crash."

"So it was suppose to look like an accident?"

"Yeah, the S-2 section at Montgomery Barracks seems to have

more than its share of accidental death," Lansing remarked thoughtfully. "Wendy, you've got your work cut out for you today."

"Okay, sir," she sighed. "Hit me with the bad news."

"I want you to find out what happened to the corpse of a certain Spec. Four Lundy. He supposedly broke his neck by 'falling' down a flight of stairs, so his body was probably shipped back to the States. When you find out where he is, I want you to get in touch with the nearest CID headquarters in the city, county or state where the late Specialist Lundy now resides. Tell them I want an autopsy. If there's any possibility Lundy's neck may have been broken *before* he tumbled down those stairs, I want to know about it."

"Wow!" Wendy exclaimed, shaking her head. "That's some order."

"Just do the best you can, Wendy. I'm going to read through these 201 files briefly and then head back to Montgomery Barracks."

"Whoever this murderer is, if he killed Lundy as well, he must be awfully ruthless, even by killers' standards," Wendy remarked.

"Yeah," Lansing agreed. "And if he intended to cause a car wreck to give the impression that Benton died by accident, he didn't care if innocent bystanders were killed in the process. I'd say that's pretty ruthless."

## SPECIALIST FOURTH CLASS

Dale Smothers emerged from the S-2 section and met Lansing in the basement corridor. A short, thin young man with jet black hair (striking because his complexion was extremely pale), Smothers nodded nervously to Lansing's suggestion that they step outside to talk. The Spec. Four's entire body seemed to quiver as he and Lansing moved through the exit and walked onto the driveway behind the head shed.

"That's it, huh?" Smothers inquired, referring to the charred patch of ground where Lt. Benton's Datsun had been.

"That's it," Lansing confirmed. "How well did you know the XO?"

"Not real well, I guess," Smothers replied as he started to put his hands into his pants pockets. Realizing he was violating military dress regulations, Smother jerked his hands free, then fluttered them about awkwardly as if trying to decide what to do with them.

"How do you feel about his death?"

"Oh! Well, that's awful." The SP4 balled his hands into fists by his sides.

"Yeah," the CID investigator muttered as he decided to change his line of questioning. "Tell me about Lundy. He was in your section, so you probably shared a room with him. What was he like?"

"Lundy?" Smothers seemed startled, his nose was running and

he sniffed hard before replying.

"He was okay. We were never buddies, but we got along all right. He sort of kept to himself. You know, sir?"

"I'd appreciate an explanation."

"Well, Lundy read a lot, stayed in his room most of the time. Now, me, I try to get out of this place every night. I like to go down town and boogie."

"We're you boogying the night Lundy died?"

"No, sir. I was sound asleep in my room in the barracks."

"Most drunks are pretty loud. Didn't he wake you up?"

"I don't think he came into the room, sir."

"How did it happen?"

Smothers shrugged. "I guess Lundy was just drunk. He must have stumbled over to the stairs and fell. The NCO in Charge of Quarters Duty found him."

"Didn't Lundy attract a lot of attention? Didn't he scream when he fell?"

"I don't think so. Nobody ever mentioned hearing a scream."

"Did he get drunk very often?"

"No, sir. That was the only time I ever recalled that he got loaded."

"So Lundy didn't drink much and he seldom left his room, but he did both that night."

"That's right. He was working late that night. As soon as he was through, he must have gotten liquored up."

"Working late? Why was Lundy working any later than you?"

"Well, each of us has, special skills that help the section. Like me, I'm a truck driver. Lundy, he was good with radio equipment. Planned to become a TV repairman when he got out. He and Sergeant Smith both stayed late that night to get the equipment ready for a field trip later that week."

"Smith, huh? 'How do you feel about nuclear energy and atomic weapons?'"

"I don't really think about it very much," Smothers answered, surprised at Lansing's sudden change of subjects.

"Most people have an opinion about such things," Lansing said with a shrug. "According to your 201 file you spent some time in a reform school a few years ago. What happened?"

"Well, er, when I was about fifteen I stole a couple of cars. The cops caught me and they sent me to Shea's Correctional Center, I guess I was always sort of keen on machines. I do my own maintenance on the section truck, you know." He sniffled again, wiping his nose with a shirt sleeve.

"No, I didn't know that," Lansing replied. "But I'm not surprised."

**SERGEANT FIRST CLASS** Edgar Smith descended the stone stairs in front of the Montgomery headquarters building. He was sur-

prised to see Major Lansing standing by the white Volkswagen, waiting for him. The NCO saluted as he approached.

"How's the investigation going, sir?" Smith asked.

"I'm still collecting new information, Sergeant," Lansing replied as he returned the salute. "For example, I read some interesting material about you in your 201 file today. I didn't know you were a demolitions expert in Vietnam."

"Oh!" Smith nodded. "I get your point."

"Did you ever use any plastic explosives? Composition-four maybe?"

"Was C-four used to blow up Benton's car?"

"Perhaps," Lansing shrugged. "Are you familiar with it?"

"Sure," Smith nodded. "It's nice stuff. Stable, flexible and damn powerful. Of course, C-four isn't the easiest explosive to come by. I doubt if a single arms room in Montgomery Barracks has a single ounce of it, and plastic explosives aren't the sort of thing you can whip up in your garage."

"True, but one could probably buy them from the German black market."

"If one knew a few German hoods or had some sort of clandestine connections," Smith agreed. "Which I don't. Of course, I don't expect you to believe me."

"Well, I don't *disbelieve* you."

Lansing smiled thinly. "Captain Cross told me about SMITTEN. He said you were pretty upset when it was rejected."

"Sure I was. So was the Captain. Hell, it was his ideas to start the investigation to consider SMITTEN for USAEUR."

"But you were angry with Lieutenant Benton when SMITTEN failed."

"Well, he did everything he could to louse it up. Damn right I was angry. Thanks to *detente* and these disarmament agreements, we've already given the Reds a military edge. SMITTEN could have added to our defense ability in Europe."

"Would you say Benton committed treason by opposing the project?"

"Treason might be an exaggeration for what he did."

"*Might be?*"

"What are you suggesting, Major?"

"You may have felt that Benton acted contrary to the national interests of The United States."

"So I killed him?" Smith snorted. "Honestly, sir. That would be pretty damn stupid. Killing Benton wouldn't restore SMITTEN. You don't think I go around knocking off people just because they do something I don't like?"

"No," Lansing mused. "I don't consider you to be the psychotic type. However, if you thought

Benton acted against America's defense interests *once*, you may have felt he'd do it again."

"So you think I killed him because of what he *might* do in the future?"

"Just a possibility, not an accusation," Lansing assured him. "By the way, I understand Lundy was working late with you the night he had his accident."

"Yes, sir."

"Did he seem upset when you last saw him?"

"Well, actually, Lundy was rather moody for a number of days before the accident. I don't know what was eating him. Whatever it was, it must have driven him to the bottle that night after he left S-2. Captain Cross could tell you more about that."

"Cross?"

"Yes, sir. He gave Lundy a ride in his car after work. I understand he dropped Lundy off at the billets that night too."

"Then Cross was with Lundy when he got drunk?"

"That's right, sir. The Captain took him to his quarters at the officers' bachelor section in the housing district near Nuremburg. Cross had a television set on the fritz and he wanted Lundy to fix it. Afterwards, they stopped at a tavern, Cross bought him a few drinks and ... well, you know what happened then."

"Maybe I don't know," Lansing remarked. "Maybe you don't either."

THE BARTENDER in the Montgomery Barracks officers' club poured a scotch on the rocks for Captain Cross. Lansing slid onto the stool beside Cross as the Captain sat by the bar, sipping his drink.

"Had a long day, Captain?" the CID investigator inquired.

"Oh, hello, Major." Cross smiled weakly. "Join me in a little bracer?"

"No, thanks. I'm still on duty."

"I take it that means you have a few questions for me," Cross remarked, glancing around the nearly empty cocktail lounge. Although dimly lit, the room was obviously occupied by only a few patrons, all of whom were indulged in their own conversations. "Here is as good a place as any to ask them."

"All right," Lansing agreed. "When you were telling me about the SMITTEN project, why didn't you include the fact that the USAEUR adoption program was your idea?"

"I didn't really see what that had to do with it."

"It might have quite a lot. Didn't you resent Benton for going against your brainchild?"

"Perhaps a little bit," Cross admitted. "But he wasn't responsible for SMITTEN's rejection. I told you before that it was Washington that scrapped SMITTEN not Benton."

"You seem to take such a setback quite calmly, Captain. If

SMITTEN had been successful you'd be a shoe-in for a promotion this year."

"Something else will come up. I'll make rank sooner or later. I'm not in any real rush. I'm still young."

"Yes, you are. You're quite young for the rank you've already achieved. Of course, your ROTC grades were outstanding and you seem to find the military life quite acceptable."

"Don't you, sir?"

"I do now, but it took me some time to find an MOS that suited me. Of course, I'm an Officers' Candidate School graduate. I never went to ROTC. You must have gotten a head start at a younger age."

Cross shrugged. "I was in an orphanage or two that had pretty strict discipline. Maybe that helped."

"Yes, I remember that from your 201 file. Your foster parents lost your adoption papers in a fire. The Army must have been quite distressed not to have a birth certificate or any document to replace it."

"They were." Cross extracted a pack of cigarettes and a butane lighter.

"Did Lundy repair your television set?"

"What?" Cross asked, an unlit cigarette dangling from his half open mouth. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you did take him out for a couple of drinks afterward."

"I'm sorry I did." Cross sighed. "I'd hoped to get him to open up, to tell me what had been bothering him. I didn't think he'd try to drown his troubles after he started talking about them."

"What was his problem?"

"A girl. He fell in love with a German National. The poor bastard planned to marry her, but she turned out to be a tramp. She dumped him for a kraut from a well-to-do family. I can't help feeling somewhat responsible for what happened to him. Maybe if I hadn't taken him to that tavern he'd still be alive today."

"You took him back to the billets?"

The Captain nodded.

"And did you escort him to his room?"

"No. The CQ did, I suppose. At least, I told the NCO in Charge of Quarters duty to see to it he got upstairs. Lundy was so drunk he could hardly walk and his speech was just an unintelligible slur."

"I see," Lansing commented. "But he did fix your TV?"

"I don't know why you're curious, but yes, he did."

"One can never have too much information when investigating a homicide case, Captain."

"Are you talking about Lieutenant Benton's death or Specialist Lundy's?"

"Maybe both." The Major replied as he rose from the bar stool.

LANSING FOUND a telephone in the vestibule of the officers' club. Dialing the number to his office, the CID investigator stared out a nearby window, observing the dimness of twilight giving way to the darkness of night. SP5 Wendy Davis answered the phone at the other end of the line.

"How's the investigation going, sir?" she asked.

"I seem to be finding more questions and no answers," Lansing said. "How have you been doing?"

"I've been trying to find out what happened to Spec. Four Robert Lundy's corpse, but nothing has come back to me yet. I did a little checking on the late Lieutenant Benton, however. Considering the high status of S-2 personnel, I decided to try the Adjutant General's office. It seems Benton had arranged for a meeting at the end of the month with the A.G. concerning certain suspicions regarding one of his fellow workers, but he didn't want to say who it was until he had some more solid evidence."

"I suppose this is too much to hope for, but did he specify what kind of suspicions he had?"

"Afraid not, sir. He only said it was a critical matter."

"Hmmm, it's beginning to look like you should be the investigator and I should be pounding the typewriters," Lansing mused. "I think you've put in a long enough day's work, Wendy. Get some sleep and

maybe some news about Lundy will be waiting for us in the morning. I've still got a couple things to do here. See you tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

He hung up and walked outside to his car. Climbing into the Volkswagen, Lansing unlocked its glove compartment and extracted a pair of steel handcuffs. Slipping them inside his belt, he turned on the engine and drove to the Headquarters Battery across the street from the head shed. He entered the billets and asked the CQ if Spec. Four Smothers was in his room. As Lansing suspected, Smothers had left Montgomery Barracks in the early evening and had not returned. Lansing thanked the CQ, then left the billets, returned to his car and waited.

Smothers finally returned to the base at 0127 Hours. Although Smothers was dressed in civilian clothes (a flowery shirt, checkered bell-bottoms and platform shoes), Lansing recognized him. Emerging from his car, the Major beckoned to the Spec. Four, urging him to approach the Volkswagen. Reluctantly, Smothers obeyed.

"Yes, sir?" The enlisted man's eyes were wide open and his speech nervously rapid.

"Please take everything out of your pockets and place it on the hood of my car," Lansing told him.

"What for?" Smothers inquired.

"We'll discuss that after you've emptied your pockets."

With trembling hands, Smothers obliged. He removed a wallet, some coins, a pack of chewing gum and two keys from his pockets.

"Now take off your shoes."

Smothers' tongue slid along his dry, colorless lips as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. Bending slowly, he untied his left shoe and pulled it off. Suddenly, he shot upright and swung the foot gear across his body, the shoe held by the toe, the thick heel a club-like weapon.

Lansing met the attack, the sides of both hands striking Smothers' forearm. The twin *shuto* strokes chopped down hard, stopping the arm and forcing the shoe to fall from numb fingers. moving quickly, Lansing caught the EM's arm and twisted it behind his neck as he propelled him into the car with a knee to the rump.

"Figured you might do something stupid," the Major rasped as he held Smothers' wrist between his shoulder blades with one hand to draw the handcuffs with the other. Keeping a knee between his prisoner's legs to discourage any attempt to stomp or kick backward, Lansing expertly cuffed his hands behind his back.

Using a knee to check Smothers' left leg, Lansing seized his right ankle and hauled the prisoner onto the curve hood of the VW, scatter-

ing the former contents from Smothers' pockets. Untying the remaining shoe, Lansing removed it. A small package wrapped in brown paper fell to the pavement.

"I pegged you for a junkie the second I laid eyes on you," the CID investigator explained. "What is it? Cocaine or speed? You've been snorting something a lot stronger than snuff. You practically have skid marks on your nostrils."

"Let go of me, you sonofabitch!" Smothers whined.

"Did Lundy know you were putting this crap up your nose?" Lansing asked. "When he came into the barracks drunk did he threaten to expose you? is that why you broke his neck and threw him down the stairs?"

"No! I didn't kill him!"

"Then Lieutenant Benton got suspicious. So you rigged up his car with an explosive surprise, but the timers failed so it didn't pass as an accident. Right?"

"No! No! I never killed nobody!"

"Well, I'm going to take you over to the detox ward in Nuremberg, where they help you fellows with a drug or alcohol problem dry out. I'll tell them you came to me for assistance. If you're smart you'll play along. You could come out of this with an Honorable Discharge or at least a General."

"I know the Uniform Code for Military Justice!" Smothers hissed through clenched teeth.

"This is improper search and seizure. I'll have your ass for this, pig!"

"Sure you will," Lansing replied. "And I'll charge you with assaulting a commissioned officer. Wise up, Smothers. This is the best thing that could happen to you." The Major sighed. "Unless you're the murderer I'm after. In which case, I'll know right where to go to pick you up when I've completed my investigation."

WENDY DAVIS brought Lansing a cup of coffee as he sat at his desk examining an assortment of information concerning the homicide case. He thanked her and gratefully sipped from the steaming cup.

"A CID official from Fort Jackson called earlier this morning, sir," Wendy said as she perched a buttock on the edge of Lansing's desk. He tried not to stare as her skirt hiked two distracting inches higher. "Specialist Lundy's body was transported from them to his family in South Carolina. They should know what happened to the remains by this afternoon."

"I hope they have something encouraging. This case is one tough nut to crack."

"Then you don't think Smothers is the killer?"

"He's still a prime suspect. At least now he's locked in a rubber cell in detox instead of running around. Smothers could be our man. He could certainly have planted the bomb, or bombs, and

he wouldn't have any trouble figuring out how to disable an automobile. As he obviously has connections with some local criminal elements in order to get his supply of nose-candy, he could probably get his hands on some plastic explosives too."

"Sounds like there are a lot of reasons to suspect him."

"Yeah, but we shouldn't forget Smith and Cross. The Sergeant hated Benton's political guts. He may sincerely believe that killing Benton was a patriotic act to defend his country. Of course, a demolitions expert wouldn't have any difficulty blowing up a car, and I suspect he could manage to find a black market source that dealt in C-four sales, if he really tried to find one. However, I have no idea what motive he might have for killing Lundy ... *if indeed Lundy was murdered.*"

"What about Cross?"

"Well, that secret project that begins with 'SM', which I am not allowed to tell you anything more about, was Cross's baby. Cross, however, claims the project was canceled by Washington, and Benton had nothing to do with its failure."

"What if Cross didn't tell you the truth?"

"I've considered that," Lansing replied. "I'm going to take a little trip over to Bamberg today and talk to their S-2 department to try to find out exactly *how* the project got scrapped. After that, I'm

going to inspect the Lieutenant's quarters. Sometimes the victim can offer some pretty valuable evidence."

"If Fort Jackson contacts us and confirms that Lundy was murdered, that would suggest Smothers was the killer. After all he was the only one of the suspects in the barracks the night Lundy died."

"He was the only one that was supposed to be at the billets," Lansing said. "However, there are very few buildings that have only one entrance, and Headquarters Battery's barracks is no exception. I've already checked it out. The post chapel is built onto the same structure as Headquarters Battery. A basement extends under the chapel to the barracks. From there, one can enter an emergency fire exit stairwell that leads right upstairs. The chapel is never locked or guarded, so the killer could have entered any time without the CQ or anyone else's knowledge. Both Cross and Smith are familiar with Headquarters Battery, as they're assigned to the unit, so either man would know about the fire stairs."

"So all three are still equally in the running," Wendy sighed.

"Yeah." Lansing muttered as he rose. "Now we have to eliminate two contestants."

AFTER DISCUSSING the SMIT-TEN project with the officer in charge of S-2 at Bamberg, Lansing drove to the housing district where

Lieutenant Benton had resided. Getting a passkey from the landlord, Lansing mounted a flight of stairs and found a door with 512 on its top panel, Lieutenant Benton's quarters. Unlocking the door, the CID investigator entered the room.

Benton, like most people, was neither a "neatnik" nor a "slob," but somewhere in between. The room appeared well-lived-in without being sloppy. The furniture was standard USAEUR issued sofa and chairs of vinyl and metal. An assortment of popular magazines lay on an end table between the couch and an arm chair. Lansing leafed through them briefly, noting the publications included *Time*, *Playboy* and *Look*. A television set and a stereo were also located in the sitting room. Checking a record rack, Lansing discovered Benton had favored rock music and folk ballads.

Moving to the bedroom, Lansing switched on a light. The bed was still unmade. Numerous uniforms and civilian clothing hung in a wall closet. Lansing smiled as he noticed Lieutenant Benton's garments were hung in USAEUR regulation manner, all facing the same direction with the left sleeve revealed. Even without the constant inspections that the lower ranking soldiers must endure, military conditioning influenced a man's habits.

Opening a dresser drawer, Lansing searched through Benton's

shaving gear. Inspecting another drawer, Lansing found three books concealed under some socks and underwear. He read the titles with interest; *KGB: Past and Present*, *Soviet Clandestine Operations*, and *A History of Russian Intelligence Organizations*. Opening each book, Lansing discovered all three were from the Army library on Montgomery Barracks.

Lansing moved back to the sitting room and dialed his office number on the late Lieutenant's telephone. Holding the receiver to his ear, the Major leafed through the books as he waited for Wendy to answer the phone at the other end of the line. He didn't have to wait long.

"CID headquarters, Major Lansing's office. Specialist Davis speaking, sir," she announced.

"Hello, Wendy," Lansing said into the mouthpiece. "I had my little pow-wow with S-2 in Bamberg. They told me the project we were talking about earlier today, was canceled by an order from a certain department in Washington, although they didn't care to tell me which department it was."

"So Captain Cross was telling the truth."

"Apparently," Lansing mused as he continued to turn pages, glancing down at the books occasionally as he spoke. "I'm calling from Benton's apartment. The only thing out of the ordinary I've discovered are a trio of books that don't fit in with the rest of

Benton's reading material. I'll check this place a little more thoroughly before I leave, but ..." Lansing stared down at an open book and read silently. "That's interesting."

"What, sir?" Wendy inquired.

"A word underlined on a page in one of the books. Maybe it's nothing. Did you hear from Fort Jackson?"

"Yes, sir. They found out what happened to Spec. Four Lundy's body."

Lansing listened as Wendy told him what the CID section from Fort Jackson had reported to her. When she was finished, Lansing said, "I think I know who the killer is."

"From what I just told you?" Wendy asked with surprise. "I don't see how it helps."

"It helps because the killer *doesn't* know about it," the CID investigator replied. "Thanks for your help, Wendy. I'll keep in touch."

SFC Edgar Smith emerged from the S-2 section in the basement of the Headquarters Building of Montgomery Barracks. Major Lansing and Captain Garret Cross waited for him in the corridor.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Smith asked as he closed the steel barred door.

"Yes, Sergeant." Lansing strolled calmly across the hallway. "I want to talk to both of you."

"If this is about what happened

to Smothers last night, we already know," Cross remarked.

"No, this doesn't concern Smothers." Lansing unzipped his field jacket. The other men noticed the but of a Government Issue 1911 .45 jutting from his waistband.

"Then why do you want us?" Smith asked, his eyes expanding with surprise as Lansing drew the pistol and worked the slide to jack a round into the chamber.

"What do you think you're doing, Major?" Cross asked, his mouth a hard line, one eyebrow arched high on his brow.

"I'm arresting you for murder, Captain," Lansing replied, aiming the .45 at Cross' chest.

"I assume you have some reason for this accusation," Cross remarked stiffly.

"Sure. You're guilty and I have proof."

"Let's hear it," the Captain demanded.

"First, I want to explain to Sergeant Smith why I wanted him to be present," Lansing stated, his steely gaze and the muzzle of his pistol still trained on Cross. "One should always have a witness for an arrest, of course, but I also think the Sergeant should hear this because it concerns Lieutenant Benton's reputation."

"His reputation?" Smith inquired.

"Actually, I'm referring to your opinion of him. You misjudged Benton, Sergeant."

"And you've misjudged *me*, Major," Cross said, holding his hands open at shoulder level, "if you honestly think I'm your killer."

"You've been wearing a clever disguise, Captain," Lansing replied. "But since I've penetrated it, I'm no longer in danger of misjudging you."

"What sort of disguise are you talking about, sir?" Cross asked, his voice revealing cool control of his emotions.

"Specialist Lundy began to suspect the truth about you. Being an enlisted man, Lundy didn't dare move against you until he had enough evidence. It's no wonder he was moody the final days before his death. He must have been terrified when you took him for that car ride."

"Damn it, Lansing!" Cross snapped suddenly. "I admitted I took him to a tavern and he got intoxicated. That doesn't make me responsible for his death!"

"A well-timed out-burst of anger," Lansing remarked with a slight nod. "You're putting on a good performance, Cross, but you're wasting your time. I suspected foul play concerning Lundy, so I traced his corpse back to the States. The CID at Fort Jackson contacted me this morning. Lundy's family demanded an autopsy of the body as soon as it arrived. Traces of chemicals, possibly phenobarbital or valium, were found," Lansing's flint-like

eyes hardened even more. "Lundy wasn't drunk. You drugged him in order to create the impression that he was. You told me he was hardly able to walk and his speech was just an unintelligible slur. Naturally, you poured some liquor down his throat as well to increase the desired illusion. Even if he tried to tell the CQ about you, nobody would pay any attention to the ranting of a 'drunk' GI.

"His mind muddled by whatever you used that night, Lundy reacted as you'd hoped he would. He went up to his room to sleep off the effects of the drugs, or possibly to get a cold shower in the hopes it would revive him enough to think more clearly. Of course, you had already ascended the fire-stairs and you were waiting for him. You caught him alone upstairs. A *shuto* stroke to the seventh vertebra, a vice with your forearms and a quick twist, a dozen other methods, any of them would have allowed you to snap his neck with ease. Then you tossed him down the main stairway and escaped the same way you'd entered."

"That's an imaginative theory, Major," Cross said flatly, lowering a hand to the inside of his tunic jacket.

"Keep your hands up!" Lansing snapped, thrusting the gun forward.

"I was only getting a cigarette." Cross said, raising his arms.

"Two men underestimated you and they're both dead," Lansing said. "I don't intend to make the same mistake."

"What about Lieutenant Benton, sir?" a dazed SFC Smith wanted to know.

"I'm getting to that, Sergeant," Lansing promised, reaching behind himself with his free hand to draw a set of handcuffs from the small of his back. "But I don't want to take any chances with Captain Cross. Cuff his hands behind his back and frisk him. Remove everything from his pockets, take his wristwatch and shoes. Be careful not to step between Cross and this gun."

SFC Smith followed the Major's orders. His search discovered a pack of cigarettes, a wallet, two pens, a small pocket knife and two lighters, a butane model and a metal Ronson with a press-lever.

"Two cigarette lighters," Lansing mused as he stared at the grim faced Captain, "I've seen you using the butane. Why don't you use the other lighter?"

"It doesn't work," Cross replied with a shrug.

"It feels pretty heavy." Smith remarked, holding the Ronson in the palm of his hand.

"Don't fool with it, Sergeant!" Lansing warned. "A lighter may be filled with lead to supply needed weight for a firing device. It might fire .22 or .25 caliber projectiles. Maybe even poison darts."

"Major," Smith began with a sigh, "what the hell is going on?"

"Captain Cross is an enemy agent," Lansing replied flatly.

"That's absurd!" Cross growled. "I was born in the United States and enlisted when I was nineteen. It's all in my records. Check my fingerprints if you like."

"Oh, you're the real Garret Cross, at least the same man that joined the United States Army claiming to be Cross," Lansing said. "But I doubt that you were born in America. You're a sleeper agent, a spy sent to a foreign country to blend in as a native-citizen. A sleeper impersonates an every-day person until he is ordered into active duty, generally some form of sabotage against the host nation. Sleeper agents have been known to wait ten years or longer before finally receiving orders for their mission."

"According to your 201 file, you're an orphan. Your foster parents supposedly lost your adoption papers. This effectively concealed the truth. While still a child, you were smuggled into America to be groomed for sleeper duty in Army intelligence. Your 'foster parents' are probably agents as well who furthered your training for espionage activities. We'll contact the FBI concerning them and we'll have everyone that supplied you with any type of references thoroughly investigated as well."

Cross' features darkened. "This

is all crap, Lansing. I was the one that favored SMITTEN in the first place ..."

"Of course you did," Lansing agreed. "If you could have succeeded in setting up such a defense system in USAEUR, *sabotaging* it would be child's play. If the U.S. forces in Germany were associated with a nuclear disaster in Europe it would certainly hurt our military involvement here and might even result in a total withdrawal of USAEUR troops. The advantages to the Iron Curtain countries would be obvious."

"Lieutenant Benton, however, began to suspect you were an enemy agent. He probably didn't accept the official version concerning Lundy's death. Considering his own political views, it must have been difficult for Benton to face the more shadowy aspects of international relations. But he had the courage to look for the truth. Unfortunately, you also suspected him. Maybe you discovered what sort of books he'd gotten from the post library. At any rate, you arranged another 'accident' for your CO."

"You couldn't have known about SMITTEN until you came to Europe, so you must have had an Iron Curtain operative, probably disguised as a German National, somewhere in the country. They supplied you with information, your lethal 'cigarette lighter' and plastic explosives. Perhaps you

decided to sabotage the car to throw suspicion on Sergeant Smith in case the bomb was discovered. However, Smith is a demolitions expert and he wouldn't have made the mistake with the timers as you did. Also, Smith had no reason to kill Lundy. Smothers could probably blow up a car, but he probably doesn't know what C-Four is, let alone how to use it. But an espionage agent, trained since childhood, would."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Major?" Cross said, a slight tremble working its way into his voice, "Benton's last words were 'Sm—'. My name doesn't begin with 'S m', *Smith* and *Smothers*' do. The SMITTEN project was scrapped by Washington over a month ago. So why would Benton try to say anything about it if he thought I'd sabotaged his car?"

"Benton wasn't trying to say *SMITTEN* or *Smith* or *Smothers*' Lansing replied. "He was trying to say the name of an organization, *SMERSH*, a special section of the KGB that deals in espionage, sabotage and assassinations,"

Lansing shook his head. "I've got you cold, Cross and you know it."

"All right," the Captain said, his voice a harsh whisper. "So you've got me. But when it's all over, my side will be the winner."

"That remains to be seen," Lansing said dryly. "Well, Sergeant. Would you like to help me escort Captain Cross to his new lodgings?"

"Yes, sir," Smith nodded woodenly. "But I do have one question. You said the report from the states claimed an autopsy revealed traces of phenobarbital or valium in Specialist Lundy's body. I thought he was emblamed before they shipped him out of USAEUR. I'm surprised there was anything left to find."

"Actually, Sergeant, I wasn't being entirely truthful," Lansing admitted with a thin smile. "It is true that the CID at Fort Jackson contacted my office today concerning what happened to Lundy's corpse. However, his family never ordered an autopsy. In fact, they had the body cremated the day it arrived."

## STRANGE, BUT TRUE

Philbert Nebbs cheated the electric chair seven times. Each time, when the executioner pulled the switch, Nebbs held his breath to avoid inhaling any of the deadly electrical fumes. The Governor, deciding the convicted murderer had suffered enough, pardoned him. Six months later Nebbs married the Governor's daughter and ran for the United States Senate. Ten years later he became President of the United States.

# THE SWEETEST REVENGE

by Diane Chapman

His life was not worth living, so there was only one thing to do. End it!

THREE FIFTEEN A.M.

Dense fog covered the deserted bridge. Dr. Eldon McKinney eased the sleek Mercedes sedan to a stop against the low wall that separated the pavement from the walkway. He vaulted the wall, took off his Pierre Cardin jacket, folded it and put it on the ground.

The wallet from his back pocket. He thumbed through it. Eleven dollars. Sixty thousand in savings lost on worthless stock in the past two months. The big house mortgaged to pay off the bookie.

He flipped through the credit cards and smiled briefly at his distinguished bearded portrait on the bank card. All completely overcharged. He had been thorough. With her taste for luxurious living, how shocked Carol would be to find herself bankrupt.

He put the wallet down exactly in the center of the jacket.

The gold watch from his wrist. He looked at the engraving on its back: *To Eldon, love always, Carol.*

The investigation would inevitably bring to light her current shoddy affair with the young tennis pro; her prim, virtuous facade would crumble in the scandal. He put his watch down precisely on top of the wallet.

Then he leaned over the wall, reached into the car and pulled out a pack, bedroll neatly tied on top, a worn plaid lumber jacket and a slouch hat.

He zipped into the jacket, shrugged on the pack and adjusted the hat. Reaching into the jacket pocket, he extracted a small battery-powered razor and, whistling a cheerful song, began to shave as he strolled off into the fog.

# ED NOON'S MINUTE MYSTERIES

## THE FRENCH JEWEL HEIST

by Michael Avallone

*Okay, mystery lovers in general and Ed Noon fans in particular, here's a crime that the famous detective recently solved. All the clues are in the story; see if you can figure out who the culprit is before looking at the solution.*

Working on the French case was like trying to tell time without a clock. There was so little to go by.

For one thing, The French shop on Fifth Avenue, a jewelry store second only to Tiffany's in expensive ice, had been picked clean as a whistle of a display case full of diamonds worth 350,000 bucks.

The haul had been pulled off after hours. Only Jeff de Ryn, one of the owners, and John Fletcher, the night watchman, had been on the premises. Ryn had been going over the books in his third floor office. His two partners, Jay

Foster and Henry Ball, were away in Chicago at a Jeweler's Convention. The cops. were pretty sure it was an inside job.

Somebody had known how to take the teeth out of the burglar alarm setup, cut off the electrical power in the building, and perform the heist without disturbing de Ryn. Fletcher, the night watchman, had been asleep in the basement. A half-empty pint on the floor had been proof enough he'd been drinking on the job. The cops held him for questioning, and although Fletcher had been

with French all of twenty years, de Ryn could not see how the store could have been rifled without his help.

The missing ice didn't turn up though and with the cops making little headway, I wasn't surprised when Jay Foster, de Ryn's partner, hired me to see what I could come up with. It seemed Mr. Foster didn't completely trust Mr. de Ryn or Henry Ball, his other partner. Even though Ball had been with Foster at the Chicago convention during the diamond heist. Well, I didn't trust all three of them because when I'm working on a case I wouldn't trust my own mother. So I did some private checking.

Henry Ball's finances were none too good. He was a bad gambler and some of the worst crooks in town were holding his I.O.U.'s.

De Ryn collected old paintings and had one of the finest private collections in the U.S.A. It was rumored he'd once shelled out 40,000 peas for a Van Gogh.

Jay Foster was currently on his third wife and was deep in alimony with the first two Mrs. Fosters.

Conclusion: They all needed money. And robbing their own jewelry store is one way to get some.

My next and only move was to interview all three of them. De Ryn insisted that he had looked for Fletcher, the night watchman,

for twenty minutes before he finally took the private elevator down to the basement where he found him drunk and dozing. Foster claimed that the jewelry was insured and de Ryn and Ball were equal partners. Also that Ball had supervised the burglar installations. Ball was certain that Fletcher was blameless and that a gang had been casing the store and picked the proper time to make their haul.

When I visited Fletcher in jail, the poor old slob told me he'd had a couple but he'd been in the basement trying to put the electrical power back on. Well, I'd talked to all of them and I had my man. When the cops heard me out, they pulled my man in and he broke under grilling. He'd needed the money all right and except for one tiny slip, he would have had it...

## THE SOLUTION

Jeff de Ryn was lying. And one lie always hides a bigger one. In this case, four trays full of hot ice that would have netted a fortune when properly fenced. The lie? If the electrical current in the store had been shut off as he claimed it was, he could never have taken an elevator ride down to the basement to look for Fletcher. Elevators still run on electricity. They did the last time I rode in one.

# A REAL NICE GUY

by William F. Nolan

They called him "Deathmaster" — an accurate title. He never missed a target, never wasted a shot. Every city street was his personal shooting gallery.

Warm sun.

A summer afternoon.

The sniper emerged from the roof door, walking easily, carrying a custom-leather guncase.

Opened the case.

Assembled the weapon.

Loaded it.

Sighted the street below.

Adjusted the focus

Waited.

There was no hurry.

No hurry at all.

He was famous, yet no one knew his name. There were portraits of him printed in dozens of newspapers and magazines; he'd even made the cover of *Time*. But no one had really seen his face. The portraits were composites, drawn by frustrated police

artists, based on the few misleading descriptions given by witnesses who claimed to have seen him leaving a building or jumping from a roof, or driving from the target area in a stolen automobile. But no two descriptions matched.

One witness described a chunky man of average height with a dark beard and cap. Another described a thin, extremely tall man with a bushy head of hair and a thick moustache. A third description pegged him as balding, paunchy and wearing heavy hornrims. On *Time's* cover, a large blood-soaked question mark replaced his features — above the words WHO IS HE?

Reporters had given him many

names: "The Phantom Sniper" ... "The Deadly Ghost" ... "The Silent Slayer" ... and his personal favorite, "The Master of Whispering Death." This was often shortened to "Deathmaster," but he liked the full title; it was fresh and poetic — and *accurate*.

He was a master. He never missed a target, never wasted a shot. He was cool and nerveless and smooth, and totally without conscience. And death indeed whispered from his silenced weapon: a dry snap of the trigger, a muffled pop, and the target dropped as though struck down by the fist of God.

They were *always* targets, never people. Men, women, children. Young, middle-aged, old. Strong ones. Weak ones. Healthy or crippled. Black or white. Rich or poor. Targets — all of them.

He considered himself a successful sharpshooter, demonstrating his unique skill in a world teeming with three billion moving targets placed there for his amusement. Day and night, city by city, state by state, they were always there, ready for his gun, for the sudden whispering death from its barrel. An endless supply just for him.

Each city street was his personal shooting gallery.

But he was careful. Very, very careful. He never killed twice in the same city. He switched weapons. He never used a car more than once. He never wore the

same clothes twice on a shoot. Even the shoes would be discarded; he wore a fresh pair for each target run. And, usually, he was never seen at all.

He thought of it as a sport.

A game.

A run.

A vocation.

A skill.

But never murder.

His name was Jimmie Prescott and he was thirty-one years of age. Five foot ten. Slight build. Platform shoes could add three inches and body-pillows up to fifty pounds. He had thinning brown hair framing a bland, unmemorable face and shaved twice daily — but the case of wigs, beards and moustaches he always carried easily disguised the shape of his mouth, chin and skull. Sometimes he would wear a skin-colored fleshcap for baldness, or use heavy glasses — though his sight was perfect. Once, for a lark, he had worn a black eye patch. He would walk in a crouch, or stride with a sailor's swagger, or assume a limp. Each disguise amused him, helped make life more challenging. Each was a small work of art, flawlessly executed.

Jimmie was a perfectionist.

And he was clean: no police record. Never arrested. No set of his prints on file, no dossier.

He had a great deal of money (inherited) with no need or in-

clination to earn more. He had spent his lifetime honing his considerable skills: he was an expert on weaponry, car theft, body-combat, police procedures; he made it a strict rule to memorize the street system of each city he entered before embarking on a shoot. And once his target was down he knew exactly how to leave the area. The proper escape route was essential.

Jimmie was a knowledgeable historian in his field: he had made a thorough study of snipers, and held them all in cold contempt. Not a worthwhile one in the lot. They *deserved* to be caught; they were fools and idiots and blunderers, often acting out of neurotic impulse or psychotic emotion. Even the hired professionals drew Jimmie's ire — since these were men who espoused political causes or who worked for government money. Jimmie had no cause, nor would he ever allow himself to be bought like a pig on the market.

He considered himself quite sane. Lacking moral conscience, he did not suffer from a guilt complex. Nor did he operate from a basic hatred of humankind, as did so many of the warped criminals he had studied.

Basically, Jimmie liked people, got along fine with them on a casual basis. He hated no one. (Except his parents, but they were long dead and something he did not think about any more.) He

was incapable of love or friendship, but felt no need for either. Jimmie depended only on himself; he had learned to do that from childhood. He was, therefore, a loner by choice, and made it a rule (Jimmie had many rules) never to date the same female twice, no matter how sexually appealing she might be. Man-woman relationships were a weakness, a form of dangerous self-indulgence he carefully avoided.

In sum, Jimmie Prescott didn't need anyone. He had himself, his skills, his weapons and his targets. More than enough for a full, rich life. He did not drink or smoke. (Oh, a bit of vintage wine in a good restaurant was always welcome, but he had never been drunk in his life. You savor good wine; you don't *wallow* in it.) He jogged each day, morning and evening, and worked out twice a week in the local gym in whatever city he was visiting. A trim, healthy body was an absolute necessity in his specialized career. Jimmie left nothing to chance. He was not a gambler and took no joy in risk.

A few times things had been close: a roof door which had jammed shut in Detroit after a kill, forcing him to make a perilous between-buildings leap ... an engine that died during a police chase in Portland, causing him to abandon his car and win the pursuit on foot ... an intense

struggle with an off-duty patrolman in Kansas City who'd witnessed a shot. The fellow had been tough and dispatching him was physically difficult; Jimmie finally snapped his neck — but it had been close.

He kept a neat, handwritten record of each shoot in his tooled-leather notebook: state, city, name of street, weather, time of day, sex, age and skin color of target. Under "Comments," he would add pertinent facts, including the make and year of the stolen car he had driven, and the type of disguise he had utilized. Each item of clothing worn was listed. And if he experienced any problem in exiting the target area this would also be noted. Thus, each shoot was critically analyzed upon completion — as a football coach might dissect a game after it had been played.

The only random factor was the target. Pre-selection spoiled the freshness, the *purity* of the act. Jimmie liked to surprise himself. Which shall it be: that young girl in red, laughing up at her boyfriend? The old newsman on the corner? The school kid skipping homeward with books under his arm? Or, perhaps, the beefy, bored truckdriver, sitting idly in his cab, waiting for the light to change?

Selection was always a big part of the challenge.

And *this* time ...

A male. Strong looking. Well dressed. Businessman with a briefcase, in his late forties. Hair beginning to silver at the temples. He'd just left the drug store; probably stopped there to pick up something for his wife. Maybe she'd called to remind him at lunch.

Moving toward the corner. Walking briskly.

Yes, *this* one. By all means, this one.

Range: three hundred yards.

Adjust sight focus.

Rifle stock tight against right shoulder.

Finger inside guard, poised at trigger.

Cheek firm against wooden gunstock; eye to rubber scope-piece.

Line crosshairs on target.

Steady breathing.

Tighten trigger finger slowly.

*Fire!*

The man dropped forward to the walk like a clubbed animal, dead before he struck the pavement. Someone screamed. A child began to cry. A man shouted.

Pleasant, familiar sounds to Jimmie Prescott.

Calmly, he took apart his weapon, cased it, then carefully dusted his trousers. (Rooftops were often grimy, and although he would soon discard the trousers he liked to present a neat, well-tailored appearance — but only when the disguise called for it.

What a marvelous, ill-smelling bum he had become in New Orleans; he smiled thinly, thinking about how truly offensive he was on that occasion.)

He walked through the roof exit to the elevator.

Within ten minutes he had cleared central Baltimore — and booked the next flight to the west coast.

Aboard the jet, he relaxed. In the soft, warm, humming interior of the airliner, he grew drowsy ... closed his eyes.

And had The Dream again.

The Dream was the only disturbing element in Jimmie Prescott's life. He invariably thought of it that way: The Dream. Never as a dream. Always about a large metropolitan city where chaos reigned — with buses running over babies in the street, and people falling down sewer holes and through plate glass store windows ... violent and disturbing. He was never threatened in The Dream, never personally involved in the chaos around him. Merely a mute witness to it.

He would tell himself, this is only *fantasy*, a thing deep inside his sleeping mind; it would go away once he awakened and then he could ignore it, put it out of his conscience thoughts, bury it as he had buried the hatred for his father and mother.

Perhaps he had *other* dreams. Surely he did. But The Dream was the one he woke to, again and

again, emerging from the chaos of the city with sweat on his cheeks and forehead, his breath tight and shallow in his chest, his heart thudding wildly.

"Are you all right?" a passenger across the aisle was asking him. "Shall I call somebody?"

"I'm fine," said Jimmie, sitting up straight. "No problem."

"You look kinda shaky."

"No, I'm fine. But thank you for your concern."

And he put The Dream away once again, as a gun is put away in its case.

In Los Angeles, having studied the city quite thoroughly, Jimmie took a cab directly into Hollywood. The fare was steep, but money was never an issue in Jimmie's life; he paid well for services rendered, with no regrets.

He got off at Highland, on Hollywood Boulevard, and walked toward the Chinese Theater.

He wanted two-things: food and sexual satisfaction.

First, he would select an attractive female, take her to dinner and then to his motel room (he'd booked one from the airport) where he would have sex. Jimmie never called it lovemaking, a *silly* word. It was always just sex, plain and simple and quickly over. He was capable of arousing a woman if he chose to do so, of bringing her to full passion and release, but he seldom bothered. His performance was always an act; the

ritual bored him. Only the result counted.

He disliked prostitutes and seldom selected one. Too jaded. Too worldly. And never to be trusted. Given time, and his natural charm, he was usually able to pick up an out-of-town girl, impress her with an excellent and very expensive meal at a posh restaurant, and guide her firmly into bed.

This night, in Hollywood, the seduction was easily accomplished.

Jimmie spotted a supple, soft-faced girl in the forecourt of the Chinese. She was wandering from one celebrity footprint to another, leaning to examine a particular signature in the cement.

As she bent forward, her breasts flowed full, pressing against the soft linen dress she wore — and Jimmie told himself, she's the one for tonight. A young, awe-struck out-of-towner. Perfect.

He moved toward her.

"I just love European food," said Janet.

"That's good," said Jimmie Prescott. "I rather fancy it myself."

She smiled at him across the table, a glowing all-American girl from Ohio named Janet Louise Lakeley. They were sitting in a small, very chick French restaurant off La Cienega, with soft lighting and open-country decor.

"I can't read a word of this," Janet said when the menu was

handed to her. "I thought they always had the food listed in English, too, like movie subtitles."

"Some places don't," said Jimmie quietly. "I'll order for us both. You'll be pleased. The sole is excellent here."

"Oh, I love fish," she said. "I could eat a ton of fish."

He pressed her hand. "That's nice."

"My head is swimming. I shouldn't have had that Scotch on an empty stomach," she said. "Are we having wine with dinner?"

"Of course," said Jimmie.

"I don't know anything about wine," she told him, "but I love champagne. That's wine, isn't it?"

He smiled with a faint upcurve of his thin lips.

"Trust me," he said. "You'll enjoy what I select."

"I'm sure I will."

The food was ordered and served — and Jimmie was pleased to see that his tastes had, once again, proven sound. The meal was superb, the wine was bracing and the girl was sexually stimulating. Essentially brainless, but that really didn't matter to Jimmie. She was what he wanted.

Then she began to talk about the sniper killings.

"Forty people in just a year and two months," she said. "And all gunned down by the same mad-

man. Aren't they ever going to catch him?"

"The actual target figure is forty-one," he corrected her. "And what makes you so sure the sniper is a male. Could be a woman."

She shook her head. "Whoever heard of a woman sniper?"

"There have been many," said Jimmie. "In Russia today there are several hundred trained female snipers. Some European governments have traditionally utilized females in this capacity."

"I don't mean women soldiers," she said. "I mean your nutso shoot-'em-in-the-street sniper. Always guys. Every time. Like that kid in Texas that shot all the people from the tower."

"Apparently you've never heard of Francine Stearn."

"Nope. Who was she?"

"Probably the most famous female sniper. Killed a dozen schoolchildren in Pittsburg one weekend in late July, 1970. One shot each. To the head. She was a very accurate shootist."

"Never heard of her."

"After she was captured, *Esquire* did a rather probing psychological profile on her."

"Well, I really don't read a lot," she admitted. "Except Gothic romances. I just can't get enough of those." She giggled. "Guess you could say I'm addicted."

"I'm not familiar with the genre."

"Anyway," she continued. "I

know this sniper is a guy."

"How do you know?"

"Female intuition. I trust it. It never fails me. And it tells me that the Phantom Sniper is a man."

He was amused. "What else does it tell you?"

"That he's probably messed up in the head. Maybe beaten as a kid. Something like that. He's got to be a nutcase."

"You could be wrong there, too," Jimmie told her. "Not all lawbreakers are mentally unbalanced."

"This 'Deathmaster' guy is, and I'm convinced of it."

"You're a strongly-opinionated young woman."

"Mom always said that." She sipped her wine, nodded. "Yeah, I guess I am." She frowned, turning the glass slowly in her long-fingered hand. "Do you think they'll ever catch him?"

"I somehow doubt it," Jimmie declared. "No one seems to have a clear description of him. And he always seems to elude the police. Leaves no clues. Apparently selects his subjects at random. No motive to tie him to. No consistent M.O."

"What's that?"

"Method of operation. Most criminals tend to repeat the same basic pattern in their crimes. But not this fellow. He keeps surprising people. Never know where he'll pop up next, or who his target will be. Tough to catch a man like that."

"You call them 'subjects' and 'targets' — but they're *people*! Innocent men and women and children. You make them sound like ... like cutouts at a shooting gallery!"

"Perhaps I do," he admitted, smiling. "It's simply that we have different modes of expression."

"I say they'll get him eventually. He can't go on just butchering innocent people forever."

"No one goes on forever," said Jimmie Prescott.

She put down her wine glass, leaned toward him. "Know what bothers me most about the sniper?"

"What."

"The fact that his kind of act attracts copycats. Other sickos with a screw loose who read about him and want to imitate him. Arson is like that. One big fire in the papers and suddenly all the other wacko firebugs start their own fires. It gets 'em going. The sniper is like that."

"If some mentally-disturbed individual is motivated to kill stupidly and without thought or preparation by something he or she reads in a newspaper then the sniper himself cannot be blamed for such abnormal behavior."

"You call what *he* does normal?"

"I ... uh ... didn't say that. I was simply refuting your theory."

She frowned. "Then who is

to blame? I think that guy should be caught and —"

"And what?" Jimmie fixed his cool gray eyes on her. "What would you do if you suddenly discovered who he was ... where to find him?"

"Call the police, naturally. Like anybody."

"Wouldn't you be curious about him, about the kind of person he is? Wouldn't you *question* him first, try to understand him?"

"You don't question an animal who kills! Which is what he is. I'd like to see him gassed or hanged ... You don't *talk* to a twisted creep like that!"

She had made him angry. His lips tightened. He was no longer amused with this conversation; the word game had turned sour. This girl was gross and stupid and insensitive. Take her to bed and be done with it. Use her body — but no words. No more words. He'd had quite enough of those from her.

"Check, please," he said to the waiter.

It was at his motel, after sex, that Jimmie decided to kill her. Her insulting tirade echoed and re-echoed in his mind. She must be punished for it.

In this special case he felt justified in breaking one of his rules: never pre-select a target. She told him that she had a job in Hollywood, that she worked the afternoon shift at a clothing store

on Vine. And he knew where she lived, a few blocks from work. She walked to the store each afternoon.

He would take her home and return the next day. When she left her apartment building he would dispatch her from a roof across the street. Once this plan had settled into place in the mind of Jimmie Prescott he relaxed, allowing the tension of the evening to drain away.

By tomorrow night he'd be in Tucson, and Janet Lakeley would be dead.

Warm sun.

A summer afternoon.

The sniper emerged from the roof door, walking easily, carrying a custom-leather guncase.

Opened the case.

Assembled the weapon.

Loaded it.

Sighted the street below.

Adjusted the focus.

Waited.

Target now exiting.

Walking along street toward corner.

Adjust sight focus.

Finger on trigger.

Cheek against stock.

Eye to scope.

Crosshairs direct on target.

*Fire!*

Jimmie felt something like a fist strike his stomach. A sudden, shocking blow. Winded, he

looked down in amazement at the blood pulsing steadily from his shirtfront.

*I'm hit! Someone has actually —*

Another blow — but this one stopped all thought, taking his head apart. No more shock. No more amazement.

No more Jimmie.

She put away the weapon, annoyed at herself. *Two shots!* The Phantom Sniper, whoever he was, never fired more than once. But *he* was exceptional. She got goosebumps, just thinking about him.

Well, maybe next time she could drop her target in one. Anybody can mis-calculate a shot. Nobody's perfect.

She left the roof area, walking calmly, took the elevator down to the garage, stowed her guncase in the trunk of the stolen Mustang and drove away from the motel.

Poor Jimmie, she thought. It was just his bad luck to meet *me*. But that's the way it goes.

Janet Lakeley had a rule, and she never broke it: when you bed down a guy in a new town you always target him the next day. She sighed. Usually it didn't bother her. Most of them were bastards. But not Jimmie. She'd enjoyed talking to him, playing her word games with him ... bedding him. Too bad he had to die.

He seemed like a real nice guy.

# MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S SCREAM

by Edward D. Hoch

The victim was shot once in the back of the head by someone he knew — someone at the party.

I FLIPPED THE TOP on a bottle of beer and tried to concentrate on pouring it into the glass. "I suppose it's my own fault in a way," I told my host and hostess. "I kept urging Marsha to be more of a liberated woman, and pretty soon she got to be so liberated she walked off and left me."

Helen Riggs laid a hand on my tanned forearm. "You're always so cool about everything, Mark. Maybe that was part of the trouble. Maybe Marsha needed someone a little more serious at times."

Helen's husband Charles snorted. "If you don't mind my saying so, Mark, the only thing Marsha needed was a change of

bed partners. And she got that!"

I sipped my beer and decided to change the subject. Helen and Charles were two of my oldest friends in Elmbrook, and while I didn't feel like discussing my ex-wife with them, I didn't feel I could tell them to mind their own business either. "How many are you expecting tonight?" I asked, gazing out the wide kitchen window at the lighted swimming pool and the fire pit beyond it. The Riggs' teenage sons were already piling up the wood for the hot dog roast, and I could hear the sound of summer music on the hi-fi.

"Just ten," Helen answered, suddenly active in her food preparation. "Us and you and the

Barrons and the Walkers and Fritz and Gert. Fritz just got laid off at work. He's feeling pretty low."

"That's nine."

She looked at me innocently. "What?"

"That's only nine people. You said ten."

"Did I? Oh, I guess one of the girls from Charles' office might drop by. Isn't that right, Charles?"

He avoided my eyes and said, "Yeah. Sally Tern. Cute kid."

"Tern like in bird?"

"That's right. She's one of our secretaries. Got a good head on her shoulders."

"I'll bet."

"Now Mark ...," Helen began, her hands full of lettuce leaves.

"You two are intent on marrying me off again, aren't you?" I swallowed more beer. "My God, isn't once enough?"

Charles put his hand on my shoulder. "We don't give a damn if you marry the girl or sleep with her or ignore her, buddy. Helen and I just don't like to see you lonely, by yourself. Right now, so soon after the divorce, you should be making new friends."

"Thanks." I welcomed a chance to change the subject again. "Here come the Walkers."

Nelse Walker was in real estate, which was a profitable field in a fast-growing suburban community like Elmbrook. His wife, whose first name I could never remem-

ber, was a bit too plump and dowdy for the rest of the crowd. People tended to talk around her, or through her, and to forget her first name.

"Good to see you again, Nelse," I said, opening the patio door and extending my hand. "How's the real estate business?"

"Can't complain." He lowered his voice a little. "We were sorry to hear about you and Marsha, old chum."

"It happens all the time these days," I said with a shrug. Then, acting like the host, I offered him a beer.

The last traces of daylight had disappeared and Charles was back with the boys lighting the bonfire when Helen came up to me by the pool and introduced a slim blonde woman with tiny breasts. "Mark, this is Sally Tern. She works with Charles at the office."

"Hello, Sally."

"Hi."

"Can I get you a beer?" I asked, silently cursing Helen for her quick retreat that left us alone.

"Thanks."

I brought it to her and then managed to introduce her to the Walkers. "Didn't anyone bring their swimsuits?" Mrs. Walker asked. "I don't want to go in alone!"

"It seemed a bit cool," Sally Tern answered, gazing longingly at the bonfire. I saw Gert and Fritz arriving and slipped away to greet them.

"Hi, Mark," Gert said, kissing me on the cheek. "You heard about Fritz's job?"

"Yeah, too bad. He got any prospects?"

"Just the unemployment office. And we've got a daughter starting college in another month!"

Fritz Obern was a good and close friend, like Gert. I'd known them since their marriage nearly twenty years ago, and I'd been like an uncle to their kids. Fritz had the appearance of a high school football coach, wearing his hair in a modified brushcut long after the look had gone out of style but in truth he was an accountant and a damned good one. I couldn't understand Elmbrook Dairy letting him go.

"The whole place is a mess since the merger," he confided. "I should have seen the writing on the wall, but I didn't. So I'm forty years old and out of work."

"Help yourself, lover."

"You shouldn't call me that. People will get ideas." I dug through the lipsticks and chewing gum, past the day's bank deposit slip from the Liquorium and a key ring with a rabbit's foot attached. On top of the cigarettes I found a clipping neatly cut from the local newspaper. "What's this?"

She turned, startled, then smiled when she saw what I held. "Didn't you see it? I brought it along to show you."

It was a brief announcement of

the fact that Marsha, formerly of Elmbrook, had married her professor in Ann Arbor. "When was this in?"

"Just tonight. You should read the evening paper more closely."

"Well, I wish her luck."

"She didn't waste any time, did she?"

"Not much. The decree was final just last week."

"So her liberation didn't last very long."

I didn't feel like making small talk about it. "Want a beer before the roast?"

"Can't. I promised that Walker woman I'd go in the pool with her."

I glanced around for Fritz but he seemed to be missing. There were some figures silhouetted against the flames out in back but I couldn't identify them from this distance. Nelse Walker strolled over to watch his wife dive into the pool. In a one-piece bathing suit she was even more dowdy than in slacks, but he didn't seem to mind. When Barbara appeared, wearing a navy blue tank suit, he asked, "Isn't that Andy Barron's wife? The liquor store guy?"

"Something will turn up," I tried to assure him. "Sooner than you expect."

"Here's Barbara Barron," Helen announced. "But where's Andy?"

Barbara — tight-jeaned, smiling and sure of herself — shot me a special look reserved for divorced

men. "Counting his money. He'll be along." Andy owned the town's only liquor store and it didn't close till nine. Once or twice when we were going out with them, Marsha and I had waited while he totaled the day's receipts. On a summer's weekend like this it could be a sizable amount.

Charles glanced out at the fire. "As soon as the flames die down we can start roasting the hot dogs."

"How are you, lover?" Barbara asked me. "Enjoying your freedom?"

"Not especially."

"I'll bet Marsha's enjoying hers."

Mrs. Walker wandered up. "Am I the only one that brought a bathing suit?" she asked again. "I don't want to go in the pool alone."

Barbara winked at me. "I'll go in with you. Helen, have you still got that old suit that fits me?"

Helen nodded. "It's hanging up in the changing room."

"Come talk to me while I change," Barbara said to me.

"No thanks." I patted her oversized white purse. "Got any cigarettes in there?"

"Sure. I thought you'd been introduced."

"I didn't catch the name, but I remember seeing her around the store. Where's he?"

He glanced around to make sure he couldn't be overheard and said. "I happened in there one day and

Andy was fooling around with someone in the back room."

"Oh?"

He glanced around again. "I think it was Helen."

"Helen Riggs?" I looked around for our hostess, but I didn't see her anywhere. "You've got to be kidding!"

"It was probably all innocent," he admitted, backtracking a bit.

Barbara picked that minute to dive into the pool, splattering us both. She surfaced smiling and said, "Hope I didn't get you boys wet."

"Not at all." I wiped myself off with a handy napkin and drifted out toward the fire, leaving Nelse Walker to contemplate the ample flesh of his wife.

Gert and Sally Tern were helping with the fire, but there was still no sign of Fritz. I steered clear of another encounter with Sally and joined Charles instead. He'd assembled ten long sticks for the hot dogs and was beginning to pass them out. Fritz Obern appeared from somewhere then and I decided he'd been off by himself brooding about the lost job. "What's this party for, anyway?" he asked Charles.

Our host shrugged. "Midsummer night, maybe. It's July 31st. Isn't that midsummer night, when people dance around fires?"

Because I knew a little about such things I answered, "Not exactly. Midsummer day is traditionally June 24th, which is

just after the beginning of summer. At least that's what it is in England. But people do dance around the fires tonight, or at least witches do — July 31 is the eve of Lammas, one of the four witches' Sabbaths, like Halloween."

Fritz snorted. "I know you don't believe that garbage, Mark."

"What garbage?" Barbara asked, coming up to us with a towel around her wet body. I saw the fire reflecting off the droplets on her bare thighs, and I looked away.

Charles laughed. "Oh, Mark is just bewitching us with his knowledge, as usual. These teachers!"

Helen came up and took some of the sticks from him. "Come on, everyone! Time to roast your hot dogs! We've got marshmallows too, for later."

For the next half-hour we were busy at the fire, and I made an effort to be civil toward Sally Tern, if only for Charles and Helen's benefit. She wasn't a bad girl, really, and in other days I might have found her a pleasant companion.

"Charles probably told you I'm divorced," I said at one point.

"He said your wife gave you a bum deal. I hope you're not bitter."

"No, just a bit sad, I suppose."

Helen was trying to get a little singing organized, but without much success. The fire was dying down and I tossed another log on it. That was when I became aware

of a newcomer to our tight little circle.

"Is it Andy?" Barbara asked, straining to see.

"Afraid not, Mrs. Barron," a voice answered. "It's Chief of Police Lambert." He stepped closer to the firelight and we could see his gaunt, tired face. "Afraid I've got some bad news. There was a robbery at the Liquorium."

"Andy...?"

"He's dead, Mrs. Barron. Somebody shot him."

That was when she screamed.

THE WOMEN TOOK BARBARA upstairs to rest while Chief Lambert gathered the four men around the pool. The fire, forgotten now, sent up a few high-flying sparks and Charles Riggs called to one of his sons to extinguish it with the hose.

"Were you the first to arrive? Chief Lambert asked me.

"That's right."

He turned to Nelse Walker and Fritz. "And were you both here before Mrs. Barron arrived?"

They agreed they were. "She said Andy was still counting the money," Nelse said. "I remember hearing that."

"What's all the questioning for?" Charles wanted to know.

Chief Lambert shifted uneasily.

"Well, you know I always swing by the Liquorium the nights I'm on duty an' give Andy a lift to the bank so he can use the night depository. 'Specially on Saturday

nights he has quite a wad — maybe as much as five thousand dollars."

Nelse Walker looked surprised at the amount. "That much!"

"Anyway, tonight when I got there the lights were on an' the door was locked. I figured he was inside, 'cause when he goes off to the bank by himself he turns off the lights. Then I saw his feet sticking out from behind the counter. I smashed the glass in the door and unlocked it. He was dead, shot once in the back of the head."

"So why are you questioning us?" Charles repeated. "You certainly don't think we know anything about it!"

Chief Lambert shifted again, gazing down at the smooth water of the swimming pool. Overhead, a few moths darted in and out of the light beams. "Well, you see he musta opened the door for his killer. Now he wouldn't have done that for a stranger — not with all the money around. He opened the door, turned his back, and got shot. There's no getting around it, fellas — Andy knew the person that shot him and stole the money. Knew him well, and trusted him."

"I can't believe that," Nelse said.

"Hell, you all know Andy. He wouldn't have offered any resistance. He was killed because he knew the robber." Chief Lambert hurried on, enlarging his theory. "Now I'm not sayin' any of you are

involved, but when Mrs. Barron arrived alone you all musta known he was back at the store countin' up. Nelse here says she mentioned it, in fact."

"That's right," I agreed. "She did mention it."

"So one of you might have slipped away, through the back yards and down to Main Street, long enough to kill Andy and take the money."

"That's crazy," Fritz protested. But I was remembering how he'd been missing, off on a walk, for a while. I tried to remember if anyone else had been missing.

Chief Lambert's mind was running the same way. "Can you all account for your time during the last couple of hours?"

Nelse was the first to speak. "I was mostly here by the pool, watching my wife and Barbara — Mrs. Barron — in swimming."

"All of the time?"

"Well, no. I went in to use the toilet once. I guess most of us did, with all this beer."

Chief Lambert nodded, then turned to Charles. "I think I should get a statement from everybody here. Sorry to mess up your party like this, but a murder is pretty serious business."

Helen Riggs came out from the house then and joined Charles. "How's Barbara?" I asked.

"Resting. I gave her one of my tranquilizers."

"Sleeping?" Chief Lambert asked. "I'll need to talk with her."

"No, not sleeping. She said she'd be down soon."

Fritz Obern stepped forward then. "You'd better take a statement from me next, Chief. I was away for about twenty minutes. I went for a walk back in the woods."

Lambert seemed startled by this admission. "Alone?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

Gert was at his side. "He's been depressed about losing his job. Is there any crime against that?"

"No," Chief Lambert admitted, taking a few notes. "There's just crimes against things like murder an' robbery."

The Chief took Fritz aside to question him further and I found a chance to be alone with Helen. She was starting to pick up glasses and plates, as if sensing the spirit had gone out of the party. "It turned into one hell of a night, didn't it?" I said.

"I feel sorry for Barbara."

I watched the last glowing embers of the bonfire out back.

"Did you know Andy well?"

She glanced up at me. "As well as any of us, I suppose."

"I heard something. Gossip. I thought you should know."

"About Andy and —"

"You were in the back room with him. Something like that."

She glanced over at Nelse Walker. "I know who you heard that from! With a wife like he's got, I suppose he's entitled to

invent fantasies about other women."

"I didn't think it was true."

She turned her gaze toward me. "I won't say there wasn't a little truth to it. Andy was a handsome guy, and I can have fantasies too."

"I though I was the only one with marriage problems."

"Everybody has them these days. We just react to them differently."

I left her by the pool and strolled out to the dying fire. The kids hadn't put it out as their father had ordered, but then I guess kids never like to put out fires. They were standing there watching it, and I took the hose from one of them, turning the nozzle and squirting the smoking embers. "It's over," I said to them. "The party's over."

Sally Tern appeared from somewhere to join me, and I wondered if she'd been in the house with the other women. "Was he a close friend of yours?" she asked, with the vague sympathy one felt toward the death of a stranger.

"Sure," I said. "He was one of the crowd. We all knew him."

"It's a terrible thing."

There was a crumpled piece of paper lying at the edge of the charred logs and I stooped to pick it up. Then I shoved it into my pocket before she could see what it was. Charles was starting to turn out the yard lights so we headed back to the house together.

"Do you like working with

Charles?" I asked, making conversation.

"Sure. It's always something different."

She seemed very young to me just then. As some of the others seemed very old.

Barbara had reappeared, cluthing a handkerchief in one hand and now changed from the bathing suit she'd been wearing when Chief Lambert arrived. He was talking to her by the pool, still making notes in a dog-eared little book.

"I'm trying to establish the time of death, Mrs. Barron. The best the autopsy will show will be within a couple of hours. What time did you leave the store?"

"Just at nine o'clock," she replied. "He locked the door after me and went back to counting up the money."

"And I came by at ten to ten. So that leaves a period of fifty minutes when it happened."

"Nobody saw or heard anything?"

He shook his head. "Appears not." He looked for someone else to question and lit on Nelse Walker. I glanced around for Mrs. Walker and decided she was still inside.

"How you feeling?" I asked Barbara as she walked away.

"Lousy. I have to go down now to claim the body and make the funeral arrangements. Will you come with me, Mark?"

"If you really want me to. I

thought we might talk some first, though."

"What about?"

I edged her away from the group at the pool, heading out the back again. "I want to find out why you killed Andy," I said quietly.

"I didn't —"

"I'm not the police chief, Barbara. You don't have to lie to me."

"But that's crazy! I was *here!* I was in the pool with —"

"You shot him before you came here, Barbara. I can prove it."

That stopped her. "Prove it? How?"

"When I went into your purse for cigarettes earlier I found the day's bank deposit slip for the Liquorium. The slip couldn't have been made out till *after* Andy counted his money. It meant he was through counting when you left him and you lied about it."

"I —"

"He cashed up early so he could come to the party. He was probably going to swing by the night depository on the way here. But you shot him in the back of the head and took the money to make it look like a robbery. You must have remembered the deposit slip at the last minute and stuffed that in your purse, so it would look like he'd still been cashing up when he killed. Now that I think of it, you were pretty startled when I asked what that was in your purse, before you saw me holding the clipping."

"You're crazy, Mark. There was no deposit slip."

I took it out of my pocket. "I've got it, Barbara. You tried to toss it in the fire but you missed."

She made a grab for it, but I was too fast for her. "Damn you, Mark!"

"In Andy's handwriting, with today's date. It could convict you of murder, Barbara — or at the very least start Chief Lambert asking some embarrassing questions."

"All right — I just couldn't stand living with him any more. Is that answer enough for you?"

"Then why didn't you simply divorce him?" I couldn't see her face in the dimness, but I could tell Helen's tranquilizer was keeping her reasonably calm. "People do it every day."

"And be left without any money?"

"You'd have gotten alimony."

"Not if I remarried."

"And who were you planning to —" Then I stopped, because I knew the answer. I'd forgotten the clipping I also found in her purse.

"I did it for you, Mark — don't you see that? Now we're both free and I've got his money. And the store!"

I knew then that I had to tell Chief Lambert about it. Keeping quiet would only have involved me deeper in her crazy scheme. "It's time to go back," I said.

She stood for a moment in the dim light, staring down at the place where the fire had been. Then she hugged herself and shivered. "It's over, isn't it?"

"All over."

## STRANGE, BUT TRUE

Suicide is a crime which is hardly ever prosecuted. In one instance, however, an enterprising California district attorney brought the corpse of a recently-deceased young woman to trial, claiming, "We can't let these suicidal freaks get away with it, especially around election time, or everybody'll be doing it." The convicted woman was taken to the gas chamber, where the fumes revived her. She was released and is now living as a housewife in Anaheim.

# HOW TO KILL A HOSTAGE

by Richard Reinsmith

Her name was Susan. She was young and pretty — with her whole life ahead of her — but she could identify the men who'd robbed the bank, so she'd have to die. The question was: how to kill her? The answer was surprising — but quite effective!

WHEN WE CAME OUT of the bank, Sam held the hostage's wrist, dragging her along. I carried the bag of money and we each had a gun in our right hand. We'd chosen the Triangle Shopping Center bank because the

parking lot was a hell of a mess and we knew cops would have trouble reaching the scene. We'd counted on a teller pushing one of those silent alarms that notifies the police a robbery is in progress. We'd calculated we would be on

our way before the cops arrived.

But it didn't turn out that way. Two state troopers were outside the bank when we emerged. They didn't fire at Sam because he had the pretty blonde bank teller shoved in front after we came through the glass doors. But they didn't give a damn about shooting at me. A bullet roared past my head and smashed glass.

I had planned my response when we first began outlining the robbery. I didn't want to kill a state cop. But I didn't want to stand around on a Principle while one shot *me*. So, I'd finally reasoned, *if* we were faced with a shootout, I'd aim for the cop's stomach. I deliberately carried a .25. With luck a person could live though a gut shot with that caliber — if somebody got him to the hospital fast enough, if the surgeon was good and if the bullet hadn't done too much damage. What you might call a fighting chance. Whereas, if I'd carried a .45, the chances wouldn't be so good. Ninety-nine out of a hundred people cannot live after having a .45 pass through their stomach.

The cop went down when I hit him and, luckily, the gun flew from his hand. I'd hoped the shot would knock him unconscious but it didn't. There are times when it seems nothing goes exactly the way you'd hoped. He crawled toward his gun. Stubborn soul. Meanwhile — Sam had shot the

other cop in the chest.

We reached our car. I was sliding behind the steering wheel when I heard Sam shoot again and looked up to see he'd shot the arm of the cop who'd been crawling toward his weapon. I only saw the last of it but it looked as if that stubborn soul had been about to shoot me in the back.

But then I slammed the car door and we roared out of there. A quarter of a mile away, we skidded to a stop beside the second car we'd arranged, transferred the money and the hostage to the trunk. Sam slapped some adhesive tape around the girl's mouth, put handcuffs on her wrists. We took our false mustaches and beards and long-hair wigs, putting them in the bag we'd thought. I drove the second car toward our home base point while Sam walked the three blocks to our third car — dropping the bag of wigs in a street trash can.

All we needed now was some luck. The police would be looking for two men in a white car while we would be individuals, each driving a black car. The hair bit might throw them off too, if they took the wigs and so forth seriously, because Sam and I both had short haircuts, my hair was grey and Sam's was blond.

About eight or nine blocks away, I stopped at a traffic light. A county cop pulled up beside me.

He frowned. He tilted his head to one side as if listening intently.

I tilted my head to the same angle and tried to turn up the volume control on my ears.

Then I heard it. *Thump-thump-thump*. The girl in the car trunk was kicking.

"What the hell is that?" the county cop asked, frowning more deeply. He was a good frowner and looked like a mean cop.

I listened to the girl kicking against the trunk lid and said, "That's my muffler. Got a bad hole. Makes a weird sound."

"You're telling me? You better get that fixed. You know there's a law against —" But he stopped in midstream because they were calling him on his radio and telling him about an armed robbery at the Triangle Shopping Center. He did an illegal U-turn at the intersection and sped off.

I drove on to home base, took the money inside and then the girl. "You almost got me into trouble back there," I told her. I pulled up the hidden trap door and pointed at the stairs. "There's a bomb shelter down there," I explained. "A comfortable room to keep you in until the heat clears off."

I motioned for her to go down the stairs.

She shook her head no.

I said, "please?"

She mumbled something beneath the bandage that sounded like a no and didn't move.

We must have picked the toughest teller in the bank.

"If you don't walk down the stairs, I'll hit you on the head and roll you down while you're unconscious."

I thought the threat would work but her face reddened with anger, she glared and growled something beneath the gag that sounded like a threat. I walked around and goosed her with the barrel of the .25.

She squealed and then moved under her own steam.

When Sam arrived an hour or so later, we divided the money. Over a hundred thousand dollars apiece — not a bad haul if we didn't have to pay with our lives. As each hour went by, it looked as if there was less and less likelihood we'd have to pay in any way. We listened to the police radio band and learned they were apparently chasing us in the next state.

"It worked," Sam said with a smile as we sat there, looking at each other over the two stacks of money on the table.

THE PLAN HAD STARTED when Sam's father died and we began renovating his summer cottage for either sale or personal use. We couldn't quite decide which. In the process of working on the cottage, we'd discovered the hidden trap door and the bomb shelter beneath. We'd started by speculating it would be a good place for someone to hide the loot if they pulled a robbery. The speculation

had led to the actual plan. We had a perfect reason for being at the cottage. Everybody in the country knew we were renovating it.

"Now we let the hostage loose and we can relax." Sam looked at the girl as she sat there tied to the chair and the smile slowly faded from his face.

At first I couldn't figure out what was wrong. The gag was still around her mouth. Nothing wrong with it. I'd done a good job of tying her to the chair.

Her blue eyes kept watching us, growing wider and wider.

"We made a mistake," Sam said. "We forgot to blindfold her."

I was glad he said we.

Hell of a mistake to make. We'd planned a blindfold.

"We'll have to kill her," Sam said. "She knows what we look like."

"I'll do it," I volunteered. "She's a royal pain, almost got me in trouble for having a bad muffler ... You know that law about mufflers? She was kicking like hell in the trunk. And she wouldn't come down the stairs."

I took my gun, released the safety and aimed at her head. Sam turned the other way. He didn't want to watch.

The girl began to cry. Not much sound but those big blue eyes were spilling tears that rolled down her cheeks. She began to shiver.

I lowered the gun. "I can't do

it."

"Huh?"

"She's crying. Look at her. She's scared silly."

"Don't be afraid," Sam said, turning in his chair to face her. "It'll be so fast you won't feel a thing. Just think ... you won't have to pay taxes. No worries about anything."

The girl began to cry harder.

"I don't think she's sold on death, Sam."

"I'll do it." Sam took his gun and aimed at her head. He closed his eyes and for a moment I thought he'd pull the trigger while he wasn't looking. But he opened his eyes again and dropped the gun on the table. "Let's think of some other way. A gun is so damned messy."

"We don't have any."

"Suffocation?"

Sam looked at the girl and wrinkled his nose. "That might work but she'll make some sickening sounds while she's suffocating."

He didn't have to elaborate. I knew he meant we were both too soft-hearted to listen to the sounds of her dying. "The same goes for strangulation ..."

"Why can't you do it with the damned gun?!" Sam said suddenly, slamming his fist against the table. He glowered. "You killed so many men in combat, what's one life more or less?" The glower turned to a reproachful expression.

I shrugged. "They were men, not women. They weren't crying like she is. And they were trying to kill me. That makes a hell of a difference, you know. She's as helpless as a kitten." I wondered if I could turn the tide. "Why'd you shoot that cop in the chest? I thought we agreed to aim for the stomach. If you like to kill so much, why can't you kill her?"

Sam shook his head. He grimaced. "You said you'd aim for the stomach. I didn't say I would." He shut his mouth and I thought that was the end of it. He crossed his arms and settled into a stony silence as he relaxed in the chair. About four or five minutes later, he added, "I was aiming at the cop's stomach. I'm a lousy shot."

"Hit her over the head?" I suggested.

Sam's face whitened. "Can you imagine the sickening sound that would make?"

"I don't think it'll make much sound."

"I read a book once where —"

"OK, OK, OK. How about breaking her neck?"

"No! I couldn't stand that snapping sound!"

"Sam," I said as patiently as I could, "I don't see how we can kill her without making *some* sound. If we're going to worry about sounds —"

"There must be a silent way of doing it."

Speaking of silence, we both fell into silence awhile.

"Electrouction," Sam said, his eyes bright. In addition to other things, Sam was a licensed electrician.

"I don't think I could stand the smell of an electrocuted body."

More silence.

I snapped my fingers. "Knife."

Sam left the bomb shelter to get a hunting knife and returned, placing it on the table. "Cut cards to see who does it?"

"OK."

Sam went to get a deck of cards. He lost the cut.

"Find her heart first," I suggested. "Do it in one stab."

Sam picked up the knife and held it in his right hand while he unbuttoned the girl's blouse with his left. He slipped the hand over her bosom. "Slightly to the left of center, right? *Her* left ... Ah ..."

"You found it?"

"The're real. Oh. Here's her heart. Beating fast. Beating faster. *Hey*." The girl slumped in the chair.

I guessed, "She's either had a heart attack or she's fainted."

Sam removed the bandage from around her mouth. He slapped her cheeks. He went and brought her a glass of water. He talked to her until she regained consciousness, then giving her some water to drink.

"You won't kill me, will you? This is all some kind of wild joke, isn't it?" She stared at us, her eyes as wide as saucers. Hopeful expression on her face.

"It isn't a joke," Sam said.

She began crying again. Crying silently with a gag around her mouth was bad enough. Crying with sound was downright awful. Sam tried to calm her. He kept talking. He asked what her name was. Susan. They started to seem so friendly, I butted in. "I don't think you should get real chummy with her if you're going to knock her off. It's easier to kill strangers."

"I guess you're right." Sam picked up the knife.

"Please! Please! Please don't use a knife!" It was easy to see she was horrified of knives.

"She doesn't want us to use the knife," Sam said sadly.

"Let's go hide the money and come back to the problem. They say that works sometimes."

We went upstairs and concealed the money in the wall as we had planned. It didn't take long. In a couple of hours we had the whole livingroom paneled, Sam's money on one side, mine on the other. I didn't worry about Susan, our hostage. The bottom door to the bomb shelter was a strong one and we had it locked from the outside. We'd left her tied to the chair and even if she managed to free herself, she couldn't break out of that room. There was an air vent to her room but the line had such strong filters in it that anyone screaming their head off couldn't be heard in the cottage or nearby.

"I think I'll go down and untie

Susan so she can stretch her legs," Sam said.

I nodded OK. He came back two hours later with a strange expression on his face. "She said she'd do anything we want if we don't kill her." Sam sighed and leaned against a wall, sliding down it, sitting on the floor, looking exhausted. This thing was taking a lot out of him, I saw. I sat on the floor nearby. We hadn't moved any chairs into the cottage so far and we'd decided to fiddle with the renovation, taking as much time as possible.

"I thought of an ideal way to kill her," Sam said.

"How?"

"Let her starve to death. She can't break out of there. And there's no food down there. Just the table and the chairs we carried down. I think she'll starve in two weeks or less."

I thought about the idea a few minutes. "Sounds good," I said.

WE DIDN'T TALK about the hostage during the weeks that followed. We'd work on the cottage an hour or two some days, but sometimes skipping two or three days in a row. The cop that Sam shot managed to live; thanks to modern surgery. I think we were both a little relieved. But the rap for armed robbery and shooting two policemen was bad enough that it still seemed to warrant killing the hostage so she couldn't identify us.

Our lives other than working on the cottage were on widely diverse paths during which we seldom saw each other. Sam was still single but liked to horse around with a young crowd full of lively chicks. As a widower, I preferred quiet evenings, occasionally with a woman approximately my own age. Sam and I had little in common other than having once worked for the same company. It was strange in a way — we'd become closer friends because he'd inherited the cottage from his uncle and because I had some skill as a carpenter — a skill he lacked. The summer cottage and its concealed bomb shelter had spawned the whole idea of the bank robbery.

I intended to visit the cottage alone about two weeks after we began starving the hostage. It stretched to two months before I finally got up the nerve. I'd decided to bury the body myself and spare Sam the unpleasant task since he'd seemed to like the girl.

I dug a grave in the woods not too far from the cottage and then went down to the bomb shelter, unlocking the door with my key. Nobody could live two months without food. Starvation had been the perfect solution. I'd decided to wrap the girl in a blanket to carry to the grave and was holding the green blanket under one arm as I opened the door.

Our hostage, Susan, was sitting up in a bed I'd not seen before. She was watching a large color television that had not been in the cottage. A box of candy and a vase of flowers rested on a nearby bedside stand. She was wearing a shortie blue nightie — and a gold bracelet I didn't remember seeing before. As I looked around the room I saw a large refrigerator, an electric stove, a home-made bookcase filled with books and some storage shelves loaded with cans of food. An electric heater had been placed near one wall and there was a vanity covered with perfumes, combs, lipsticks and a large oval mirror. The sight sort of stunned me because the last time I'd seen this room it had contained only a table and three chairs.

Susan, startled, looked up and stared at the blanket under my arm. Her eyes were wide, frightened. I placed the blanket on the floor and grinned sheepishly. "I thought you might want another blanket. Winter's coming." I didn't know what else to say, so I turned and went out, locking the door again.

Sam had his own key to the bomb shelter, of course. And he wasn't as dumb as he'd sometimes seemed. He'd thought of the best way to kill our hostage: keep her well fed and let her die slowly of old age during the next fifty or sixty years. ●

# MIKE'S MAIL



## MORE LANSING?

I enjoy the Major Lansing novelets in the MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE. I only wish I could read one every month instead of every other month. It would be a great addition along with the Mike Shayne novel.

Debra D. Slagle  
Lisbon, Ohio

*You're a member of a very big fan club, Debra. We have several more CID stories by W.L. Fieldhouse on hand, but we'll probably space them out more than one a*

*month. After all, we've got a lot of good writers with stories in stock, and we want to give them a chance, too.*

## SHE LIKES MIKE!

I would write a letter to you, but I have no time.

Do you really want to know that I have been buying your magazine for a long time; that I am happy Mike has changed so little over the years?

Does it matter that I look at the table of contents each month for Joe Lansdale's name; that my affections keep wavering between Shayne and Slater?

Do you care that I like short stories (they're just the thing to read during lunch) and that I find yours especially pleasing; that it is a treat to find stories by Dana Lyon, Lawrence Treat and Edward Hoch? And now we have reviews; you must be thinking of me.

I would write and tell you all these things, but I have no time. I just bought the latest issue of MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE and I'm too busy reading.

Myrtis Broset  
Spring Valley, Illinois

*Of course we care, Myrtis. We'll continue to have stories by the authors you mention, but we're also getting stories by others who also have interesting tales to tell. Besides reviews, we're also striving for greater variety in the features (such as a letter column, quizzes, etc.). I'm glad you're having fun reading, but when you have a chance, write us a letter!*

## DOUBLE IS BETTER

I bought the December 1979 issue of MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE the other day from the bookstall at the tobacco shop in my hometown. And looking over from the last issue (November 1979) I see that you went back to the original double column in the December issue. I think it's better that way because it gives it the "homely

atmosphere" of a pulp magazine. EQMM and AHMM with its "across-the-page printed words" are better equipped with their own style of changes in the magazines. Therefore, no need to copy them. You're doing just fine in handling the situation.

About the serial, I think it is not a bad idea at all. Since the publication is on a monthly schedule it's in no way affected with your schedule. If you were bimonthly, then it would not be fruitful to have the serial published. Aside from this, my favourite feature is the Mystery Makers which is the first department I come to. After that, I read John Ball's book reviews, which I find very interesting even though I cannot afford to buy hardcovers, or even paperbacks. The paperbacks are well over the two dollars mark and my best buy would have to be in the digest magazines bracket. Since they only cost a dollar and a quarter, I can't go wrong with these prices despite the recession of today. It also paved the way for me to acquire F&SF with the leftovers I have in my budget.

Here are some of the writers I would like to appear in MSMM:

Bill Pronzini — The Nameless Private Detective

Lawrence Block — Martin H. Ehrengraf — a straight and crooked lawyer.

S.S. Rafferty — 'Chick' Kelly

Edward D. Hoch — Simon Ark

Joseph Payne Brennan — Lucius Leffings

Joe R. Lansdale — A tough private detective named Scatti

John Storm Roberts — Red Salter

Donald E. Westlake — mystery comedy

Well, I guess this pretty well ends my letter until next time. When will you have a letter column? I'm just dying to see it. The sooner the better.

Gary Seiler  
Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

*We tried the single column approach with the Shayne short novel as an experiment. It was kind of interesting visually to set it off from the balance of the magazine, but I felt it was more difficult to read. One reason other magazines use one line stretching across the page is that frequently typesetting is charged by the vertical inch; six inches of wide copy costs the same as six inches of thin copy. So two columns cost twice as much to typeset, even though the total amount of copy is the same. In a magazine composed mostly of words, this adds up to a considerable expense. Since we do our own typesetting here at MSMM, this is not a factor, so we can give you what we consider the best at no additional expense to either of us. As for letter columns, there was a pretty good-sized one in the January MSMM,*

*a brief one in February, and because of space squeezing, none at all in March. But here we are in April with another MIKE'S MAIL. So keep those cards and letters coming in, and I'll try to make this a regular feature.*

## WRITERS' GUIDELINES

I have been a freelance writer for the last year and have recently turned to the genre of mystery writing. As a result, I have been reading your magazine with great interest and now feel quite capable of making a valuable contribution to your publication.

Please send me a copy of your writing guidelines so I can begin to assemble a story line for your magazine.

Mitchell Stuart  
Brooklyn, New York

*We don't have any writing guidelines we can send you or any other writer. The physical requirements are the same for any market, and these should be learned before submission of any manuscript — basic things like double-spacing, enclosing a self-addressed, stamped envelope, and so forth. Obviously, since MSMM is a mystery Magazine, there must be some sort of mystery and crime involved, but there are no hard and fast rules about storylines, characters, style*

or anything else. Too many stories fit predictable patterns, and I'd like to avoid the overworked ones as much as possible in favor of new ideas, new approaches. MSMM has been the showcase of many new writers whose first publication was in this magazine. In inventory we have others. This doesn't mean we're going to neglect the old pros, though; the reason they've become old pros is because they consistently turn out good stories.

### PHOOEY?

"Phooey" on your two-part stories. *Death On The Strip* may be a good story, but having to wait a month for the finish takes all the joy out of reading it.

I have purchased your magazine for many years, for the Mike Shayne Novel and your interesting short stories. Imagine my disgust with the December issue. TWO SHORT STORIES ONLY! Also why put all that Special Feature junk in what used to be a top Mystery Magazine?

Why don't you cut the price to \$.50, put in one 50 page story, and devote the rest of your magazine to advertising? That way your readers won't be disappointed, as they won't expect much good reading anyway.

Rae McMains  
Rialto, CA

Magazine serials are an old tradition, Rae, and most of them in the pulps and in the slick magazines have gone on for well over two issues, three to six or more. If we'd run *Death on the Strip* (which is a good story, by the way) in one issue, there wouldn't have been room for any short stories. And even though there were only two short stories, there was still the same wordage in the magazine. Sorry you don't like the Special Features, but most of our readers find them a welcome change from cover-to-cover stories.

We'll cut the price of the magazine when the price of gasoline goes down and food prices lower and the cost of publishing stops rising. Sure, I'm prejudiced, but I sincerely think for the money MSMM is the best-looking, most-readable mystery magazine available.

### PHOOEY TWO?

You asked for comments on breaking the story *Death On The Strip* in two parts. I for one think it is terrible. The story is good, but I want to be able to finish a story once I start it.

Also we older people, on a limited income, are not always able to buy a copy of your magazine every month. Therefore, we do not get the full benefit of the one we bought first.

PLEASE no more continued stories.

Mrs. Edward Hemmer  
Rialto, CA

*You've got a good point about limited income groups not being able to buy MSMM every month. Sorry about that. At the moment there are no plans to publish any more continued stories. Death on the Strip seemed like too good a story to pass up because of the length, and I thought I'd give it a try. You never know unless you try. My thanks to you and to Rae for your opinions on this. We value readers who care, even if they don't agree with us.*

### FEEDBACK

Never one to remain silent when I can speak, and knowing you want some feedback, I decided to write and make some comments on your recent issues.

First, your covers have improved a lot, the artwork being more eye-catching and . . . luminous, I guess is the word I want. I can easily imagine someone who doesn't ordinarily pick up mystery mags choosing yours over *Ellery Queen*.

I don't mind serials at all, as long as they don't run to four or five issues. Three should be the maximum — and as long as the serial is not identical to the published book (if it is ultimately published as a book). I'm a writer

myself (you have one of my stories now) with a Bachelor's degree in English, and I like to study the changes a work goes through before it's finally called "finished."

I was glad to see an old-fashioned horror story, "Freak Out," in your December issue, since there's not too much of a market for this kind of thing these days outside of mags like *Weirdbook* and *Whispers*.

I also wanted to say that I've been enjoying the book reviews and minibiographies and even the puzzles. A magazine made up entirely of stories gets a little dull. How about a Mike Shayne novelet in which Mike tells the story himself?

Fred H. Tolman  
Ossining, New York

*I agree that a magazine made up entirely of stories can get dull. Which is why MSMM is trying now for a variety of items in its lineup. A first-person Shayne story is an interesting idea. I don't know of any having been done before, but I might be wrong. Closest I know of was a 1955 paperback mystery story collection published by Dell, cover price 40¢ (sigh!) titled DANGEROUS DAMES with the byline "Selected by Mike Shayne." Shayne's picture was on the cover along with three lovely young ladies who were*

*apparently dangerous in more ways than one. Inside were 12 short stories with introductions by the redheaded detective. One of the stories was by Mike Shayne's "favorite author," Brett Halliday. I suppose in these days of women's lib, the title would have been DANGEROUS FEMALE PERSONS. Loses something in the translation, doesn't it?*

*I mentioned WHISPERS once before for you fantasy/horror fans. This is a quality mag that doesn't have newsstand distribution, so you'll have to order it at the subscription rate of 4 single issues or the equivalent (sometimes they have big double issues) for \$7.00 from WHISPERS, Box 1492-W, Azalea Street, Browns Mills, NJ 08015. Good stories, articles, artwork, pictures, and reviews for those of you interested in the field.*

### BRING ON THE GIRLS

I am writing this in regard to your request for bouquets or brickbats.

My first impression of the November issue was the change in the cover. A new artist? Definitely an improvement over the previous covers. The disappearance of the small drawings with each story is another plus for you. I might add for the past 23 years I have been married to a free lance artist and eventually it rubs off.

To say I am a mystery fan would

be incorrect. The usual novels of Christie, Gardner, etc. are not for me. But I do enjoy the short stories found in each MSMM.

Also, I have been seeing stories by women writers and hope to see more. No, I am not a libber, just a frustrated writer who has continually put husband (one who has always worked at home), six children, their growing pains and pets (you wouldn't believe what and how many), and our home first. Reading and studying have been detailed to "spare time," if and when.

Judith Schmand  
Dover-Foxcroft, Maine

*All the MSMM covers during 1979 except September (by St. John) were done by a talented young artist named Sid Bingham. Sid also did the January 1980 cover art. Starting in February, we're trying a somewhat different approach. Let us know what you think of it.*

*As for women writers, you'll continue to see them in MSMM. I thought (for about ten seconds) about having an all-female-writer issue, but that wouldn't make any more sense than having an all-male issue or an all-writers-with-red-hair issue or — well, you get the idea. The story's the important thing, regardless of the sex of the person who wrote it.* ●

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# STIFF COMPETITION

by John Ball

In recent weeks a number of suspense novels in larger than usual size have appeared. Most of them run from 350 to more than 400 pages as the publishers apparently try to Roman ride by putting one foot on the mainstream novel category and the other on the mystery/suspense genre.

By far the best of these we have read is *Hawks* by Joseph Amiel. This first novel is a winner all the way. A ruthless conglomerate head tries to take over an international airline by fair means and foul. This is a fast moving, sometimes gripping story from page one to the finish. Will Nye, the one-legged general counsel for the airline is the central figure in the action which almost never slackens. This is perhaps the outstanding debut suspense novel of the year. (Putnam, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Two books about tunnels come next. *Tunnel War* by Joe Poyer is a long, sometimes slow, but acutely perceptive story laid in 1911 during the attempted con-

struction of a tunnel under the English Channel. The Germans sabotage it, and the Irish help them for what they consider the Cause. While this is a "what might have been" story, it is worked out with great care, and the background is exceptional. At times it is over-detailed, and over-populated with characters, but it is still an engaging work. The young Winston Churchill appears prominently in the book which is well worth reading. (Atheneum, \$12.95)

*Tunnel* by Hal Friedman starts out very well as five escaped convicts take over the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel in somewhat the manner of *The Taking of Pelham 123*. Unfortunately, the last quarter of the book falls completely apart due to a mass of obvious factual and technical errors that could have easily been avoided. Mr. Friedman is identified as an advertising executive; apparently he has fallen victim to the familiar dementia of Madison Avenue that the American public is simple-minded and "Who'll know the difference?" It is too bad to see his time and obvious talent defeated by such blunders.

Modern submarine torpedoes, for example, cannot possibly require ten seconds to travel forty feet. (Morrow, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

First prize for remarkable nerve must go to Tony Chiu, the author of *Port Arthur Chicken*. This tale of high industrial espionage opens with Richard Nixon submitting to a punishment circumcision in China. As his Chinese American protagonist struggles to uncover an international plot, the author introduces Chairman Mao, Howard Hughes, the Shah of Iran (while still on the throne), and Aristotle Onassis with Jackie lounging nude in the background, all under the thinnest of disguises. There is a huge amount of international travel and no one will be able to complain of a lack of action. Wild and woolly, but it will certainly hold your attention. (Morrow, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

If we ever paint a picture of Los Angeles, a project totally beyond our capabilities, it will be called *Landscape with Private Eyes*. In *Good Night and Good Bye* Timothy Harris offers the second appearance of his private detective Thomas Kyd. Kyd is clearly a compassionate man who gets mixed up with a worthless girl, but who isn't tough enough to

let her stop abusing him. He is beaten up, as per formula, and also, as has been done so many times before, there is a hostile police captain to harrass him. No new ground, unfortunately, is broken and Mr. Kyd has quite a ways to go before he will be ready to start taking clients away from Lew Archer. The dust jacket is exceptionally good. (Delacorte, \$8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

An absolute delight is *The Eleventh Little Indian* by two Frenchmen who write as Jacquemard-Senecal. This is a tribute to Agatha Christie and is dedicated to her memory. A French theater company is presenting a stage version of *Ten Little Indians* when one member of the cast, late in arriving at the theater, discovers that all ten of his colleagues in the play have been simultaneously murdered in their dressing rooms. Enter Superintendent Hector Parascot, who certainly has the right initials. The romp that follows would have delighted Dame Agatha, and the ending is as tricky as anything that great lady devised herself, which is saying plenty. Fiendishly ingenious and highly recommended. (Dodd Mead, \$8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

An unusual crime novel is

*Point of Honour* by Alan Schole-Field. A man finds that there are unusual circumstances concerning the award to his father of the Victoria Cross. When the medal is sold at auction for a fabulous price, he begins an investigation that holds many unexpected surprises. There are too many flash-backs (one is too many and there are several), but the ending is unusually neat and well done. Definitely above average by a good margin. (Morrow, \$8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

If you are looking for a fast moving, very tough story, you will undoubtedly like *Nightmare* By Richard Owen. This one deals with a modern day Fagan in New York, a banana republic with an honest new president, a fugitive American millionaire, and a London reporter who sets out to interview the man no one can see. A word of warning: the making of snuff movies, which is part of the plot, is pretty strong stuff and may disturb some readers. The people and backgrounds are well drawn and the pages turn rapidly. (St. Martins Press, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Edwin Leather uses the familiar background of Vienna for his new book *The Mozart Score*. The author obviously knows the city

well and writes of it convincingly as a small group of terrorists try to kidnap a Jewish scientist and take him to Libya via Albania. This is not a book replete with action, but moves at a different pace more at home with reality. While reading the book, it is very easy to believe that Sir Edwin knows whereof he writes and while the music of the title fades out quickly, the interest does not. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$7.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Scholarship interest in the mystery story has been very much on the increase of late. Allen Hubin's massive and definitive *Bibliography of Crime Fiction* being an outstanding example. (University of California, San Diego Extension, La Jolla, California, \$59.95) A welcome new addition, which will be of particular interest to collectors, is *Murder by Mail* by Michael L. Cook. Mr. Cook traces the three major mystery book clubs, The Detective Book Club, The Mystery Guild, and the now defunct Unicorn Mystery Book Club, and supplies check lists for all three that are complete (to the date of publication) and accurate. A great deal of hard-to-get information is now easy of access. (The Unicorn Press, 3318 Wimb-berg Avenue, Evansville, Indiana 47712, \$6.50 plus postage) A complete index is included. ●

Do you realize that in this issue we've got a short novel, 2 novelets, 7 short stories, a book review column, 2 mystery puzzles, 6 pages of letters from avid and sometimes irate readers, plus the Mystery Makers feature? Well, you should if you've read the preceding sentence. Okay, now tell me MSMM isn't worth a buck and a half? Listen, if you get a couple of smiles out of the fillers you've got your money's worth. Would I lie to you? Of course not. (Only if it was for your own good!)

JEAN DARLING hasn't graced our pages since her appearance in March 1979 with *Dying in Dublin*. She returns with *Siege in Dublin* for this issue. In response to my plea for biographical information, the lovely lady replied:

*Suffice it to say I was born — in Santa Monica, California, third generation show biz on my mother's side; my father was an oil wild-catter. Freelanced from age six months to two-and-a-half, when I was signed by Hal Raach for OUR GANG COMEDIES. On leaving the GANG almost five years later, I headlined a single act in vaudeville, appeared on numerous soap operas and various radio shows; was signed by Lee Shubert and toured in operettas (STUDENT PRINCE, etc.), also on Broadway in COUNT ME IN, toured Italy and North Africa during the war for the USO. Became a top model. Played Carrie Pipperidge for 850 consecutive performances of CAROUSEL on Broadway. Appeared in lots of movies and dozens of plays and TV guest spots. Had my own television shows, A DATE WITH JEAN DARLING on NBC in New York and THE SINGING KNIT-WITCH on KHJ in Los Angeles. Married a magician and had a little boy, Roy, who is now twenty-three. Went with my husband, Kajar the Magician, on tour in South Africa, Rhodesia, Europe, South America with his magic show. Have had a residency here in Dublin since 1967. Besides writing, I have had several showings of my water colors — and SOLD quite a number, mostly African animals and leprechaun-type kiddy things. I ride a Honda 50 because the traffic here is unreal and a gallon of gas costs the equivalent of \$2.65 in U.S. money!*

Next issue will feature THE BEDLAM FILE, starring your favorite redheaded Miami detective. Also a lot of terrific stories. And maybe a few surprises that will thrill and delight you. Be here!

—CEF

# SIEGE IN DUBLIN

by Jean Darling

Condon invaded the preschool playroom and took three children and two female adults as hostages. If his terms weren't met, the hostages would be killed! Under circumstances like that, who could blame Garda Shay Kelly for not following orders?

"COME OUT, CONDON, give up now before someone else gets hurt. You know you haven't a hope in hell they'll meet your demands." Garda Superintendent Patrick Foley spoke into a loud hailer. He was standing in the courtyard of the Irishtown Rehabilitation Clinic. Nearby, on the black tarmac, several news cameras flashed the scene onto film.

"He must be jokin', it's the kids haven't a hope in hell," came softly from a bystander on the far side of the wrought-iron fence. The narrow street behind was clogged with squad cars, emergency vans, ambulances, a fire engine, two army Land Rovers, dozens of uniformed police and the curious, some of whom

had stayed throughout the night. Radio and television crews moved restlessly to and fro attached by slender umbilical cords to the external broadcasting units that had bulled their way into the congestion.

"It's diabolical for those poor little tings," a housewife from the flats wailed theatrically as a passing microphone and shoulder borne Tee Vee focused on her briefly before zooming in on the window-framed Arne Condon. He held a small girl as a shield from a possible sharp-shooter.

"You know my terms, Foley. You have until twelve noon," Condon shouted through a slash of open window. He lifted a gun to the child's head, mouthed the word 'BANG!' and moved back

out of sight.

"The Irishtown Seige is entering its eighteenth hour," an announcer said, voice clipped with urgency. "Since yesterday afternoon at seven minutes past three, Arne Condon, self styled leader of the O'Houlihans, a hitherto unknown para-military organization, has held three children and two women hostage. Two of the children suffer from spina bifida, the third has been severely brain damaged since birth. Here beside me, braving wind and rain, is Garda Superintendent Patrick Foley who has been in charge throughout the long and harrowing night. Superintendent Foley, would you —"

"Get that damned mike out of my face!" Foley interrupted, dropping the bull-horn to one side. "You there! Guard! You're not here for crack! Get those mikes and camera on the other side of the fence. NOW!" He spoke towards the nearest uniform which, in this case, contained Seamus Kelly, a foot patrolman from the Irishtown Barracks. Amidst rude gestures, protests and flashes from news cameras, Shay Kelly herded the media men onto the sidewalk outside the wrought-iron barrier.

**THE TRAIN OF EVENTS** leading to the present crisis had been set in motion several weeks before by a group of American Senators on a whirlwind fact-finding tour of

Ulster and the Irish Republic. Like so many spinsters who feel qualified to advise on child care, these men proposed a simple solution to the six hundred year old Irish problem. They called for a meeting to clear the air, promote understanding. A chat around a table between leaders: political, para-military, church, including the Ulsterman Sean McNulty, the Protestant spell-binder whose sermons bore little trace of 'Love thy neighbor' should the neighbor embrace the Roman faith.

After much televised posturing and discussion at the UN, Westminster, and the Irish Dail, an agreement was reached. A time was set for the historic meeting that would forever lay sectarian unrest. Everything would be sweetness and light between Ulster and Eire, if one were to believe the good Senators in whose heads visions of the Irish-American vote danced like sugar plums.

To cut a long story short, an unknown para-military organization selected the meeting as the ideal occasion to make its name famous in song and story by eliminating Sean McNulty. The fact that the meeting was to be held in Dublin made the challenge convenient for the O'Houlihans, as the group called itself. Being more gung-ho than organized, the young men concerned parked their Hondas on Dawson Street, two

blocks from the seat of the Irish Parliament, Leinster House, and made their way through police and protesters. Two of them were armed with revolvers jammed into pockets of raincoats similiar to those worn at the time of the Easter Uprising. Another carried a strange arrangement of hand grenades wired together and camouflaged with a rumpled Tricolor, the flag of the Irish Freestate.

Eyes sharp above still downy cheeks, the three O'Houilhans: Arne Condon, Pauric Ryan and Bill Slattery waited in a pre-arranged formation near the gates that would place the motorcade within the sights of their cross-fire. Around them the various factions held their protest aloft on placards, each group chanting: OUT BRITS or IRELAND THIRTY-TWO COUNTIES or OUT MCNULTY OUT OUT OUT. UP THE IRA added chorus to the choir.

As it turned out the assassination attempt was a fiasco in which three Irish Senators and four bystanders, including a pregnant woman, were blown into tweezer-sized bits to be collected in plastic bags. Unbelievably, the driver of the car sustained only minor injuries and, along with seven onlookers, was taken off to the hospital. Sean McNulty, the object of the exercise, trotted unscathed into the safety of Leinster House.

Some mix-up in the order of

official limousines had turned the Senators' black Mercedes, identical to the one in which McNulty rode, into the procession ahead of that carrying the Ulsterman. As the wrong limousine pulled into position, Condon and Ryan fired. Slattery pulled a pin and threw the 'bomb'. In the ensuing melee Slattery and Ryan were arrested. Condon, dodging capture like a goal-bound footballer, gained his motorcycle and played fox to a pack of ululating police cars in a hair-raising chase through the streets of South Dublin. At last, with the law hot on his wheels, now spinning away the last drops of gas, Arne Condon abandoned the Honda and holed up in the Clinic.

At gun point he took over the pre-school playroom at the front of the central building where he found the three children and two female adults that he took as hostages. Condon allowed the building to be emptied of spina bifidas and spastics, mongols and the retarded. Along with the clinic employees, some were loaded into buses and driven off to safety, others were taken to the library to wait for transportation.

Five o'clock came. Six. Arne Condon, barricaded into the playroom remained incommunicado while the forces of law and order gathered.

At seven o'clock he opened the window slightly to shout for food. He held little Sandra Flynn

against his chest in the fashion that was to become so chillingly familiar over the next hours and shouted that sandwiches would do and not to try anything strange or he'd blow a hole through the child's head.

At seven twenty-five Ban Garda Kate Fallon, wearing civilian clothes, set a bag of ham and chicken sandwiches, three bottles of milk and a thermos of sugared tea on the window sill. Condon watched her through the glass, gun resting on the leather harness that fastened on the heavy calipers Sandy wore. "Okay, turn and walk away quickly," Condon's voice was barely audible through the glass.

By eight o'clock a canvas shelter had been raised at the far side of the courtyard. Inside, the parents of the three children waited. Outdoor lighting was plugged in through the windows in the wings of the Clinic that reached to the wrought-iron fence on either side of the large square of tarmac.

Nine o'clock. Time dragged; cold April rain shown silver in the artificial light. Ten o'clock.

At fourteen minutes past ten Condon signalled he was ready to make a deal. Superintendent Foley drew near.

"I want to talk to O'Malley." Condon shouted.

"O'Malley? You mean President O'Malley?"

"That's what I said. President

O'Malley or no deal." Condon closed the window.

This request caused much consternation and not a little activity, but by eleven-thirty a helicopter landed on the stretch of grass beside Sandymount Strand. A police car took President Thomas O'Malley to the Rehabilitation Clinic.

After turning out his pockets in the glare of arc lights, O'Malley was instructed by Arne Condon to drop his coat. The President of Eire let his jacket fall to the ground. Fine rain glued the white shirt to his shoulders.

"Take off your shoes," Condon ordered through the slightly open window. Sandra was asleep, her head drooping against the young man's chest. O'Malley stooped to untie his laces. Shay Kelly stepped forward offering his arm for balance. A shot cracked. "Get back, Cop!!" Condon yelled. "That was just to let you know I'm not hangin' in here for laughs. Okay, You!" he addressed O'Malley. "Come in through the front entrance, turn right along the corridor until you come to the door marked: INFANTS. Knock three times."

The crowd of onlookers had eddied and changed from housewives with children to people expelled from the pubs by closing time. Above, on a roof here and there across the street from the Clinic, a shadow separated itself from the chimney stacks. The

Army sharp shooters were in position.

Shortly after midnight, Thomas O'Malley came out. There was a surge towards him and he lifted his arms to halt the advance, his movements as jerky in the photo flash as a Chaplin two reeler. Once inside the shelter where the parents waited, a blanket was wrapped around his shoulders, a mug of steaming coffee thrust into his hand. Questions came all at once.

"The children seem alright," O'Malley said. "The boy Stevie Connors and Mary Murray are asleep on a sort of floor mat. Sandra Flynn seems to be a permanent fixture on Condon's lap." A soft cry came from Mrs. Flynn whose face was against her husband's tweed shoulder. "The child seems happy enough. Condon's still in his teens. He's not really a bad boy — just misguided. A malaise of today, I'm afraid." He patted the woman's arm. "No, Sandra is a dote, Mrs. Flynn, you should be proud of her. It's the therapist, Miss Costelloe, has me worried." He turned to Superintendent Foley. "See what you can do about getting a doctor in to her. Yvonne, the teacher-girl is doing her best but the woman is flushed and having difficulty with her breathing."

"Yes Sir, the cardiac unit as well as an emergency van are here, have been since shortly after four o'clock yesterday evening,"

Superintendent Foley sounded defensive.

"Yes. Well — they'll do more good if the woman can be moved out to one of them. Now for his demands: Condon wants Ryan and Slattery released and brought to Dublin Airport where a 727 will be laid on with a crew and full petrol tanks. And, oh yes, he wants a million pounds — sterling — old notes."

"Quite an ambitious 'wants list' for a beardless lad." Foley's voice was dry.

"Beardless or not, he's the man with the clout. If everyone isn't ready to go by twelve noon tomorrow he will shoot one child." A woman stifled a scream, another began to cry. "An hour later he'll shoot another and so on until his demands are met. I said I'd give him the answer as 'soon as possible,'" O'Malley continued. "I warned him it might take awhile to get everyone concerned together let alone get an answer, but he wouldn't give a minute past twelve." The press, who had jammed themselves into the shelter entrance, fled to the nearest telephone or darkroom.

A television cameraman, deformed by his equipment like some surrealistic hunchback of Notre Dame, taped the police car carrying the President as it shrieked a path through the bottleneck of flesh and vehicle on its way to Leinster House. Soon the parties concerned would gather

within its historic walls: the Prime Minister, the Garda Commissioner, the President of the Central Bank, several Senators and officials from the State run airlines, Aer Lingus. And they would argue back and forth fully aware that by capitulating and granting Arne Condon's demands they would be helping to make the world safe for 'hi-jackers', into which catagory by a slight stretch of the imagination, Condon fell. There was, of course, nothing else to do. Young children were at risk and not ordinary healthy children. Arne Condon's demands would have to be met as quickly and as expeditiously as was humanly possible.

IT WAS THREE A.M. by the time Shay Kelly let himself into the house on Tritonville Road. His wife, Maura, was still awake. "How's it going, Love?" she asked as he came in. "You must be starved. It won't take a minute to —"

"Just a cup of tea. Sure its that tired I am I could sleep where I'm standin'," Shay interrupted. "Anyway, I have to be on duty half seven in the morning."

Later, warm in their big old brass bed, he told Maura how Condon had been persuaded, at last, to allow a doctor inside to check on the children and Miss Costelloe. Surprisingly, he had let her be exchanged for another hostage.

"She's well over sixty, he ws probably afraid she might die on him." Maura remarked.

"Ummm," Kelly said, hoping she'd forget about the woman for the present. "Would you believe who volunteered to take her place? Declan. Declan Fogarty himself."

"No! Not Declan. You shouldn't have let him, him bein' blind and all!" Maura exclaimed. "And Mannix?"

"Sure that Arne wouldn't let him in with the dog o'course. He's scared of Alsations, says he. So, Mannix can come home with me, says I, but Declan shook his head. So I took him over to one of the police cars and he locked the dog inside out of the wet."

"How's old Mis Costelloe?"

Shay paused before answering, hating to mouth the answer he would have to give. "She died on the way to the hospital," he said, at last.

"Oh, no." Her voice was small and lost. "She was Aunt Mae's best —"

"Hush, love." Kelly gathered his wife into his arms mentally cursing a society that could breed creatures like Arne Condon and the boy who had killed Aunt Mae. Reaching for a tissue from the bedside table, he dried Maura's tears, hoping nothing terrible would happen to the children just when she was getting back to her old self after having come to grips with the knowledge that they could never have a family of their

own. "Don't you want to hear about Sandra?" he asked, changing the subject. "Condon holds her in front of himself like a shield everytime he comes to the window. And you should see that brave little one, not a tear out of her that I've seen."

"She's all heart, that Sandra. You should see her coming along the corridor pushing the walking frame. And the weight of those calipers. And there she is every day when I come, twistng her little body to move the useless legs from one side to the other, calling 'hello, Maura' and pushing the frame, twist, push, gaining a few inches at a time." For the past six months Maura Kelly had been a voluntary escort on one of the buses that took the children home from the Clinic. Two afternoons a week she fastened them to the seats, comforted tears, kept the retarded from scratching or pulling hair.

"It's Mary Murray whose worst. Cryin' most of the time, her mother's under sedation at St. Vincents, she collapsed after President O'Malley told about Condon's threat to shoot a child every hour. Stevie. Well, you know Stevie."

"Yes, my happy little vegetable. And he's such a beautiful child, always smiling. Oh, God! How can anyone be such a monster. Sandra is epileptic, you know — so many spina bifidas are. What if she has a fit?"

"Yvonne is with her."

"Yes." For awhile they lay quiet listening to the rain patter against the windows, Shay thinking of how to phrase what he had in mind.

"Maura, I think there's a way to free the hostages. Declan and I made a sort of plan before he — before he became a hostage."

"You know you'll be suspended again."

"I will o'course. You'll have to help. Get a list of all the out patients in the immediate neighborhood and —"

It was past five before all was quiet in the back bedroom of Georgian house on Tritonville Road in Sandymount, two miles from Dublin City Center.

"CONDON, YOUR DEMANDS have all been met. You will have everything you asked for," Superintendent Foley spoke into the loud hailer. It was then two minutes before the twelve o'clock deadline, word had just come over the radio that everything was ready — almost. Now, it was up to him somehow to avert tragedy. "A Boeing 727 with crew are waiting on a runway. The petrol tanks are full. Ryan and Slattery have been released and are now speeding towards the airport. A limousine is here, you can see it over there at the end of the street with a motorcycle escort waiting to take you to the —"

"So what's all the chat for?" Condon interrupted, voice slightly muffled through the partially opened window. "Let's get goin'!"

"That's it. There's a slight hitch. The money isn't ready, won't be for another hour. At one o'clock you'll have it all. One million pounds! But it'll take until one!!"

"Never mind one o'clock. I said twelve. I meant twelve. It's twelve o'clock now. This kid's dead!" Condon shouted. Sweat beaded Foley's brow as he saw the gun slide into view over Sandra's harness and press against her ribs. He wished he could see the expression on Condon's face through the breath blurred glass.

"Don't do anything foolish, lad. Not now when everything you asked for has been laid on. Money takes time to count — you asked for Sterling — you've got it all in old notes just like you said. Right now it's being counted and packed. One o'clock. Think, lad. One o'clock, no one else need get hurt." Foley's voice showed the strain of the long night's vigil and the need for calm.

"The safety's off!" Condon yelled, poking the blue steel in the child's side. "Are you counting, Foley? — ONE — TWO —"

"Ah Arne, stop tickling!" Sandra interrupted the fatal count. Giggling, she twisted her head around to look up at the gunman. The gun moved again. It move-

ment struck terror to the hearts of those who watched.

"I tickle, do I?" Condon said softly, eyes resting on the small laughing face for a long moment. He nudged her again, without malice. There was no malice in the tired boy face now turned down towards the child's, just desperation. The gun moved again and Sandra's high clear laugh drifted like the tinkle of a silver bell into a silence that was almost tangible as apprehension stopped breath. Waiting ears cringed away from the inevitable shot that must come. And then Condon was shouting something through the window.

"Okay!" He shouted. "Okay! You've got till one o'clock and not one second more!" Breathing once more became possible, as relief found itself in laughter, in movement. The air was as filled with sound as it had been quiet a few moments before.

Maura Kelly, standing near the gate, caught her husband's eye and her head moved in an almost imperceptible nod. Shay crossed quickly to his wife's side.

"Where are they?" he asked.

'Across the street in the Bingo Hall, Mrs. Coady at the wool shop gave me the keys."

"Are there many?"

"Seventeen, plus the three blind men with their dogs."

"It's enough. Try to keep out of the wet," the tall guard said, squeezing her arm. He made his

way across the tarmac to where the Superintendent stood girding himself for the next bout with Condon if, by some horrid trick of fate, the money still were not ready.

"Superintendent, Sir. If you don't mind I'd like to have a word with you," he began and with no further preamble launched into his plan to bring the siege to an end.

"Rain might be grand for the grass, but I could do without it today," Foley said to no one in particular before turning to address Kelly. "Of all the eejit ideas! Aren't you satisfied with the number dead already, Garda ... Garda?"

"Kelly, Sir. Seamus Kelly, Irishtown Barracks."

"Yes. Garda Kelly. I thought I recognized you," Foley said, grateful for the chance to let off steam. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what did I do to deserve you?" With difficulty Foley kept his voice under control as he laid down the law. "Ah yes, I know that name well and the way you go charging around the country against orders. Seamus Kelly, the one man Garda Síochána! We should fire the lot and let you take over!"

"But I thought —"

"You above every man in the Irish Police Force are paid *not* to think! You are here to keep the crowd back — nothing else. Do you hear me? Don't think, and that's an order!"

"Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir." Kelly turned away.

"Where are you going?" Foley asked, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"To keep the crowd back, Sir." As soon as was possible Shay shook his head at Maura, mouthing the words, 'No way.' He stuffed his hands in his pockets. He squinted up at a sky so grey it was impossible to believe the sun ever would shine again. Abruptly, he went over to Maura. "I don't care, I'm going to do it," he said.

"What did the Superintendent say?"

"Never mind about him."

"But —"

"No buts. You brought my rifle?" Maura nodded. "And the grey jumper?" She nodded again. "Okay, ease over to the entrance of the Bingo Hall, I'll see you there." Five minutes later, Kelly handed his jacket to Maura and pulled the dark sweater over his head, he could hear the chatter of voices coming from the main hall.

"Sure there's after bein' a half dozen Army sharp shooters inside now, what makes you think —" his wife ventured.

"They're all on this side of the street and they shouldn't be."

"They are o'course," Maura said. "Condon would spot anyone on top of the wings. They're so flat a flea would lump up like an ox."

"That's why I need something to distract him." He kissed her quickly on the mouth. "Get everyone in position and as soon as you see me on top of the right wing they should fan out in the courtyard. Condon must be so distracted he won't notice me as he crosses to the car. Wish me luck," he said and was gone.

AT TEN MINUTES TO ONE word came that the money was on its way to the plane. Foley conveyed the information to Condon. The Mercedes crept through the crush into the courtyard stopping twenty feet from the door through which Condon would come.

"Alright, Condon, it's time to go," Foley said into the bull horn. Maura's eyes willed Shay to appear but there was no movement on the right hand roof.

"I've locked the others in and I'll be coming out with the kid," the boy held Sandra in one arm. "Come here to me, Foley, it's that sick I am of shoutin'." Superintendent Foley walked over to the window.

"You see that kit tied to the kid's back?" Foley nodded. "Inside is a bottle of nitroglycerin, one strange move, I shoot and the whole lot, you, me, everything will be blown to hell. Understand?" Again Foley nodded. "Now get out there and I warn you not to let anyone move so much as an eyelash if you want anything left of the Clinic."

There was a rustle of movement behind Maura as the out-patients pushed their way in wheelchairs and on crutches into position by the gates. The blind men brought up the rear.

"Everyone stay where you are," Superintendent Foley's voice boomed over the loud hailer, "Condon will come out in a minute and when he does I don't want anyone to breathe until he is in the car and it has left the area. There is a bomb on the child's back which he will explode — " His voice stopped as Sandra, leaning on her walking frame inched out on to the tarmac. A small determined figure dressed all in red, her hair bunched into a handle above each ear and fastened with long-eared plastic rabbits, she looked neither to the right nor to the left. Her parents watched from the entrance of the shelter not daring to breathe. Then Arne Condon appeared in the doorway, gun in hand.

Kelly's wife was by the gate eyes riveted on the roof of the right hand wing. Nothing. No one. Oh God, she said under her breath, where is he? Though Condon moved at a snail's pace behind the child, every passing moment found him that much closer to his goal. If she didn't see Shay soon, it would be too late for the planned diversion to serve its purpose. Everyone was in place awaiting the signal that she couldn't give until he was in place.

A seagull swooped drawing her eyes left — and she saw him — on the roof to *her left* — *his right* not hers. She glanced around to see if the slight bulge in the flat line of the roof had been noticed, but all attention clung to the drama being enacted on the tarmac as to a life support unit.

Maura lifted her hand slightly and the two nearest her rolled forward. The others followed close behind, their initial movement through the gate cloaked by the black Mercedes and the surrounding motorcycle escort.

Condon was almost halfway to the car, gun trained on the mount lumped on the child's back. "Can't you push that thing faster?" he hissed through his teeth.

"I'm going best I can," she answered, swiveling to look back at him. As she turned, one of the wheels hit a stone causing the left handle to come adrift. She swung sideways off balance, body stiff in calipers locked at the hip. The frame teetered. Mouths gaped in silent prayer as the child-bomb poised precariously mid-fall. Paralyzed by fear of imminent mortality no one dared offer help.

Then Arne Condon reached down awkwardly to catch the child with his left hand, words jerking, "Not a move — out of — anyone! — I warn you!" Sandra leaned her shoulder against his leg for support until both hands

regained their purchase on the walking frame.

"Thanks, Arne," Sandra said before continuing to push, twist, push, twist across the remaining distance separating her from the car. When certain the child was steady on her feet again, Condon looked up to find the courtyard ringed with spastics on crutches advancing in eccentric cadence. They were interspersed with children propelling themselves in wheelchairs and the three blind men led by dogs.

"Bleedin' hell! What are you tryin' to pull, Foley?" Condon shouted. Swinging around, the Superintendent blanched on seeing the small army of disabled toiling across the tarmac just the way Shay Kelly had suggested. A vision of the young Guard drawn and quartered momentarily flickered in his mind.

"Believe me, Condon, I had nothing to do with this. I swear." Foley spoke softly, hoping to control the situation by being calm in the face of the terrorist's rising hysteria. "Ignore them. Just keep following the little girl, nobody will try to stop you."

"Don't give me that bleedin' crap. I want them stopped! I'm warnin' you!" Condon shrieked head turning, trying to face everywhere at once. Suddenly, a shot cracked. Condon jerked sideways, the revolver dropped to the ground. In falling his foot toppled Sandra onto her face crying.

Medical aid and an Army bomb disposal unit converged, one bundling Arne onto a stretcher, the other gingerly relieving Sandra of her lethal hump. Then she was in her father's arms, her mother, laughing and crying, kissing her little hands. Men from the media were everywhere flashing cameras, asking questions, demanding statements.

THE HOSTAGES FILED OUT of the building to be reunited with their families; in blind Declan Fogerty's case, a joyous Alsatian named Mannix. An ambulance took Condon, under guard, to hospital. The bomb disposal expert shouted that Sandra had been loaded with nothing more lethal than a cloth wrapped box of water colors. And then the Clinic was almost deserted.

As quickly as forces had gathered when the crisis had developed twenty-two hours before, vehicles and people evaporated until, at last, only a small nucleus of police remained.

After firing the shot that had dropped Arne Condon, Shay Kelly had sprawled full length on the roof limp with relief that his aim had not gone astray, thanking God his shot had not killed. He listened as the area below cleared, dreading the chewing out that would come his way for disobeying orders, wishing nothing had been said to the Superintendent. He knew Maura would be

waiting for him with Declan and Mannix in tow but he didn't feel like moving. The sun came out and was warm on his face. It was as though the whole world rejoiced now the crisis had passed. Soon the 727 would be put to bed and the crew would wander off to wherever crews went when they were off duty and all the money would be put back in the bank.

"Guarda Kelly! Seamus Kelly! Are you up there on that roof?" A voice boomed through a loud hailer. Shay rose and stood silhouetted against the sky, rifle looped in the crook of his arm.

"Yes, Sergeant Clancy," he answered.

"Get down outa there and get your ass over to the Barracks." And his Sergeant walked over to the Superintendent's car where he stood, head near the window, talking to Foley. About me, no doubt, Shay thought, making his way down to the ground. About not following orders, but surely if a man had an idea he should be given a hearing. Foley had heard. Foley had said no. Guards were supposed to obey orders, not think. If, for appearances sake, they got around to giving him a medal for bravery, he knew darned well what would be engraved on the flip side: Seamus Kelly, foot patrolman in the Garda Siochana, Irishtown Barracks; Suspended for thinking in the line of duty. ●

# THREE DEAD DEADBEATS

by Robert Fester and Joe R. Lansdale

Three death claims had been filed against the insurance company. All three listed the same beneficiary. And all three deceased had died in exactly the same way. Was it coincidence — or was it murder?

I WAS AT MY WITS' END. I'd studied the problem for hours, but still no answer. I crumpled my scratch paper and tossed it in the general direction of the waste can.

I touched my intercom button and called into the outer office. "Hey, Debbie, can you come in here? I need some advice." I turned my attention back to the newspaper.

I didn't look up from my *Post Dispatch*, but I knew the moment that shapely brunette secretary of mine entered the room. I'd know that *Eau De Roma* anywhere.

"Yes, Mr. Hunter?" she asked,

leaning over my desk.

I tried to ignore her big blue eyes and the other endowments that the tight brown sweater advertised. "What's an eight-letter word that means 'a bitter denunciation'?"

She looked at the half-filled-in puzzle. "Hmmm ... How about diatribe?"

I looked at the squares. "Yeah, that's good. That's sort of what I thought." I wrote it in. "Any calls?"

"Oh! I almost forgot. Mr. Capella from *International Underwriters* called. You're to call back

after lunch."

Since it was well after lunch, I suggested that she get in touch with him immediately. Insurance cases are hardly glamorous, but the companies pay well and promptly — traits conspicuously absent in a good many clients.

The white light below the dial on my phone lit up. I picked it up. "Leif Hunter."

Frank's soft Italian tones greeted me with, "Leif, ma boy. I was afraid you wouldn't get back to me before I left the office."

"What's up, Frank?"

"Got a little problem I hope you can help me with."

Seems that three death claims had been filed against *International Underwriters* within the last month, and all three had listed *American General Finance* as the beneficiary. None of the three had any family to speak of, and odder yet, all three had died of a coronary while driving on Jefferson Avenue near Bixby, and two of the three had died within a block of each other. The other had kneeled over six blocks closer to the heart of the city. It appeared all three had been traveling in the same direction, and last but not least, were probably on their way from *American Finance*. Of course, being a month apart, the deaths had not struck anyone as odd until all three were processed through *International Underwriters*. It all sounded fishy to Capella, fishy enough for him to offer me a ten

percent saviour's bonus to straighten things out. If it was all a case of incredible coincidence, I got a nice fee anyway.

I jotted down the three names on a legal pad, plus a little background information, and set myself to snooping.

It was a bright, cold winter day in Clayton, Missouri, and I shivered in spite of my wool overcoat. To the east, that delightful St. Louis smog hung in the air like a thick, yellow blanket. I climbed into my dirty, blue Mustang, cranked the wreck to life and headed down highway 44 toward the morgue.

**DOC WARREN HAD PRESIDED** over the downtown morgue since Pierre La Clede first traded beads to the local Indians for their furs. It wasn't hard to find the grumpy old pathologist. As usual, he was at work in the crypt-like dissecting room of the morgue.

Doc looked like a balding, old elf with watery blue eyes. And I always thought his voice was a lot like George Burns'.

"Well, well," he said patting the chest of an outstretched corpse. "It's our old pal Leif Hunter." He bent down to whisper in the corpse's ear. "What do you think, Dave? Think he wants a favor?"

Some folks say Doc Warren has a morbid sense of humor, but don't you believe it.

"Well," I said. "Dr. Franken-

stein at work."

Doc stepped aside, exposing Dave's abdomen, the skin of which had been neatly sliced open and laid aside to exhibit the entrails and such with disgusting clarity.

I put my eyes on Doc's face — which was almost as bad as "Dave's" entrails — and said: "What say I buy you a cup of coffee, Doc?"

Doc turned to his supine straight man. "Bribes, Dave. He's going to try and ply me with spiritous drink."

"Hardly spiritous," I said.

"At my age coffee is spiritous. By the way. What brings you to Necropolis, Leif?"

I told him briefly about the insurance problem. When I finished, he nodded, motioned to a vulture-faced young intern who was examining a vial of vitreous pink fluids. "Take care of Dave here for me," Doc said, and we left Vulture-Face in charge of Doc's buddy.

We stopped at a file cabinet in the outer office, and using my list of names, Doc picked out the three deaths I was investigating. "This isn't exactly kosher," Doc said; "but as long as you don't actually look at them ..."

We went out of the office and walked down the hall to the little staff canteen. The coffee was out of one of those big tan machines that eats dimes like candy, and the coffee, though hot, tasted like the stuff they put in the corpses.

After we seated ourselves at a table, Doc flipped open the files. I said, "Any sign of foul play on the three?"

Doc was quiet for a moment. He went through each file slowly, sipping his coffee as he read. Finally, he said, "No ... But, often times, unless foul play is suspected, it's difficult to find."

"Come again," I said.

"Well, unless it's something obvious, like a gunshot wound for instance, you have to have an idea what you're looking for. I mean I can see how it would all be curious now. The three dying the same way, in the same area, within a month of each other, but there was no way of knowing the deaths were unusual at the time. They were just routine, and no autopsy was performed on any of the three.

"One thing that's sort of curious, not enough to get excited about, but all three died of cardiopulmonary dysfunction. This Dravek guy, the young one, seemed to be healthy enough. I mean, it's not impossible, but young guys like him just don't keel over from heart attacks every day. He was a mailman and did a lot of walking, I presume. He should have been in pretty good shape. At least as far as the heart is concerned. But like I said, that's not astounding. The other two were old enough, in their sixties, and heart failure is a rather common cause of death at their age. That's about all I can tell you."

"And where are the bodies now?"

"Some cemetery, of course. You think they just hang around the morgue?"

"No, guess not." I told Doc to give my regards to Dave, went out to my car and steered her for *American General Finance Company*, the address of which led me down Jefferson Avenue, the main drag where all three of my dead clients had met their end.

**THE BUILDING THAT HOUSED** *American General Finance Company* was squat and cheaply modern. It sat at the back of a blacktopped parking lot between a shoe store and a barbershop. It hadn't rained for three days, but puddles still stood on the lot in mute testimony of the ineptitude of its designers.

Inside, a three-hundred-pound secretary whose name — so help me God — was Miss Little, took my card between two fingers the size of frankfurters and examined it. She read it, put it on her desk and looked up at me. "Well."

"I represent *International Underwriters*," I said. "I'd like to speak to your office manager."

She darted me with her flat, brown eyes, waved a pudgy hand at a row of chairs that looked like Goodwill rejects. "Have a seat."

I had a seat.

Reminding me of the hippo in Disney's *Fantasia*, she plucked the phone from its cradle, dialed two

digits, said into the mouthpiece: "Say, Charlie. There's a guy out here wants to see you. I don't know ... Wait a minute." She looked at the card I had given her, read it off to him.

"Representing *International Underwriters*," I offered.

Miss Little frowned at me, gave that information to Charlie, replaced the phone. "He'll see you in a moment. Make yourself comfortable." It sounded like a direct order.

I watched as she flipped my business card into the already overfilled trash can to the right of her desk, and she watched me watch her do it. She had a smile like a razor slash.

"Got to keep it tidy," she said with hardly any inflection at all.

I looked around the reception room. Cracked plaster showed at its edges, cobwebs decorated the corners and there was a half inch of dust sticking out from the wall. The ashtray urn to my left had enough cigarette butts in it to give Missouri lung cancer.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Nothing like tidiness."

The hippo smirked, went to shuffling papers on her desk. After awhile her phone lit up. She clutched it in her chubby paw, said, "Okay," into the instrument, then said to me, "All right, Charlie — Mr. Fredrickson — will see you now. Go on back."

I stepped into an office of taste-

less luster. A rotund man with a whisky-veined nose, blue-pin-stripe suit and a three-dollar maroon tie greeted me from across the desk with an extended hand and hundred proof breath. I fought the urge to peek and see if he was wearing white socks.

I took the clammy hand and shook. "Charlie Fredrickson," he said as if that explained everything. "Sit down, Mr ... Sorry, what was it again?"

"Hunter," I said. "Leif Hunter."

I dropped in the chair across from his desk. He sat down behind his desk, twisted in his swivel chair like a nervous cobra.

"Now, Mr. Hunter. What can I do for you?"

I explained who I represented, and gave him a brief rundown of the coincidences that bothered *International Underwriters*. He listened passively.

"And how may I help?" he asked with an expansive spreading of his hands. The left hand just missed knocking his coffee cup off the desk and his right rocked a bottle of *Bug Off Roach Spray*.

I nodded at the roach spray. "Interesting paperweight."

Fredrickson offered me an embarrassed smile. "Roaches are bad in this building. Constant war."

"I bet."

Fredrickson gave me a cold stare. "Now, you were saying ...?"

"First," I said, "you can let me speak to the employees who wrote up the agreements with my three clients." I named them again for him.

Fredrickson leaned back in his chair, cupped his hands together over his stomach. "Do you suspect wrong-doing?"

"I don't suspect anyone of anything, yet. But I suspect everyone." Someone had said that corny line in a movie once and I had been saving it for just such an occasion.

"Well," Fredrickson said, "we're a small company. I mean there isn't anyone else except myself and Miss Little."

"You wrote the agreements then?"

"That is correct, Mr. Hunter. Uh, would you care for a cup of coffee? I have some cups in my desk drawer here." He made a gesture for the bottom, right hand drawer.

"No thanks. Doesn't it strike you odd that three people would come to you for a loan, sign you as beneficiary for their insurance and all three die of a coronary in the same area? And why were you named as beneficiary? Any idea?"

"Yes, I do, Mr. Hunter. All three clients you named were credit risks. The younger of the three, Dravek, had a good solid job, but he was an alcoholic. You know how that is?"

I didn't know, but I nodded.

"The others were old, had

meager incomes from the government. I know how this is going to sound, but I was very much afraid to give them a loan. At their age it was unlikely they could manage the payments. They just might up and die at any moment."

"But you did approve the loans?"

Fredrickson sighed. "Yes. My humanitarian instincts got the better of my common sense. Well, not entirely. The three were dead-beats, really. So that being the case, I suggested, as a protection for myself and the company, that they take out policies from *International Underwriters*. Insurance is not written out to dying people, Mr. Hunter. Insurance companies are a solid business. I knew that if they approved the clients, then I wasn't taking such a big chance. I chose *International Underwriters* because of its reputation."

"But why sign the policies over to you?"

"More security for my company. If they should die, well, I wouldn't be left holding the bag, now would I? *American General* would be sure to get its money."

"In triplicate," I said.

"Mr. Hunter, you're looking at this through a knothole." And with that he made with the expansive gesture again and nearly clobbered the roach spray as before. This time he put the bottle in his bottom desk drawer. He continued as if nothing had happened. "None of these people

had any family to speak of, so I doubt if I deprived any loved ones of funds. It was just a business transaction, nothing more."

"But they all turned up dead shortly thereafter, and all within a few blocks of each other."

"That is indeed an incredible coincidence, Mr. Hunter, but I can hardly be held responsible for that, now can I?"

"I wonder," I said. "I don't suppose you would allow me to look at your files on the three."

"They are confidential, but in a case like this, of course, you're welcome. I've nothing to hide."

"May I see them then?"

"Certainly, certainly," he said, flashing teeth all over the place. "They're in the front office. Ask Miss Little for them on your way out. I'll dial into the front office and have her accommodate you." He did just that. "Sure you won't have a cup of coffee? It's hot." He waved a hand at a Mr. Coffee perched on a small table to his left.

I got up and went to the door. "Fredrickson."

"Yes."

"Why don't you use some of that insurance money to remodel this joint?"

"Now, Mr. Hunter," he whined. "That's no way ..."

I went out with him still talking. Miss Little gave me the files and breathed chocolate mint breath down the back of my neck all the while I was examining them. The files didn't tell me anything I

didn't already know. Fredrickson had made notations about them being credit risks and about his suggestion that they take out policies from *International Underwriters* to assure *American General* of their steadfastness. The loans *American General* had granted to the three were all for a thousand dollars or little over. Everything seemed in order.

I gave the files back to Miss Little, told her not to take any wooden chocolates and got out there before she could throw her desk at me.

THAT NIGHT AS I LAY BACK on the couch watching John Wayne single-handedly decimate the Japanese army, I managed to slip the nagging events of the day from my mind. At least until the commercial, and damn if it wasn't a commercial for *Bug Off* and that brought to mind Fredrickson again and gave me a headache. I knew that clown was guilty as sure as I knew my name was Leif Hunter. But how to prove it? It looked as if Fredrickson had literally gotten away with murder. And then again, maybe it was all coincidence.

The commercial did nothing for my headache. A fellow dressed like a headhunter pleaded, "It blows roaches away!" With that the pseudo head-hunter put a blowgun to his lips and dispatched a silverfish the size of a horse.

An insult to the intelligence, I

thought, and the termination of that commercial seemed like a good place to call it a night. The movie would go on without me. I got up, turned off the tube, took a couple of aspirin for my aching head and went to bed.

About three in the morning I woke up with the answer.

Eleven a.m. found me in the office of *American General* with two plainclothes detectives at my side. One was James Harrison, a friend of mine from when I had been on the force, the other a recently-promoted detective named Jacobs.

The cops flashed their badges at Miss Little, then herded her with the rest of us into Fredrickson's office for a little chat.

Fredrickson said, "What's the meaning of this? Miss Little, I specifically ..."

"Oh, shut up, Charlie," Miss Little snapped. "It's the cops."

"Listen here," Fredrickson said to James, "you have no right to intrude. What is the meaning of all this?"

"Mr. Hunter tells it so well," said James, "we'll just let him tell you."

"Tell what?" Fredrickson asked.

"Tell how you killed those three deadbeats, as you call them," I said.

Fredrickson shook his head. "Yesterday we went over this in great detail ..."

"That's before I got the evi-

dence I needed," I said. "What got me thinking on the right track was a commercial I saw last night. A commercial for the bug spray you have in your desk drawer. It's called *Bug Off*. The commercial made me aware of the fact that it has a curare base. I checked that out by going to the dry goods store this morning. Next I called the police and told them my suspicions. Guess what we did?"

Fredrickson licked his lips. "What?"

"We got a court order to have the bodies exhumed for an autopsy. About an hour ago we got the word. Oh, it was hard go considering the embalmer had already been there, but Doc Warren is an expert. He found traces of curare in all three bodies."

"And I suppose you think I held them down and sprayed bug poison in their mouths," Fredrickson said.

"Nope. You prepared for them, and after they got the policies signed over, and you fixed up the loan papers, you poisoned them. You had a cup prepared before hand with a good dose of *Bug Off* in it." I looked at Miss Little. "Have any idea how much *Bug Off* it takes, Miss Little?"

She didn't answer. Just looked like she wished she could melt. I looked at the coffee maker on the far side of the room. "I suppose you poured the coffee yourself, huh, Fredrickson? No matter.

They had the coffee, left here and died of disruption of cardiovascular functions. That's what curare does to the human body. But of course you know that. That's why Dravek got a little farther into town than the other two. He was younger, and able to resist the poison longer.

"It's not a nice way to collect money, Fredrickson, but it worked, and would have continued to work if you hadn't gotten greedy. They just died too close together and of the same ailment." I turned to Miss Little. "And you, I bet, are an accessory."

"He did it," Miss Little whined. "It was all his idea."

I said, "Uh huh."

Jacobs grabbed Miss Little by a pudgy arm and escorted her to the reception room to take her statement. I didn't bother to mention to Fredrickson that I had lied about having the bodies exhumed.

"I suppose you can link all of this to me?" Fredrickson said, but his voice was a whine.

"She's link enough," James said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "She's in there spilling her guts out. You can bet on that."

Fredrickson's Adam's apple worked up and down, and then suddenly he dove for the desk drawer.

James, still quick after all these years, leaned over and slammed the drawer on Fredrickson's hand, opened it slowly and removed the

.38 snub nose that was resting there.

"Tsk, tsk," James said. "If you're going to be a hardened criminal, Mr. Fredrickson, you're going to have to learn to keep your cool."

"And not be so greedy," I said. "You could have gotten away with this."

"You sonofabitch," Fredrickson said, rubbing his hand.

James looked at me, his face full of mock pain. "Did you hear that? Such an ugly remark from the mouth of a gentleman."

"You can never tell these

days," I said.

Fredrickson, defeated, sat down behind his desk and put his face in his hands. James began reading him his rights. I went out quietly.

In the outer office Jacobs was listening patiently to Miss Little's snarling remarks. I waved at her as I went out between two uniformed cops standing in the doorway.

She waved back with the middle finger of her left hand, the old one gun salute.

I went out to my car and drove over to find Capella and collect my ten percent saviour's bonus. ●

### STRANGE, BUT TRUE

A parakeet named Poopsie was the key witness in an upstate New York murder trial. While detectives were looking for clues in the apartment of the victim, Mrs. Harriet Fulano, the two-year-old green budgie shrieked, "Butler did it! Butler did it!" Since the Fulano household had no servants, police were temporarily puzzled, until a neighbor informed them that a John J. Butler lived in one of the other apartments. Under questioning, the suspect broke down and admitted to killing Mrs. Fulano, letting his cocker spaniel defecate on the front lawn, and thinking lascivious thoughts about Marie Osmond. He was quickly brought to trial and convicted in the face of the parakeet's damning testimony. When the judge passed sentence, Butler rose to his feet and shouted, "I'll get you for this, you lousy bird!" Fortunately for Poopsie, the convicted killer was put to death before he could carry out his threat. Unfortunately for Poopsie, a routine cleaning of his cage brought to light new evidence that indicated *he* was the real murderer, who killed his owner because she named him Poopsie. The parakeet was put behind bars, where he remained for the rest of his life.

# GEORGE

by R.C. Tuttle

He was about three inches long, he could spread his legs out to six inches, and his bite could create a serious problem in a human body — like maybe death!

MRS. VIVIAN VAN LEER walked briskly down the sidewalk, her delicately-featured face slightly apprehensive. The closed stores lining the side street seemed to be staring at her, telling her: *You old fool, you shouldn't leave your apartment after dark.* She was a slim figure in her brown, polyester coat and floppy hat atop well-kept snow-white hair and could easily be mistaken in the dim light for a teenager instead of an ex-psychologist of seventy-eight. Perky was the word for Vivian. She enjoyed good health, a youthful outlook on life, a comfortable income, and she wasn't about to be chained to her apartment by a few crazies.

Nevertheless, she was tense as she stepped past shadowy, staring

figures, night people who, like poisonous toadstools, emerged from the depths at night to do their thing. A street peopled with furtive figures — who wrote that? Sax Rohmer in one of his mysteries.

Her husband, dead ten years, had been a detective story writer with a small but faithful following. As her eyes panned the street ahead, she thought about Tom and his battered old typewriter. Wherever he was, he was probably devising a diabolical plot of murder and mayhem. Yet, he'd been a gentle, loving man whom she had loved dearly.

Now, her only love was George — which was unique because tarantulas don't usually have lovers, even among the

spider set.

As she walked, her purse dangled loosely from her hand.

Suddenly, a figure appeared and a quick hand yanked the purse out of her grasp. There was a rush of feet, and the purse snatcher sped down the street.

She staggered but quickly recovered. She had gotten a glimpse of his face and his hair! Especially his hair. His picture had been in the paper a week ago — a suspect in a drug bust. Greg Matson. His father was a lawyer and an official in the city administration.

She quickened her step and ten minutes later stepped into her second story apartment. After closing the door and flipping the lock in place, she turned on the lights and called the police.

Then, she caught a silverfish in the bathroom and fed it to George.

George was a South American tarantula — the clerk in the pet Central America, as a bird spider. He was about three inches long, he could spread his legs out to six inches and his bite could create a serious problem in the human body — like maybe death. In the jungle he would be living in a tree and feasting on small birds, but in the apartment he resided in a large glass tank among rocks, dirt and exotic plants. Vivian kept him well fed with roaches, silverfish and other bugs that inhabited the nooks and crannies of the apart-

ment. Thinking that George might need some female company, she had bought a smaller California tarantula, known in his homeland, store had assured her it was a female — and put the eight legged beauty in with George. The romance never got off the ground. Perhaps the small spider was actually a male or George, a female. George had promptly pounced on the hapless intruder and had him or her for supper.

George's entrance into the United States was unexpected. One minute he had been eating a bug on a bunch of bananas and suddenly he found himself on a banana boat headed for the United States. He had surfaced in the fruit section of the local supermarket, luckily, just as Vivian was checking the oranges. She had lured him into a paper bag and taken him home.

They were great friends. He let her stroke his back, and he liked to walk on her hand and arm.

"You're a nice guy, George," she mused as she stroked his fuzzy back while he disposed of the silverfish.

The doorbell rang. That should be the police. She pulled her arm out of the tank and put the cover in place. Then, after covering the tank with a cloth, she opened the door.

Sergeant Al Grimes was a tall, thin, tired-looking man who looked older than his thirty-nine years. He had a narrow, prematurely-

lined face that reminded Vivian of a hound dog she had as a child. He was bald and wore a nondescript gray suit.

They sat down and she told him about the purse snatching.

"I see." He took out a notebook and a pencil. "What was in it?"

"Five dollars and fifty-six cents, a bottle of vitamins, a handkerchief, a comb, a ticket to an art show, and a package of mints," she said promptly.

He wrote in his notebook for a moment. "Now — you say you know who the purse snatcher was?"

"Certainly. Greg Matson. I saw his picture in the paper last week and I'm certain he was the one."

A look of pain crossed Grimes' face. "Are you sure, Ma'am? We just got through a session with him, and he was found innocent."

She eyed him closely. "Innocent? Charges were finally dropped, weren't they?"

He shrugged. "Lack of evidence."

"As I understand it, you people had a pretty good case against him," she said, "then suddenly you didn't." She paused. "What does his father do in City Hall?"

"Right now, Mr. Matson is working for the DA, and I think he's going to run for Supervisor in the next election."

She smiled mirthlessly. "Very interesting. Here's a lad, caught with drugs on him — and suddenly

there's no evidence. Mr. Matson must have been pleased with the outcome." She nodded her head briskly. "Well, you get young Matson, and I'll identify him as the purse snatcher. We'll see if that pleases Mr. Matson."

Grimes shifted in the chair as though suddenly uncomfortable.

"Ma'am, are you sure it was young Matson? Sometimes in the dark, faces look like other faces. You aren't as young as you used to be and —."

"Grimes," she interrupted in cold tones, "I'm not young but I'm not senile. My eyesight is excellent and any time you want to take me on in an IQ test, I'll be glad to comply. That thief was young Matson. My God, with a rat face like that and a mop of shaggy hair, he couldn't possibly be mistaken for anyone else."

Grimes sighed. "That's him all right. We tried to get him to get a haircut down at the jail and he threatened to sue." He stared at his notebook for a second. "All right. I'll go through this again. I'll have him down at City Hall at nine in the morning." He looked at her. "You can formally identify him."

"I'll be there," she said.

"I gotta tell you, Ma'am, Mr. Matson isn't a shrinking violet. He's got lots of power behind him

"I am not the least bit afraid of him, Sergeant. His son is mentally sick and should be treated accordingly. Doesn't the boy work or

go to school?"

"No Ma'am. He dropped out of high school a couple of years ago and hasn't done anything since."

"Except get involved in drugs and steal my purse," she snapped. "Why in the world do you allow people like that to roam the streets?"

Grimes started to answer the question, then evidently realizing that he had no good answer, merely nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow at nine. In fact, I'll pick you up if you like. About ten of nine?"

"Fine."

He stood up, smiled briefly and left.

Vivian went over to the tank, pulled the cover aside and looked in at George who was stretching himself on a rock. "George," she said, "I have the feeling that we aren't going to get anywhere in this Matson thing."

George who was voiceless, seemed to understand. His antenna quivered a bit, seemingly sending out the timeless message; you can't fight City Hall.

GREG MATSON AT NINETEEN, did indeed resemble a rat with black, curly hair that sprang out of his head in all directions. His last haircut was at the age of twelve. He had a thin, tight, sharp-featured face that could be menacing or innocent looking. He was wearing the uniform of the night people — dungarees, dirty shirt

and bare feet.

Vivian, completely composed and sharply dressed in a brown outfit, sat down in the interrogation room and pointed a steady finger at a young Matson. "That is the person who took my purse last night."

Matson, who was standing between his father and Grimes, wore an expression of injured innocence. "I did not," he whined. "I was home watching TV." He looked pleadingly at his father. "Wasn't I Dad?"

"Certainly!" exclaimed the older Matson, a broad, puffy-looking man with a large featured face and full head of gray hair. He looked severely at Vivian. "I'm sick and tired of my son being blamed for every crime in the city."

purse last night." Her words were almost spelled out.

Matson, who had pushed, shoved, connived his way through the years to a pretty good job in the city government, was taken aback by this slip of an old lady who apparently was unimpressed by his position in life. He tried again. "Madam, I am a lawyer, and my enemies will tell you that I'm a tiger in the courtroom. I am convinced that my son had nothing to do with the loss of your purse — if, indeed you did lose your purse."

"I did," she said coolly. "Your precious son took it."

He eyed her grimly. "Are you

sure you're not a member of the opposition party trying to discredit me? As you probably know, I'm running for Supervisor in the coming election."

"I'm not going to vote for you," she said. "And I'm not in politics."

"We're ready for him, George."

She spent the rest of the day re-reading one of Tom's early detective novels.

After supper, she sat down next to the telephone and sipped a cup of tea. George made himself comfortable on a pile of dirt. They waited.

The telephone rang at eight-thirty. She flipped the recorder switch to ON position and pressed the RECORD button, then picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Hey ole lady," came the sneering voice. "You're wasting your time calling the cops. My ole man'll take care of them, you —."

She listened calmly to the parade of obscenity that followed, her eyes on the turning tape and the blinking red light on the recorder.

"Why," she interrupted, "are you doing this to me, Matson?"

"I don't like you. Maybe for a hundred bucks, I'd like you."

"Not on your life. I wouldn't give you a penny."

"You —! you better not walk around the streets after dark, ole lady! I'll —."

She let him record for a few

minutes longer, then hung up. She played back the recording and found it to be a perfect reproduction.

The telephone rang again. She picked up the receiver and heard Matson's voice again. After putting the recorder on RECORD again, she smiled. "Hello, Matson."

She recorded his tirade for a few minutes, then hung up. She then called Grimes. The recorder was still recording.

"Grimes, I have a recording of young Matson's phone calls, two of them. I'd like you to listen to them — and you might get his father to listen too."

"You sure now?"

"Yes. Will nine in the morning at the police station be all right?"

"Yes," he sighed.

Vivian walked into the police station promptly at nine the next morning and set her tape recorder on the table in the interrogation room. Grimes, looking nervous, was standing next to an angry-looking older Matson while young Matson in dungarees and sweat-shirt stood next to his father.

Matson glared at her. "As you know, I'm a lawyer, Madam — and a good one. Tape recordings of innocent victims are not acceptable in a court of law unless the victim has given his permission to be recorded. You are doing something illegal."

"Just keep quiet and listen to your innocent son."

An expression of fear covered young Matson's sallow face. "Dad! She's a liar! I never made any phone calls."

"Don't worry, Son," Matson said. "She's just an old lady with an overactive imagination." He eyed Grimes. "Grimes, I object to this."

Grimes shook his head. "I'd like to hear it. There's no law against playing the tape in here." He smiled suddenly at Vivian. "Go ahead."

She set up the recorder to play and pushed the button. The Matsons and Grimes listened in shocked silence as the sneering voice repeated the filthy, obscene wordage. The final recording was her dialogue with Grimes.

He reddened and his face tightened. "If you prefer charges against my son, I'll sue you. The poor boy is having a tough time finding himself."

Vivian was smart enough to see that Matson, with the weight of City Hall behind him, could wipe her out with legal proceedings — and all for five dollars and fifty-six cents.

"I'll let it go this time."

Matson did an about face and put on his best vote-getting smile. "I'm glad you see your mistake, Mrs. Van Leer. Now, I don't like to see you elderly people living alone. I know of a nice retirement home in the Bay area where —"

She stood up. "Good-bye,

gentlemen."

Grimes smiled at her. "If you need help sometime, you be sure and call me."

"Yes," chimed in Matson. "We are here to serve the public."

She eyed them for an instant. "Coming in here to complain about something is similar to a German Jewish citizen in the thirties complaining to Goering about something that Hitler did."

She walked out.

FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS, Vivian led a trouble-free life — a movie, art show, and a baseball game. One night when she was feeding George, the telephone rang. She picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"I'm gonna get you, ole lady," snarled a voice into her ear. Young Matson. "Call in the cops, did you. Next time I'm gonna drag you into an alley and —"

"Matson, I'm calling them again." She hung up and immediately dialed a number Grimes had left.

Grimes arrived at the apartment a half hour later.

Ma'am," he said sadly. "Young Matson said he didn't make any phone call to you. And his father's pretty mad."

"It was young Matson," she said. "I recognized that voice." She sipped the drink in her hand. "He even mentioned my calling in the police."

Grimes sighed. "You drinking

liquor?"

"A martini. I have one every night. Been doing it all my life." She paused and looked at the drink thoughtfully. "My husband and I used to have delightful little conversations over a martini."

Grimes took a deep breath. "I can't arrest him on such flimsy evidence. His father would tear it apart."

She nodded. "I suppose he would. You're afraid of Matson, aren't you, Sergeant?"

He frowned. "No, I'm not. It's just that our legal system is so complicated and —."

"Full of loopholes," she continued, "that it's difficult to make a charge stick, especially when the accused has a father in the DA's office. All right. Forget it."

"Well, now, for example, he could make something big out of you drinking a martini, like you're imagining things —."

"Do you think I'm imagining things?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Good night, Sergeant. Sorry I wasted your time."

"It's my job to look into these —." He sighed and shrugged. "Goodnight, Mrs. Van Leer."

After he had gone, Vivian pulled the cover off George's tank and smiled sadly at the furry creature. "What can I do, George?"

Then, an idea dropped into her agile mind. A tape recorder. Of course. She'd buy one tomorrow.

THE NEXT MORNING she went to an electronics store and bought a small tape recorder and a microphone that could be attached to the base of the telephone. After buying several tape cassettes, she went home and quickly attached the microphone to the telephone, plugged in the recorder and grinned at George.

Young Matson's face was a blend of anger and fear. "It's a fake! She faked it! That ain't me!"

Lawyer Matson seemed to have turned a shade of gray. "Of course it's a fake. What are you trying to do to my son, Madam?"

Grimes, also visibly affected, shrugged. "That sure sounds like me in that last recording."

Vivian removed the cassette from the recorder and dropped it into her purse. "I suggest you put a voice analyzer on it. I think you'll find that young Matson's voice and the voice on the recorder are the same."

Grimes looked at Matson. "Are you willing to have it checked?"

Matson hesitated a few seconds, then nodded. "All right."

Grimes held out his hand. "I'll take care of it. May I have the cassette, Mrs. Van Leer?"

She studied him for an instant. "The telephone company has a voice analyzer. I'd rather they did it."

"Oh no!" exploded the older Matson. "We have all the facilities for voice analysis and that's where I want it done. I'm afraid

that the telephone company would be biased."

"No more biased than you!" shot back Vivian.

"I am confident," he said, "that the voice on the tape is not my son's, therefore, I'm willing to have it checked — but only in our laboratory. I think you are a sick woman who for some reason wants to destroy my son and I suggest that you consult with a psychologist as soon as possible."

Vivian's face reddened. He probably had enough power down at City Hall to put her in some home or something. Was there no way to fight back? Oh God, if she were only fifty, or even sixty instead of seventy-eight! She handed the tape to Grimes. "Will you take good care of it, Sergeant?"

He took the cassette. "I will." He turned to the older Matson. "I'll have to hold your son until we can check this out. My voice on the tape is quite real."

Greg Matson backed off. "I don't wanta go to jail, Dad, don't let them —!"

Vivian watched, unmoved by tears. She'd seen that act many times during her working life — phoney as an eleven-dollar bill. "Sergeant, let me know the results of the test."

"Yes Ma'am."

She left amid an elder Matson tirade against crazy old ladies.

But she had an odd feeling that she had failed again.

THAT AFTERNOON Vivian had a visitor from the City Welfare Department, a Miss Caroline Eckel, a tall, thin, sober-faced woman with straight black hair, who looked as though she should be working in the public library. She wore a knee-length brown skirt, chilly white blouse and a plain brown coat.

Vivian, after a glance at George's tank which was covered, motioned the woman to a chair. "I suppose this has to do with the Matson boy," she remarked, sitting down in an easy chair. "Are you a psychologist?"

"Why, yes," was the brittle reply. The woman was nervous. "My superior suggested that I pay you a visit."

"Why? I'm not on welfare."

"True, but you seem to be having a problem." She leaned forward and cast what was meant to be a steady gaze on Vivian's placid face. "Do you have dreams?"

Vivian smiled. The woman was obviously right out of college. "Yes, one recurring dream — that young Matson will stop bugging me. How long have you been out of college?"

"College? Six months." She frowned. "Then young Matson is a fixation with you. You are convinced that he lives only to harm you."

Vivian rubbed her chin reflectively. "At the moment, that appears to be the case." She

laughed. "Caroline, you are a lousy shrink."

Caroline's ample mouth dropped open. "What do you mean?"

"For forty years, young lady, I was an industrial psychologist. One of the first things you do when seeing a patient is to gain their confidence, talk about their daily life, their home, anything. You just barge right in and accuse me of being nutty as a fruit cake."

"I did not. I merely —." Tears appeared in her eyes. She looked down at the floor for an instant. "I'm so afraid —."

"Afraid of what?" Vivian asked gently. "Talking to people?"

The girl nodded. "I freeze in front of people."

"You must train yourself to relax," Vivian said. "Make friends with your patient before you start probing. Talk about baseball, football, anything that the patient finds interesting —."

The telephone rang. Vivian walked over to the table and picked up the receiver.

Grimes was on the other end.

"Ma'am, I hate to tell you this, but your tape was wiped off by accident. Now, I told the lab to take good care of it, but —."

"Sergeant!" Anger flashed in her face. "The lab isn't under Matson's jurisdiction, is it?"

There was a pause. "I'm afraid so."

"I guess I am an old fool. What do I do now?"

"Well, now," Grimes said earnestly, "you just be careful and if you have any more trouble, you just let me know —."

"Sergeant?"

"Yes."

"Horse droppings!" She hung up.

She went back to her chair and sat down. Then, with a wry smile, looked at the welfare worker. "Caroline, where do you come from?"

"A little town in Ohio," Caroline said eagerly. "Remford. It's just a tiny town and —."

Vivian settled back and half listened to the wonders of a small town in Ohio.

THE NEXT THREE DAYS went by with no messages of hate from young Matson, either on dark corners or the telephone. She hadn't really expected him to use the phone any more, thanks to the tape recorder which she kept connected just in case. Perhaps he had tired of his little game.

Then, one Saturday night at dusk she was walking home from the bus stop and as she paused on a corner, a familiar voice oozed out of a dark store front. "If it ain't the ole lady with the tape recorder."

An icy chill went up her spine. The street ahead was deserted, with no help anywhere. She must make a run for it! But it was too late. He grabbed her and pulled her into the dark store entrance.

His ratty face wore a horrible

expression of lust. "You made me spend the night in jail, ole lady." He grabbed her purse and emptied the contents on the sidewalk. "One buck!" He put the dollar into his pocket. "Know what I'm gonna do, ole lady? I'm gonna strip you and let you walk home naked."

She was both angry and frightened. Somewhere back in her memory, there was a nephew, a marine who had shown her a few dirty tricks that could be used in self defense. One of the tricks emerged in her mind.

He put his hand inside her coat, grabbed her blouse and started to pull when she lifted her skirt slightly and brought her sharp knee up hard into his groin.

With a cry of anguish, he crumpled to the ground. She picked up her purse and whatever else she could find, and hurried home. After resting a moment, she called Grimes.

"Ma'am," Grimes said, "we could pick him up but — well, you know the problem."

"His father has you people in the palm of his hand. That's the problem." She slammed the receiver down and made herself a double martini.

Twenty minutes later, the telephone rang again and Grimes' voice hit her ear.

"Ma'am, I just talked to Mr. Matson and he says his son never left the house tonight."

Somehow, she had expected

that from the Matsons. "One *really* can't fight City Hall, can one, Sergeant?" She slammed down the receiver.

Completely frustrated, angry, she made up a martini and sat down next to George's tank. "What are we going to do, George?"

The telephone rang. She picked up the receiver. "Hello," she said in a tired voice.

"Kill!" and then there was a click.

She hung up. She suddenly felt frightened.

VIVIAN STAYED in her apartment all the next day and read. As darkness approached, she stood at the window and watched the shadows close in on the buildings along the street. An ocean fog was gently rolling in, swirling about the dull street lights and people were becoming indistinct figures.

Young Matson was out there somewhere waiting for her.

She had half of a tuna sandwich for supper, fed George a silverfish, then slipped into a pair of slacks and a sweater. Her face tense, she slid a small briefcase out of a closet. She put on her polyester coat and floppy hat.

Then she opened the briefcase. "Let's get him, George."

She carefully deposited the quivering George inside the briefcase and stepped out into the night.

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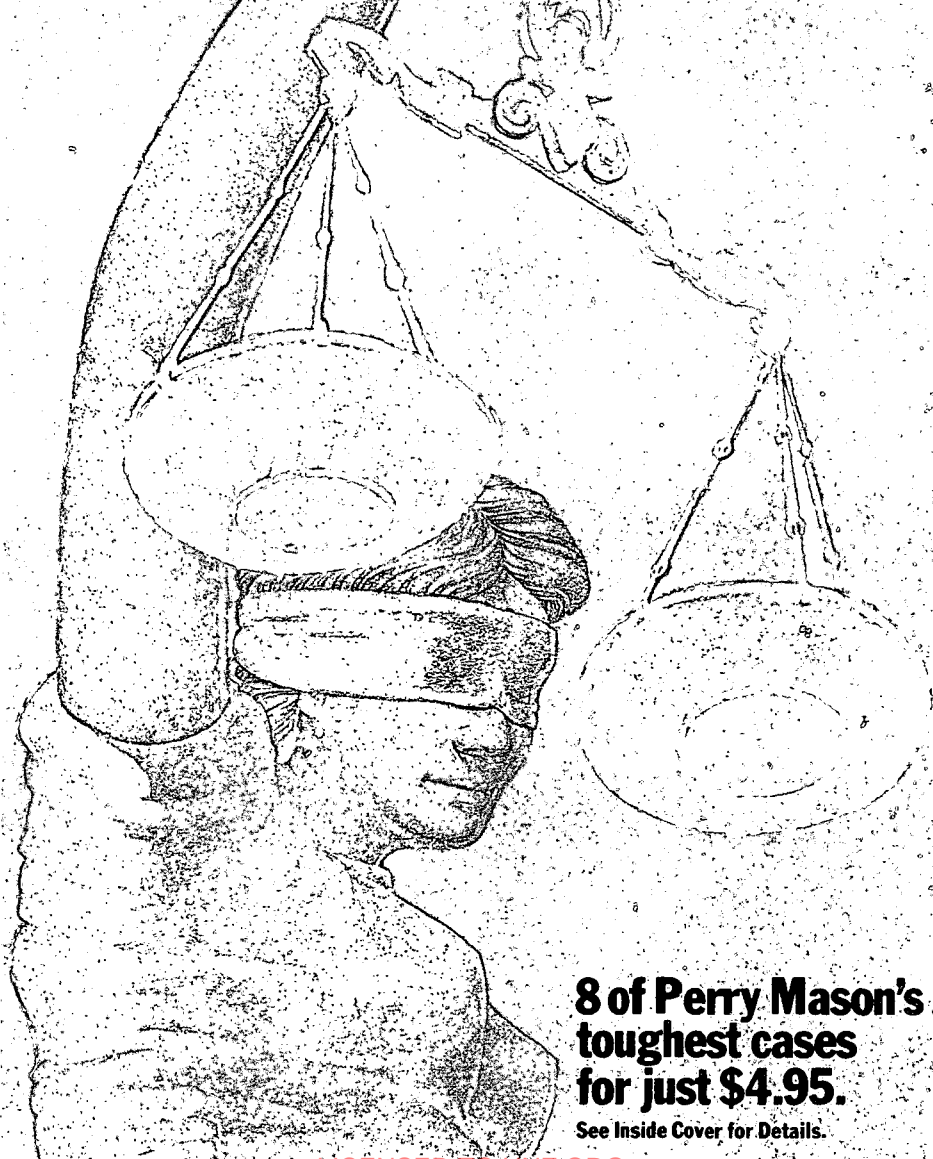
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