ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 35¢ K

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE DECEMBER 1961

Dear Readers:

Observe, if you will, and admire, if you please, the *aplomb* which I display on the cover of this month's issue. The French have a word for it . . . *sang-froid* . . . which in beatnik *argot* is translated as "cool, man, cool!" The cold perspiration bespangling my brow bears mute witness to my coolness. So cool am I, in fact, that the skeletal hand has turned green in envy of my imperturbability, and of my absorption in the December AHMM. Out of sight, my forefinger is hovering over a row of buttons, and I am silently debating whether to push the panic-button, the burglar-alarm, or the light-switch?

This trifling interruption has broken my train of thought, which accounts for the look of annoyance on my face. I was about to start PUNCH ANY NUMBER, the novelette by Jack Ritchie. There are other excellent stories in this month's issue, and it is my earnest hope that you will be so diverted by them that you will take immediate advantage of the Christmas Subscription offer on pages 65 and 66, and bestow AHMM as a gift upon your nearest and dearest, to keep your memory as green as the hand on the cover, throughout the coming year.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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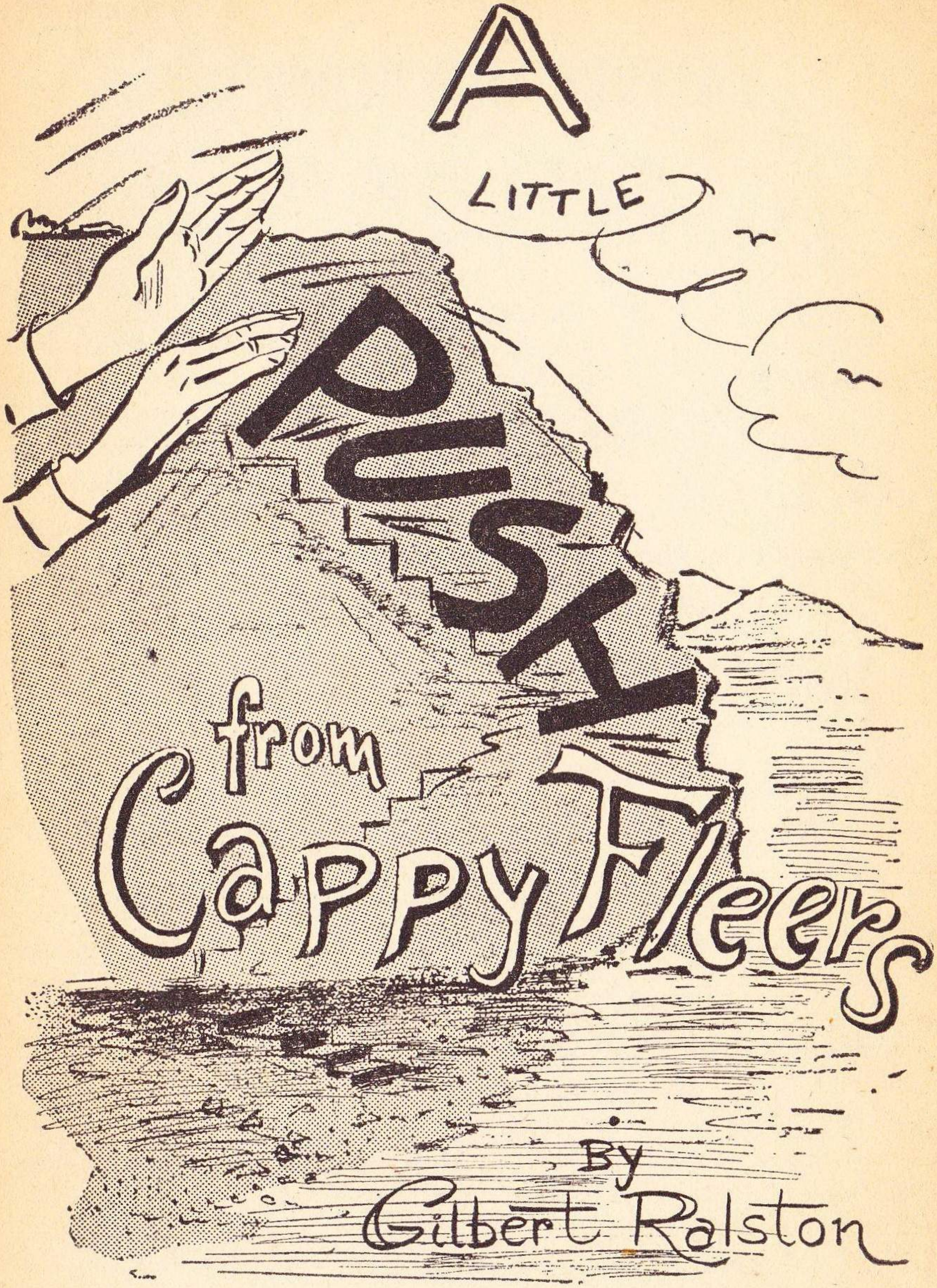
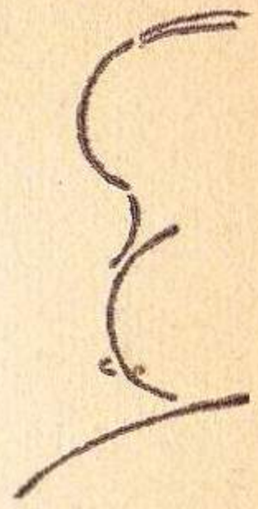

A
LITTLE
ASK
from
Cappy Ricks
By
Gilbert Ralston

I find Cappy Fleers a most appealing character. He has a dog-like devotion to those whom he loves, and a simple, direct approach to the problem of disposing of those who threaten his loved ones.



It wasn't long after Pop died and the bank took the place back, when I hitched a ride on a truck to New Orleans to get some construction work, or maybe ship out on one of those Gulf freighters. I hung around for a while but couldn't find anything unless I had a Union card, which I didn't. So I thought I'd go to California and pick fruit, or maybe get in the movies. Billy Jo Cartright, a fellow I met, went with me. We hitched rides as far as San Antonio, then Billy went to work for his uncle, who grew cotton. The uncle said I could stay too, but I kind of had California in my head, so I said no thanks and went on. I had sort of a plan if I couldn't find anything to do in Los Angeles, so after I saw the lines of fellows in front of the employment places, I went to the dime store and bought a hammer and nails and a can of paint, and made a shoeshine box. I spent three dollars for some polish and a couple of brushes and went looking for a building, out on the bus all the way to the Sunset Strip, which I had heard about. Out by La Cienega there was a long row of the kind of buildings I wanted, two story, with maybe twenty offices, and no doormen. I went to the rental agent and asked him if I could go around the offices and shine shoes. He talked to me for a while, then said okay, so I began in the upstairs corner office. That's how I met Mr. Danny Froken.

He had a big place, with some girls at desks in the outside room. One of the girls looked up at me. "I'm the shoeshine boy," I said.

"Just a minute," she said, and pressed a thing on her desk. "Mr. Froken, want your shoes shined? The boy's here." Then she told me to go in. There were actors' pictures on the wall and a big desk at the end of the room with a little man at it, looking at some papers. I went over by him and sat down on the shoeshine box. He didn't look up, just stuck his foot out. I remember the shoes because they were small, like a boy's, and hardly needed a shine at all. When I was through he stuck a hand in a pocket and gave me fifty cents. He

looked kind of surprised when I gave it back to him.

"You're my first customer," I said. "This one's free."

He had a funny face, all tight and wrinkled and very serious. He looked at me for a moment. I got sort of uncomfortable, then he smiled.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Cappy," I said. "Cappy Fleers."

"That's an odd name."

"Not where I come from, Mr. Froken," I told him.

"Where's that?"

"Seneca, West Virginia."

"You're a long way from home, Cappy."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Thanks for the shine."

"You're welcome, Mr. Froken." I started out.

"Cappy."

I turned back.

"Come every day at ten o'clock." He smiled again as I went out. I went through that building like a field of wheat and the next one to it in the afternoon. Made enough to pay my room and had two dollars left for food.

Everything went fine after that. Pretty soon I had a whole string of offices to go to and everybody knew me by name. Mr. Froken was the best to me. Every day, when I did his shoes, we'd talk a little. He was interested in the way I lived in Seneca and would ask me questions.

About two weeks after I started the shoeshine business, Miss Faulkner, the lady on the desk outside his office, stopped me when I started to go in.

"Hold it a minute, Cappy," she said. "Mr. Froken's got a houseful."

I waited while she pressed the key on her desk.

"Cappy's here, Mr. Froken," she said. "All right to send him in?"

Mr. Froken said it was okay.

The office was full of people, sitting around on chairs, all talking at once. They were arguing about a movie script, two fellows in the corner pretty excited. Over in the other corner I saw Ray Prestwick, the big actor. He just sat there big as life, listening and smoking a cigarette while I did Mr. Froken's shoes. When I finished, Mr. Froken said, "This is Cappy Fleers. If you two could write as well as he can shine shoes, we wouldn't be here." Everybody laughed.

"Go ahead, Cappy. Shine 'em up," Mr. Froken said.

I did the writers' first, while they got back into their fight, mostly with each other. I never heard such an argument. Finally I got to Mr. Prestwick. He had some nice brown shoes on, English leather. I

got a big charge out of doing his shoes. He paid for them all. It was a funny feeling, getting paid by a big star, even for a shoeshine.

"Thank you, Mr. Prestwick," I said, and headed for the door.

Mr. Prestwick called after me. "Hey, Cappy," he said. "You know anything about yard work?"

"I know some farming," I told him.

"This is not exactly farming," he said. "Mowing, and things like that."

"If it grows, I guess it wouldn't be strange to me," I said.

"I need a man on my place. Want a job?"

"Who'll do Mr. Froken's shoes?" I asked him. Everybody laughed, even Mr. Froken. I felt kind of bad that he thought it was funny. He smiled at me again, with that nice sort of look, so it was all right.

"Take the job, Cappy," he said. "I'll send 'em over."

Next thing I knew I was in the outside office with an address on a piece of paper in my hand. I sat for a long time in the cafeteria on the corner, thinking about it, and Mr. Froken, and how things happened.

The address worried me some when I looked at the map. It was way up in a place called Laurel Hills, in the mountains back of Hollywood, without any bus. I figured I'd have to get some kind of car to get there to work each day but with only $73.00 in the box in my room I didn't see how I could work it. I thought about it some when I went back to finish off with my customers.

The next day was Saturday and I was supposed to go to Mr. Prestwick's house in the morning. I got up early and took the bus way out on the Sunset, where Laurel Street cut in. Then I walked the rest of the way. They lived on top of a hill on a street without any sidewalks, all full of houses that looked like castles. I opened the gate and went into the yard. They had a lot of it, all green and big trees and plants around, everything wet and cool looking, sprinklers going, up near a big stone house. There was a lady over at the side. She had a pair of shears in her hand for cutting flowers and an armful of them already cut.

"Hello . . ." she said. "Cappy?"

I said I was. She was the prettiest little thing, dark-haired, with her face all lit up with the flowers.

"Ray said you'd be coming up today. Come in, and we'll talk." She led the way into the kitchen. It was the biggest one I ever saw, all white tile and machinery. She sat me down at the table and gave me a cup of coffee.

"Mr. Prestwick will be back soon. Was it a hard walk?" I knew then that she had seen me coming up the street.

"No, ma'am," I said. "I was watching the pretty day."

"So was I," she said. "That's how I saw you."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Come on out. I'll show you around."

We went outside again, and walked around the grounds. Everything looked pretty good except some of the trees needed pruning back and the oleander bushes on one side were choking for space. The grass was nice and healthy, with the spring of good turf under it.

"We just got this place," she said. "The old owner took the gardener away with him. That's why we need you."

"I've never done this kind of work before, ma'am. I hope I'll satisfy."

"Mr. Froken told me you were a farm boy. If we get stuck, we'll get a book."

"Mr. Froken?" I said. "You know him, ma'am?"

"Mr. Froken is my husband's agent. He's a good friend. That's how we heard about you."

"I'll bet that's why Mr. Froken used to ask me about Seneca. And all those other things."

Then she took me back to the pool. There was a shed there with enough mowers and edgers and seeders and things to open a store.

"I think you'll find everything you'll need here, Cappy. If there's anything else, just let me know."

"We could put in a stand of alfalfa with this, ma'am." I told her. She laughed like a little girl.

"Your room's over the garage," she said.

I must have looked surprised.

"Didn't he tell you?" she said. "Mr. Prestwick expected you to stay here. We're away a lot. We want a hand on the place."

I just listened, marveling at the way things happened.

After we looked around a little more, she showed me my room. There was a bed and a dresser and two chairs, even a television in the corner. It even had its own bathroom.

"I'll try to keep it neat, ma'am," I said.

She looked at me for a moment, a funny expression in her eyes.

"You do that, Cappy," she said finally. "You do that."

I moved my stuff in the next day, after church, and started on the yard. I had an itch to prune those trees and was up in one of them when Mr. Preswick came out. I climbed down, and said good morning.

"Everything all right, Cappy?" he said.

I said everything was just fine.

"You'll find lunch in the kitchen at one o'clock," he said. "The cook's name is Rosa. Stay on her good side. She's a terror."

I didn't have any trouble with her. She was a fat Italian lady who really set a table. I didn't talk much to her at first, just stayed polite and enjoyed the food, which seemed to please her. After a few days we got to be pretty good friends, and sometimes when the Prestwicks were out we used to talk and she would tell me about the Old Country and how she lived in Italy when she was a girl. We were both farm raised so I guess that helped.

It took a while to get the yard and house the way I liked it, all clipped and roomy with the flowers healthy and bright. I put in a new piece of grass in the back and made a little sitting place like a rock garden back of the pool. It was a pretty place, looking out over the tops of the hills. Mrs. Emma, that's what Rosa told me to call Mrs. Prestwick, liked to sit there when she read a book.

It was a strange time. I didn't have a car, except Mr. Prestwick said I could borrow one when I had an errand or something I wanted to do, but, even so, at first I didn't leave the place much. Once in a while, Mrs. Emma would talk to me when I was in the yard, or Mr. Prestwick would ask for something, and I would get it for him in the car. Then I started driving Rosa around when she wanted to go somewhere, or taking Mr. Prestwick to the studio when he was working. He didn't like driving and I did, so that made it nice. I'll say one thing. That yard *shone*. Even my Pop would have liked it.

Time sort of slipped by. Then one day I was clipping the hedge and turned around and Mr. Froken was standing there. He held out a hand to me, that little smile of his on his face again.

"I forgot to send the shoes, Cappy," he said.

"Mr. Froken," I said. "Am I glad to see you!"

"You're doing a fine job, Cappy," Mr. Froken said. "The Prestwicks couldn't do without you."

Somehow, hearing him tell it was better than anything I heard in my life. I couldn't stop smiling. Like a fool, I couldn't say much.

"I hope you're happy here."

"It's a wonderful place," I said.

He turned to go into the house.

"Mr. Froken," I said.

"Yes?"

"Thank you," I said.

"That's all right, Cappy," he said. "An active agent has to look

after the welfare of his clients."

I picked a big bunch of flowers and put them in his car.

Just before Christmas was a big and exciting time at the house, all kinds of people coming and going, Mr. Froken in and out, Rosa and I so busy we didn't have time to think about anything, which was just as well for me. Christmas used to be pretty good at our house, even after Ma died and there was only Pop and me. When I thought about it I got pretty low, so it was better to be busy.

Christmas Day was another high time. The house was full of people, we had some extra help in to serve, and I took care of the cars and helped with the drinks, except for Mr. Prestwick, who only drank coffee. Rosa and I started at six in the morning to get ready so when the last of the people left we were pretty tired, sitting in the kitchen with coffee when Mr. Prestwick came out. He said Merry Christmas to us both and gave us each a hundred dollar check. Old Rosa gave him an Italian hug and I shook hands. Then I went to my room. On the dresser was a little Christmas tree, all covered with spangles. Under it was a package. I opened it. It was a wallet, the most beautiful leather I ever saw. Across the front of it was my name in golden letters, "Cappy Fleers" . . . in *gold letters*. I just looked at it and at the card. It was from Mrs. Emma, who wrote "Love from the Prestwicks" on it. Next to it was a scarf from Rosa. I sat on the bed, holding the presents in my hands for a long time. Then I noticed something else. On the dresser was another box. In it was a watch, a gold watch, with a gold band on it. My name was on that too, on the back. It said "Cappy Fleers with the affection and admiration of Danny Froken." Well, I was overcome.

After that, Mrs. Emma decided that I'd better go to school nights, two or three times a week, so I did, the Adult Education course at the high school. I enjoyed it, especially the English. I read a lot of books. Mrs. Emma used to pick some new ones up for me when she went shopping, then when I saw her in the yard she'd talk with me about them.

I met a girl at the school. Mrs. Emma deviled me a little about it, till I asked Norma, that was her name, to go to the movies with me. She wasn't a very pretty girl but I liked her a lot. She was kind of quiet, like Mrs. Emma, and fun to be with. We had some good times together.

All this time, I took care of the house and yard, and drove Mr. Prestwick to and from his work.

I used to drive him down in the morning and go and get him in the afternoon. The fellows on the gate at the studio got to know me, and used to wave me right in when I drove up, and let me park the car right outside the studio door where Mr. Prestwick was working. Sometimes I'd go in and watch the picture being made, and once in a while Mr. Froken would be there and he'd smile that funny smile of his and I'd look at the time where he could see me, so that he could see that I was wearing his watch. It was a little game with us. Mr. Froken was getting old. Each time I saw him he seemed to shrink a little. You could almost see the bones under the skin of his face, he was so thin. I talked to Mrs. Emma about it. She said that Mr. Froken wasn't very well. She said maybe the layers were peeling off a little so that the kindness and integrity were beginning to show through. Mrs. Emma worried me, she was so sad. Not only about that, but about the trouble that began with Mr. Prestwick.

I guess actors are different in the way they think about things. Mr. Prestwick was always nice to me so I had no complaint, but it was different somehow. Maybe down underneath he cared, but I always thought he kind of saw himself in a place or situation, then did what he thought he was supposed to do. Anyway, he wasn't like the others. They always said exactly what they meant. Mr. Prestwick said what he was *supposed* to mean. That's a big difference. Anyway, when he won that Oscar, things began to change. Mr. Prestwick was busier than ever and the next thing we knew he was playing in that war picture with Kitty Lamson, and was a real big star again. He went away to Mexico to do the location shooting for three weeks and when he came back he was different. That's when he bought me the uniform and cap to wear when I took him in the car. I didn't mind, but I heard Mrs. Emma fussing about it to him. Anyway, I wore it and took him to the studio first time I had it on. They were making the interior shots of the war picture and I figured I'd arrive a little early that afternoon so I could watch some of the scenes. I came back at five o'clock, and didn't see Mr. Prestwick anywhere. I knocked on the door of his dressing room at five-thirty. That's the first time I ever saw him with a drink. He told me to go back to the car and wait for him. When I turned at the door of the studio, I saw Miss Lamson come out of the dressing room with him. By the time they got to the car, I was

waiting with the door open. He put her in and gave me an address at the beach in Malibu. Every once in a while as I drove them, I watched her in the rear-view mirror. She had an actress face, very beautiful, black hair and big red lips. She laughed a lot and made jokes all the way to her house. When we got there he got out and took her to the door. She said something and he laughed and went in. When he came back he was pretty drunk, didn't say much, just rode home in the back seat of the car. That was the first thing I noticed. Two days later he phoned and asked Rosa to tell me to get a bag packed for him so that he could go away for two days' location. I brought the bag to the studio and left it in his room. On my way out I saw Al Morgan, the assistant director. I asked him where the location was they were going to. He said that it was on the beach at the other side of San Diego. He told me that the company would be there Monday and Tuesday. This was only *Friday*. That was the second thing. I worked on the lawn that afternoon, thinking about it.

Wednesday, when Mr. Prestwick had a day off, Mr. Froken came. Mrs. Emma was out and Rosa was shopping, so I went into the house to see if they needed coffee or anything. They were in Mr. Prestwick's den and I could hear him yelling all the way out in the hall. So I didn't go in, and I didn't listen. After a while Mr. Froken came out, got in his car and drove away. I never saw him look like that before—worried and sad and nervous. That was the third thing.

Next day I saw Mrs. Emma in the little garden place I fixed up for her. She was sitting in her chair, all alone. I went to see if she wanted anything. She told me that Mr. Prestwick had another week's location to do and would I please ask Rosa to pack his bag and take it down to the studio. When I looked back at her, her face was all twisted up and tears were running down it. She just sat there, crying. I went to get the bag, my stomach all tight and knotted up.

This time when I went to the studio dressing room, Mr. Prestwick was in it. He called me in and looked at me, hard.

"Cappy," he said. "I want you to do something for me."

"Yes, sir." I said.

"I am going to stay at the Malibu Beach house for a few days. I want you to call for me there, each morning."

I said I would.

"And I want you to keep it to yourself. Man-to-man. Okay?"

I started to speak, then didn't.

"Yes, sir," I said.

When I got to the studio door again, I felt like I might throw up. When I looked up, Mr. Froken was standing there.

"Mr. Froken," I said. "What am I going to do?"

He looked at me for a long time. "Nothing, Cappy." I guess I must have looked funny. He put a hand on my shoulder. "This is not your trouble," he said. "It's mine—and Mrs. Emma's. Do one thing for me?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"If he starts to drink, call me. Sometimes he can't stop." Then he went on while I got into the car.

Everything was terrible after that. Mr. Prestwick was living down at Kitty Lamson's house and didn't come home at all. Mrs. Emma looked sick and thin, and wouldn't eat, even when Rosa tried to make her. Rosa looked at me most of the time like I was some kind of a traitor. I brought things down to Mr. Prestwick when he asked me and drove him to work until the picture was finished. Even then he stayed away. All the time Mrs. Emma got thinner and thinner. Then the papers began to write about it, every day some dirty little thing. Reporters called Mrs. Emma. It was a rotten time. Then the phone call came for me. I took it in the kitchen. It was that Kitty Lamson. She was sort of whispering, but very serious.

"Cappy," she said. "This is Miss Lamson. Better get down here. Mr. Prestwick needs you right away."

I didn't like the way her voice sounded so I ran to the car and drove out of the yard without telling anyone. When I got to the beach house, Miss Lamson let me in. She was sort of laughing and sly in spite of being very pretty and I could see that she had drunk a lot. She could barely walk, and just pointed inside. I went into the living room looking for Mr. Prestwick, then onto the porch. The house was way up on a cliff, over the ocean, on the Palisades, and had a big cement porch all across the back, with a stairway going to the beach, crisscrossing right down the cliff. All the rooms faced on the porch and when I turned back I could see Mr. Prestwick in the one next to the living room. He was on a chair, his head down and hanging. I ran in. She was there behind me, giggly and horrible.

"Take him home, Cappy," she said. "He's a mess. A real mess." Then she laughed. Mr. Prestwick looked sort of grey and his breath was making funny noises. I grabbed him up and laid him on the sofa. Then I ran to the phone and called Mr. Froken. He got right on the phone and said

to hold everything till he got there. Miss Lamson had gone into the other room. I could hear her in there playing some loud music on the phonograph. I took Mr. Prestwick's tie off and washed his face. His hands were cold. I rubbed them. I was still working on him when Mr. Froken came. He took a look at him, with his face sort of hard and set. "Let him sleep a little, Cappy," he said. "then we'll put him in a hospital. I know a place." We went out to the other room. She was still there, still with the crazy music on the phonograph. She was dancing, whirling around and around without her shoes on. Mr. Froken crossed over to the phonograph and shut it off. She stopped like a cat, still laughing. Mr. Froken just stood there, his hands shaking.

"You filth!" he said.

She just stood there looking at him, then she slapped his face. He stood, without moving. Then she spat, right in his face. I grabbed her and put her down on a chair. Mr. Froken took his handkerchief out and wiped his face. He let the handkerchief slip to the floor and walked away from her out on the porch. I watched her for a minute. I was afraid to leave her. Then she got up and began to dance again, wild, round and round the room. I looked out at Mr. Froken. He was way out by the stairway, down to the beach. She was running the whole length of the room, back and forth, under her breath humming music. When she ran out on the porch I ran between her and Mr. Froken. Then I saw him. He was all bent over and holding on to the top of the stair rail. He looked up at me.

"Cappy . . ." he said. "Cappy." Then he fell. I ran for the rail. He was maybe twenty steps down, all crumpled up. I went to him. I held him in my arms. Mr. Froken was dead. I wished it was me. I loved Mr. Froken.

After a while I carried him back up the stairs. He was light, like a little boy. She was standing there her hand on her mouth. I went by her and put Mr. Froken down on the sofa in the living room. I called on the telephone for the ambulance, then just stood there, looking at Mr. Froken. The ambulance came, and two fellows from the Police Department a little later. They took Mr. Froken away. Miss Lamson sat in a chair, not saying a word, just kind of shaking her head while the policemen looked around the room. They asked me who the man was in the other room and who I was. I told them. They were making notes, sort of slow about it. Then they talked to her. She sat in the chair, quiet. It was wonderful how she had changed, hardly drunk at all. She told them he fell down the stairs and that she didn't see it. She said I saw it all. Then they turned to me.

"Tell us about it, Mr. Fleers." It was the old quiet one who asked.

I sat in the chair, not saying anything for a moment, then I looked right at him.

"She pushed him," I said. "She hit him, then she pushed him when he was by the stairs. She was drunk. She hit him, then she pushed him."

"Liar," she screamed at me.

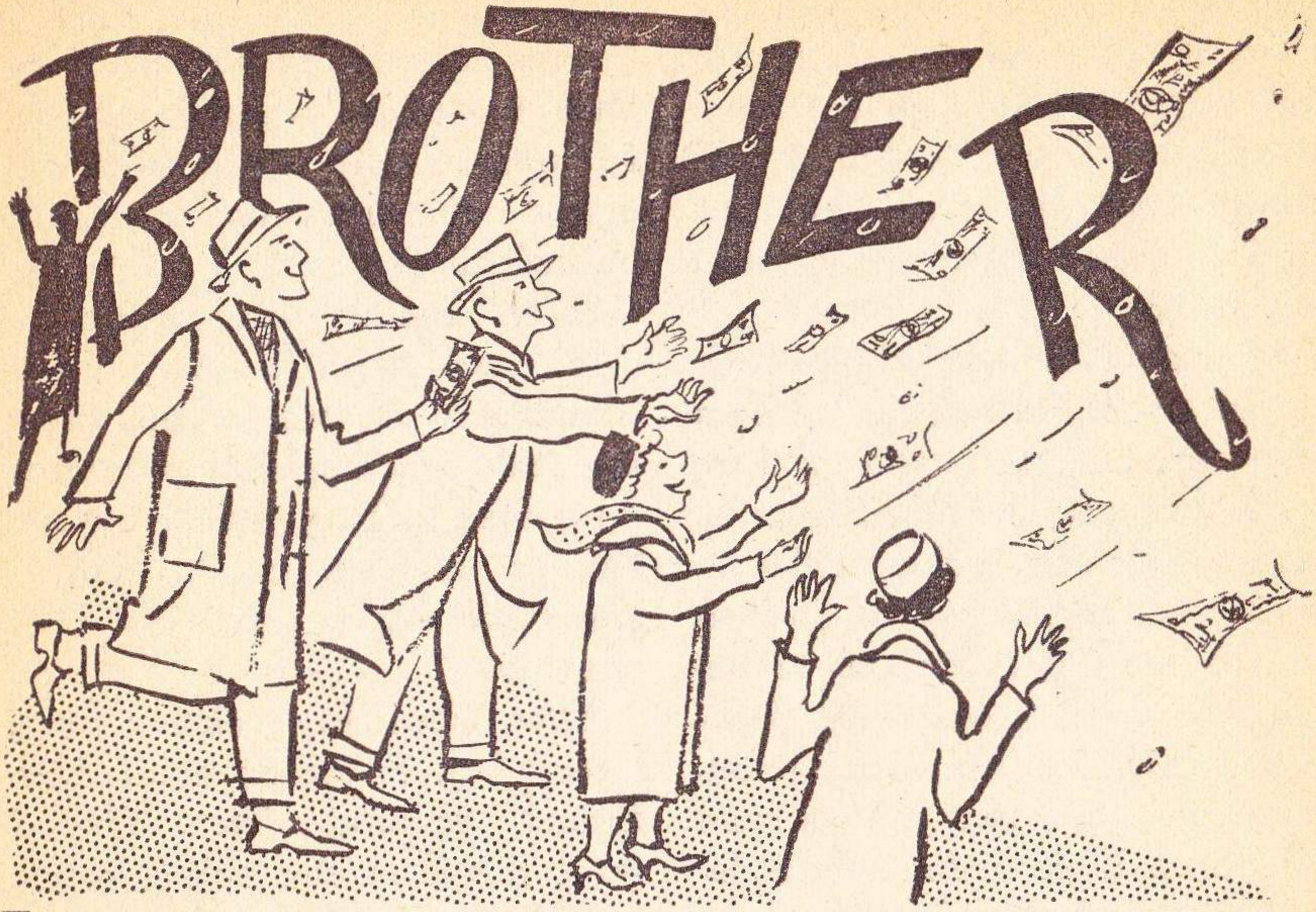
"I'll swear to it," I said.

Suddenly she was at me, clawing and scratching and screaming dirty things. They pulled her off. "That's what she did to him," I said. "She was so drunk she can't remember."

After, when they took her away, I took Mr. Prestwick home. Mrs. Emma put him to bed. Then I went down to the police station and wrote down what I had said. They said I'd have to come back when the trial came up. I said I would and they took down a lot of other things I told them. It wasn't really a lie. About the pushing, I mean. She did push him. She pushed us all, Mr. Prestwick, Mr. Froken, Mrs. Emma, Rosa, me . . . the whole family. I just pushed back a little.

Things are getting back to normal now. I can't tell you what's happened to Miss Lamson. I feel so bad about Mr. Froken, I don't even read the papers about it, and her trial hasn't come up yet. I'll bet you one thing. I'll bet she won't get off. Not after what I wrote down at the police station.

BROTHER



IT WAS snowing outside. Fat, soft flakes were falling, piling up on the window-sill. The sidewalks and streets were already covered. Across the street Paul Sarling could see people lining up for the bus and over their heads the clock and thermometer above the door of the bank. He looked back down at his desk, waiting, and pretended to study the papers there.

Sam Juraska looked into Sarling's office and said, "You going to stay here alone all night, boy?"

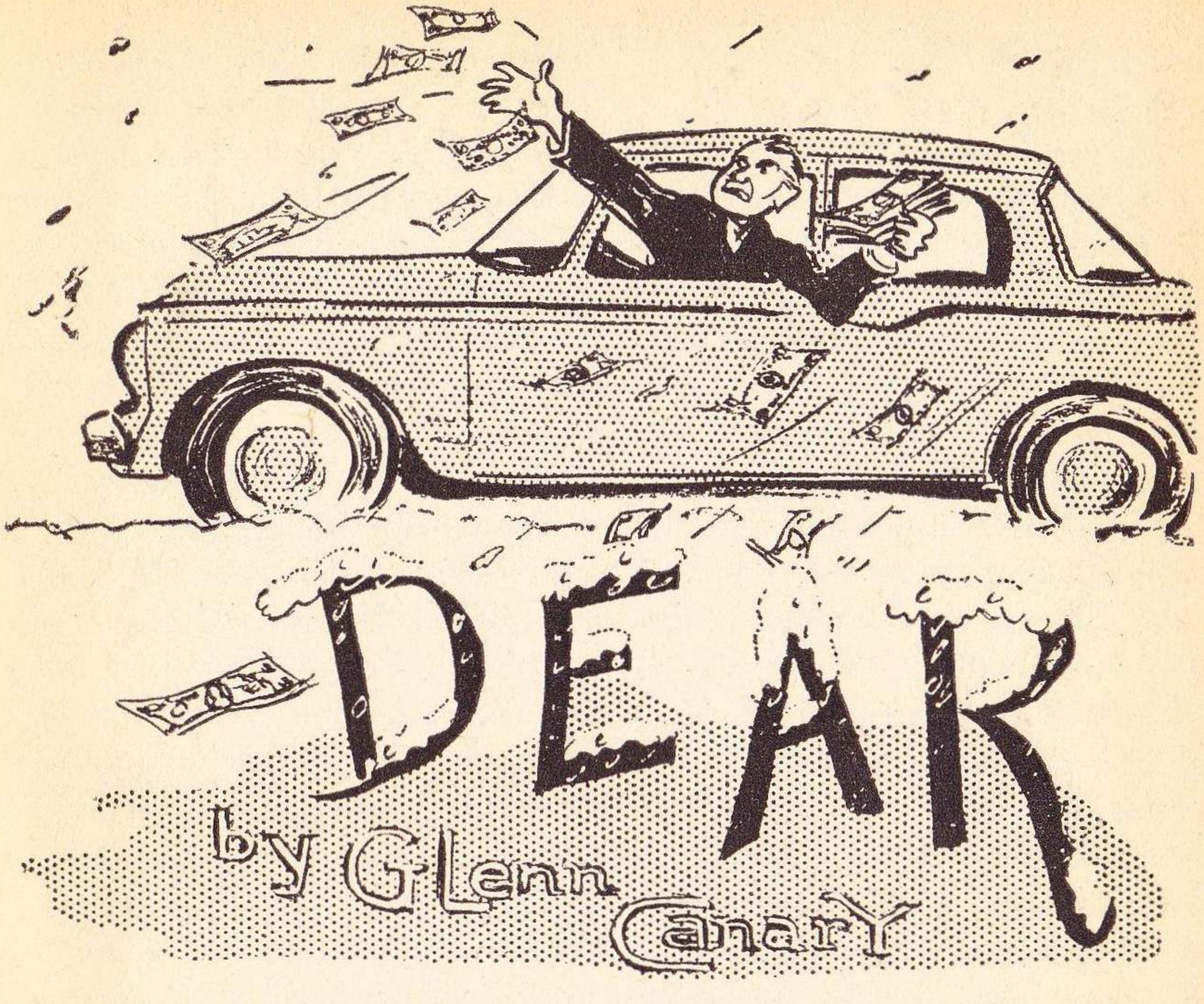
"I have some work to clear up before I leave," Sarling said.

"A man has to go home sometime, Paul. You can't work all the time."

"It doesn't matter," Sarling said. "A bachelor like me can work as late as he likes. No one's waiting for me." He laughed. "I'm just building up time for the next hangover I have."

He listened to Juraska leave the

Just as there is no closer tie than that of blood-kinship, so there is no feud more bitter than that between two brothers. Add rivalry over a woman, and you have the makings of a first-class vendetta.



office. He heard him tell Sally to be sure to lock the safe before she left. The front door slammed and Sarling heard Sally pulling down the blind over the door, hiding the legend that said, Home Loan Company.

She came into his office. "Aren't you ready to leave yet?" she asked.

"Not quite yet."

"This was a long day." She smiled at him. "Is there anything I can do to help you get finished?"

"No. I just have to finish these papers. You go on."

"I'll be glad to wait for you."

"That's not necessary. There's nothing you can do."

She went out and put on her coat and scarf and then came back and said, "You be sure the door is locked when you leave."

He knew she wanted him to ask her to wait. She was thirty and had never been married even though she was plumply pretty. He felt sorry for her somehow and any other day he would have suggested that they have a drink together. But not this day. He looked at her face, and he was coldly angry that she didn't leave.

"Go on," he said. "I won't forget to lock up."

"And the lights."

"I'll get them too."

He thought there was something sad in her face and his anger died and he was sorry that he had been curt with her. But not this day. He kept his head down, staring at the papers until he heard her go out. She passed the window and waved at him but he didn't look up.

He shivered slightly; he was depressed. He sat up straighter, hesitating, and then stood up, picking up his briefcase, and walked into the outer office.

The safe was behind a counter so that it could not be seen from the street window. He went to it and put down the briefcase and knelt beside it. When the safe swung open he sat down heavily on the floor and looked inside it for a few seconds. The money was piled neatly, bound in bundles with paper strips.

He felt calm but his hands shook a little when he started taking the money out. His briefcase was too small to hold it but he put in as much as he could and snapped it shut. He filled his pockets, too, but there was still money left in the safe. He left it there; he had enough to do what he planned.

He slammed the safe door shut and twirled the dial, relocking it, and then stood up and went back to his office. He put on his hat and coat and picked up the briefcase.

When he went out it was colder than he had expected. The snow cracked when he walked on it and the wind burned his eyes. It was already dark.

He lived on the second floor of a wooden building. There was a cigar store under him. He took a cab home. He was nervous now, excited and on edge, but he went up the stairs and into his room. He took off his outer clothing and tossed it over a chair.

Even though he knew it was too early to start, he looked at his watch and then lay down on the bed. On the dresser, across the room, was a photograph of a smiling woman in an evening dress. He looked at it and smiled. "Cindy," he said out loud, "beautiful, beautiful Cindy." He turned and lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling, and went on as if she were in the room. "This is the night, Cindy." He closed his eyes. "I can't get to you, but I can still get to him."

He shook his head as if he were laughing at himself and reached across to the night-table and turned on the radio. It came on just as a piece of recorded music

was ending. An announcer said, "You have just heard one of the hottest pieces around these days and on a night like this anything hot is welcome." He turned the radio off and looked out the window. It was still snowing. He hadn't eaten anything since lunch and he thought of getting up and going out to eat, but he was too excited to be hungry.

He looked at his watch again. Too early. But he couldn't stay in the room. He was too keyed up to simply lie there and wait. He got up and put on his hat and coat again and went out, taking the briefcase with him. His car was parked on the street and he put the case into the trunk and then drove downtown and parked and went to a movie. He used his own money to pay for his ticket. He watched a double feature selection and was able to relax. When he came out, the snow was more than ankle deep and still falling. The wind had stopped blowing, though, and it felt warmer.

He walked back to his car and stood there, watching the people who passed. A young man and woman came by, laughing; they had their arms around each other. He spoke to them.

"What did you say?" the man asked.

"I asked you to come over here."

"What for?"

"I have something for you."

The man looked suspicious. "What do you want?" he asked.

"To give you a present."

"A present?"

"Here." Sarling held out a bundle of money he had taken out of his pocket.

"What's that for?" the woman said.

"It's a present."

"No one gives money away," the man said.

"I do," Sarling said.

The man shrugged and looked at the woman. "It may be some newspaper gag or something," he said. "But I'm sure not going to be the one not to take money." He took the bundle of bills and looked at it. "How much is it?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"What's the catch?"

Sarling just shook his head and walked back to his car. He heard them call to him but he didn't look around. He started his car and drove away. When he looked in the rear-view mirror, he saw them on the sidewalk, counting the money.

The streets were slick with snow and he didn't want to drive very far. He turned off the main street so the man and woman to whom he had given the money wouldn't see where he stopped,

but then he parked and went in to the first bar he saw. He opened the trunk and took the briefcase in with him. It was warm inside the bar and crowded. A juke box was turned up loud and a Frank Sinatra record was playing. The room had a whiskey smell. He was glad of that. He didn't like bars that smelled of beer and he didn't like the people who went to them. There were only two women in the bar. Both of them had bleached hair. They gave him a sudden idea, an embellishment of his plan. He liked it and he was chuckling when he sat down on a stool. He ordered whiskey. When the bartender brought it, he slid it across the counter but held on to it and said, "That'll be sixty cents, mister."

Sarling laid the briefcase on the bar and opened it. "Take it out of one of those," he said.

The bartender let go of the whiskey and stared at the money. "Judas," he said. "Judas. That's a lot of money."

"I know it. Aren't you going to take your sixty cents?"

"Don't you know you could get into trouble showing that much money?"

"I don't think I'll have any."

The people sitting near them had seen the money. The room grew quiet in waves as men told other men what was happening. There was a moment of tension but Sarling swung around on his stool and said, "Drinks are on me. Then I have something to do."

A man down the bar broke open the silence by shouting, "What the hell, it's his money. Let's drink it up." Everyone started laughing and talking again.

Sarling sipped his drink and watched them. One of the women walked over to him and said, "What are you doing with all that loot, honey?"

"Having a good time." He smiled at her. "Would you like to have some of it?"

"Sure, sweetie, but I'm not cheap."

"I don't imagine you are."

"Where do you want to go? I have a place."

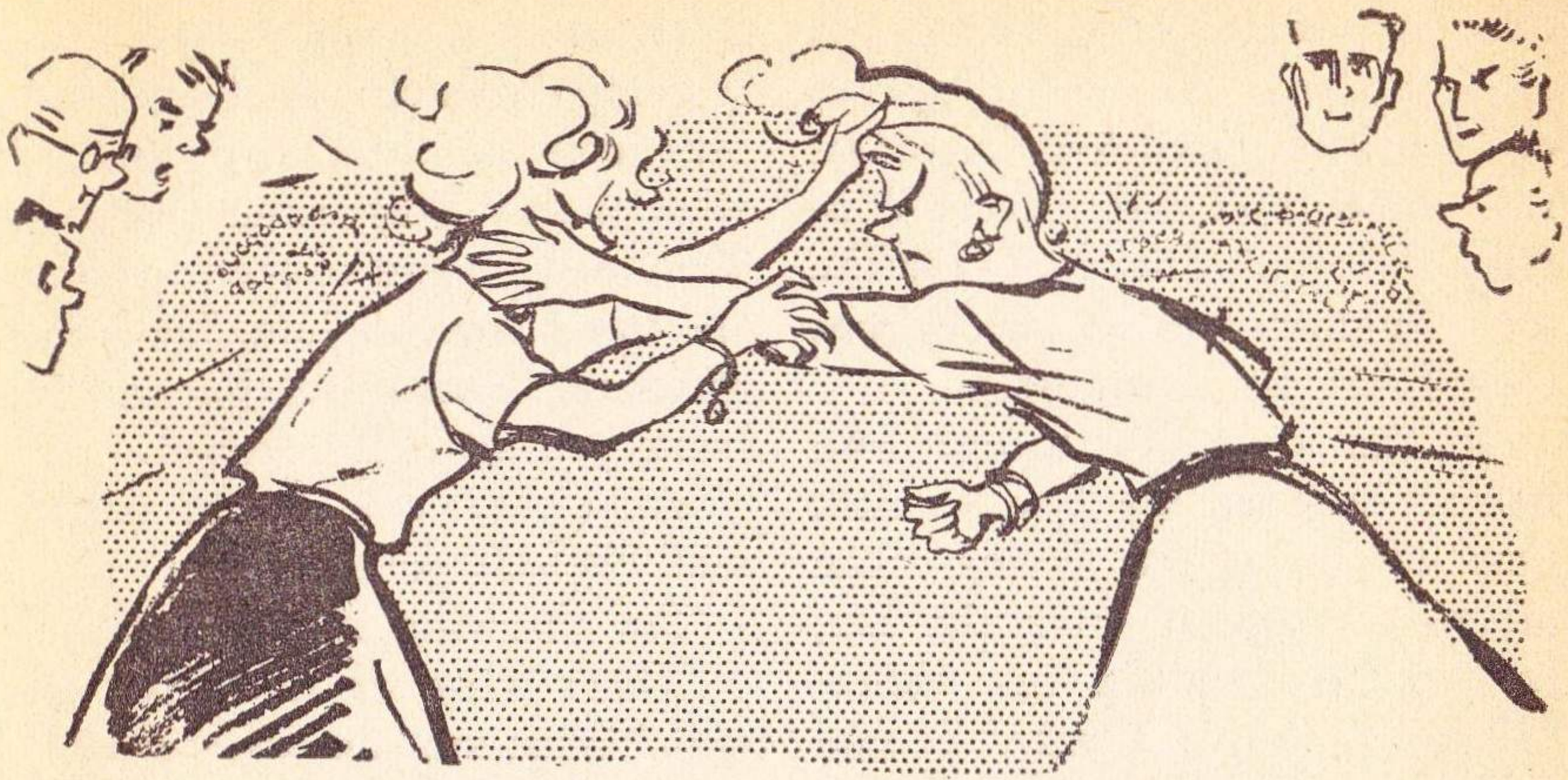
"No, not that."

The second woman saw them talking and said, "Don't do it, mister. She ain't worth fooling around with."

"Shut your mouth," the first one shouted.

The men all laughed and the bartender said, "Take it easy. I don't want no cat fights in here."

"Sure," said Sarling. "There's plenty here for both of you." He stood up and looked at them. "Listen. It's worth a thousand dollars for me to see something. Five hun-



dred each, cash in your hands."

"What?"

"I want to see which one of you two is stronger. I want you to take turns hitting each other." He grinned.

"You're nuts," one of the women said. "I don't do nothing like that."

"I will," the other one said, "for five hundred dollars."

The second woman hesitated and then nodded. "All right. I will too."

The men were gathering around them in a large circle. Sarling made the two women stand facing each other. "Now you," he said, pointing to the smaller of the two, "when I drop my arm, you slap her face. Then she'll slap you. Then you slap her again. Keep at it until I say stop."

The woman slapped the other and the men applauded. It wasn't a hard blow but it made the second woman angry and when she slapped back it was harder, a stinging slap that cracked and made the woman who was hit gasp with pain.

The juke box had stopped; there was no sound except the blows being struck. The women's hair came undone and flew wildly each time they struck. Their faces were red and one of them had a small line of blood at her lip.

The smaller woman, the one who had begun the game, started to cry.

"That's enough," Sarling said.

The men were cheering. The women panted heavily, staring at each other.

Sarling picked up the suitcase

and threw it. The money scattered out. "Split it up," he yelled and the men ran for it. He started to walk out but he stopped and looked at the women and said, "There it is. Go pick it up." They looked at the men fighting for the money but they didn't say anything.

At the door he turned and looked back at the two women. One of them was crying. The other was leaning over the bar, holding her head in her hands. "That was for you, Cindy," he said softly. "You wanted money that badly, too. You would have done what those women did."

He started his car and made a U-turn and drove back to the center of town. When he reached the square, he stopped and parked in the middle of the street and took the remaining bundles of money from his pockets and stacked them on the seat beside him.

One by one he stripped off the paper bands and threw the money out the window, letting the wind catch it. Cars stopped and people jumped out as they saw what was happening. People came running from the sidewalks. One man brought some of the money over to the car, intending to give it back, but Sarling just laughed and rolled up the window. He lit a cigarette and waited for the police.

It didn't take them long to get there. A few people were still standing around, watching him, but most of them had grabbed what money they could and run. Two men got out of the patrol car and came over to him. He rolled down the window and said, "Hi there, you all." He laughed.

"All right," one of the officers said. "What's going on?"

"I'm throwing money away."

"That's what we hear," the cop said. "What are you doing it *for*?"

"That's none of your business."

They made him get out of the car and stand with his hands in the air while they searched him. They looked at his wallet but his name didn't seem to make any impression on them. He was surprised at that.

When they were sure he didn't have a gun or anything hidden away, they asked him again, "Why are you throwing your money away?"

"It's not my money."

"Whose is it then?"

"I stole it from the Home Loan Company. I work there and I stole it tonight."

"I think he's nuts," one of the cops said.

"I'm not," Sarling said.

They put him in the squad car after one of them pulled his car out of the middle of the street and

they took him to headquarters. They put him in a small room and told him to wait there. He nodded and sat down. He thought that probably one of them was outside, watching to make sure he didn't run away, but he didn't bother to look. He lit a cigarette and leaned back in the chair. After a few minutes a different policeman came in and asked, "Are you Ralph Sarling's brother?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my God," the cop said. He went back out and slammed the door. He came back in a short while and sat down across the table from Sarling. "Your brother's on the way," he said worriedly.

"Good."

"Tell me now what it is you've done." He took out a pencil and notebook.

Sarling told him about it. He left out the part about the two women and only said that he had given the money away in a bar. The women were between him and Cindy; it wasn't important to this man.

"Why did you do it?" the cop asked when he had finished.

"That's my business."

"It might help you if we knew why you did it."

"I don't want help."

The policeman looked at him disgustedly and rubbed his hand through his hair. "Anyway," he said. "You won't mind signing this statement you just gave me."

"Sure." Sarling signed his name in the notebook.

"I don't know what to do with you," the cop said.

"Book me, of course."

"Of course," the cop said sarcastically. "Your brother will love that."

"You could call the paper. They'd love it, too."

"And your brother would undoubtedly promote me when I told him I had called the newspaper."

Sarling spat on the floor. "He's just the mayor, not God."

"Yeah. Well, I think I'll wait till God gets here before I call any paper or book anyone."

"Have you called Juraska?"

"Who's he?"

"The manager of the loan company."

"Oh, yeah. I called him all right. Had to, to find out if you're telling the truth about stealing that money."

"What did Juraska say?"

"Said he didn't believe it."

"He will."

"You're nuts," the cop said. He went out, swearing.

It was another half hour before Ralph Sarling got to the police station. A policeman started into

the room with him but he shut the door. "What's this all about?" he said.

"Didn't they tell you?"

"They told me. I want to know why."

"Can't you figure that out, brother dear? I mean Your Honor. Mr. Mayor. I'm never quite sure how I'm supposed to address your magnificence."

"Have your fun. Don't you know the trouble you're in?"

"Sure I know. That's why I did it."

Ralph Sarling sat down and slammed the table with his fist. "And election only a month away," he said.

Paul Sarling laughed at his brother. "That's right, brother. And now this. What chance do you have now of getting elected again?"

"Tell me why you did it."

"You figure it out. You were always smarter than I. You were always able to see through me. You said that once."

The policeman who had questioned Paul opened the door and said, "Mr. Mayor, Juraska just came in. The money's gone all right."

"Keep him out there. I'll be right out." He waited until the door was shut and then said, "I don't blame you for hating me, but why this way to get back at me?"

Paul lit a cigarette and dropped the match, still burning, on the floor. He didn't speak until it spluttered and went out. "When you took Cindy away from me, you took everything I had."

"She was going to leave you anyway. I didn't *take* her."

"I'd have managed to keep her somehow. We were happy together until you started butting in. But you could get her things I couldn't because you're a big man. You made a money-hungry witch out of her, Ralph. And then you killed her."

"It was an automobile accident. I didn't kill her."

"How do you think I felt, brother dear? I'll tell you. I wanted to keep her even after I knew she was having an affair with you. You probably don't understand that." He stopped, trembling, and took a drag on his cigarette. "You were always the big man at everything. Football, college. Everything. Well, I hate you for killing her. But most of all I hate you and her too for humiliating me. I think that's why I stayed with her even after I knew she was running around with you. I didn't want her any more. Not after that. But you had always had everything and you took her too. I was determined I'd get her back from you. I'd make

her want me instead of you. I'd get back my self respect by winning against you in competing for her. And then *I'd* walk out on *her*. But I never had the chance. You killed her instead and all I have to remember is the humiliation." He looked up and smiled. "There were two women in that bar tonight. I did something to them, something humiliating. In a way, that makes me even with Cindy. Now it's your turn. Try to explain away in your campaign speeches what I did tonight. People won't blame you, but they'll laugh at you. And they won't vote for you. They'll just laugh at you. See how you like it."

"You're stupid," Ralph Sarling said. "You could go to prison."

"I'm planning on it. You managed to cover up the fact that you and my wife had been to a motel the night she was killed. At least it was officially covered up, wasn't it? The fact that a few people know about it doesn't matter to you. They won't talk, they'll just laugh at me. Well, to send me to prison, they have to try me. And I'm looking forward to the trial." He stood up and looked down at his brother. "How long can I get? Five years maybe. Time off for good behavior. It's worth it to ruin you."

Ralph Sarling got up and left the room.

Paul Sarling was shaking but he felt good. He walked to the window and looked out. It was still snowing, even harder now, and he thought it was pretty. The shaking stopped and he felt calm; he hummed a tune under his breath and waited.

It was nearly an hour before his brother came back. Paul was still at the window, looking out. He turned and smiled at his brother. "Well," he said, "are they ready to book me now?"

"They're not going to book you."

"Why not?"

"I gave Juraska my check for the amount you stole and he agreed not to say anything about it. Ten thousand dollars."

"It was less than five thousand."

"I figured that. It was worth it to me."

Sarling felt sick at his stomach. "What about the statement I gave to the police?"

"It's been destroyed."

"I won't let it go," Sarling shouted.

"You can't help it. What you did tonight never happened."

"How did you do it?"

"Money. And I told Juraska you were sick."

"Crazy, you mean."

"Whatever you say. You should have figured I could buy you out of it. Ten thousand dollars isn't

much, to save my whole career."

Sarling sat down at the table and put his head on his arms. "All right," he said. "You win."

"You can leave whenever you want to."

"All right."

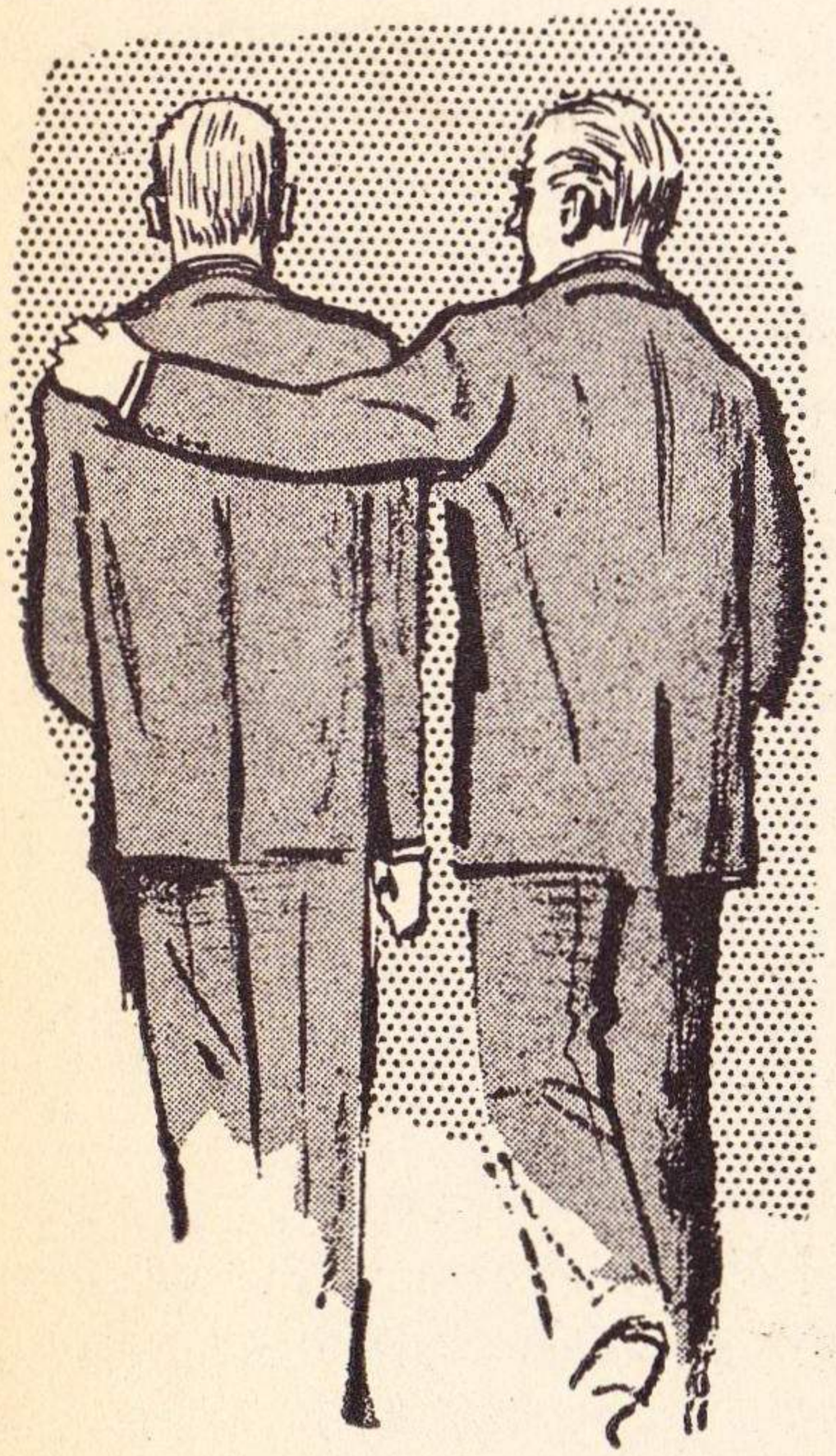
"There's no reason for this sort of thing. She wasn't worth it. Why don't we just talk it over like two grown men?"

"You've said that before." He looked up. "All right," he said. "Let's talk it over."

"You mean it?"

"Why not?"

"Well then, let's go to my house and have a drink."



"All right, Ralph. Let's go to your house and talk about it."

They went out of the station together, Ralph's arm around his shoulders. Juraska was already gone and none of the policemen looked at them. Sarling wondered whether, when he was gone, they would laugh at him or pity him.

Ralph made a fire when they reached his house and didn't turn on any lights. He said they could talk by firelight. Men talk more honestly, he said, when the lights aren't too bright. "You know," he said, sipping at his drink, "this is more sensible than hating each other."

"Did you hate me?" Sarling asked. "What did you have to hate me for?"

"Oh, I didn't hate you. But you hated me. That's what I meant. And it was for nothing."

"For nothing?"

"She would have left you anyway. And we're probably both better off with her out of the way."

"Is that your justification, that she would have left me anyway? Even if you hadn't had an affair with her? I heard a man say once that a woman he killed with his car was sick and didn't have long to live even if he hadn't hit her."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Didn't you?"

"No."

Sarling looked into the fire again. "You know," he said, "you'd have been better off if you hadn't stopped what I tried to do tonight."

"I'd have been ruined and you'd have gone to prison."

"You humiliated me again tonight."

"I saved you."

"You saved yourself." He put down his glass and stood up. He picked up the poker from beside the fireplace.

"Don't."

Sarling looked down at the poker, surprised, and put it back. "Did you think I was going to kill you?" he asked.

"No. No, of course not."

Sarling smiled. "That was fear, brother." He laughed out loud. "How much money do you have left after tonight?"

"Not much. You know that."

"I know. You know, I thought you might buy me out tonight. I hoped Juraska wouldn't let you, but I thought it might happen."

"I'm sure you did."

"What will you do tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"I'm going to rob the bank."

"You're crazy," Ralph said, jumping up. "I'll stop you."

"I don't think you can, not until after it's done. This time I think I'll spend the money on myself. It should take them a few days anyway to catch me."

"You're crazy."

"Maybe." He walked past, ready to leave. "That's the wonderful thing about the human mind, though, there are so many possibilities." He stopped at the door and turned. "Incidentally," he said, "I rather hope you get me out of this one, too. Next time I think I'd like to write a threatening letter to The President. That should bring an interesting number of Secret Service men on the run. I may even sign your name to the letter." He laughed. "You really should have kept your money, Ralph. You'll wish you had it to retire on."

As USUAL, Mrs. Grady read the morning paper with her breakfast. And again as usual, she skipped over the national and international news—it had become too vast and complex for her to understand—and read the local news on the inside pages. With morbid fascination she found the inevitable crime stories. Mayhem was flourishing with ever-increasing flagrance. She winced and cringed inwardly as she sipped her coffee and read the unblushing details of the latest brutal robbery or murder.

"It's as Oliver always said," she said aloud. Oliver was her late husband, dead these twenty years, but still orally referred to by his widow, for he had uttered many memorable things. Oliver had said once, and Mrs. Grady was remembering it now: "I tell you, Myrt, instead of civilization advancing, actually it's the opposite. The very fact that peo-

ple, in the face of scientific and intellectual progress still remain heartless brutes, means that they are going backwards." Oliver had been a subway motorman and had come into daily contact with thousands of people, so his observations meant something. According to Oliver people were becoming less patient and less understanding, more cold and selfish. He was able to document these grim theories by tales of the incidents he saw daily. Perhaps Oliver had been too sensitive a man for such a position, but his tales of mankind's thoughtless brutality had always made Myrt shudder, and she still shud-

It is difficult, if not impossible, for members of two different generations to understand one another. Even when engaged in the same profession, so to speak, standards change with the passage of time, and what is acceptable to one generation is shocking to another.

dered today as she saw in the daily newspaper reports vindicating her late husband's words.

Finishing her breakfast and folding away the paper (she was always careful to save half of it to read with her lunch), Mrs. Grady prepared to go downstairs to attend to her morning shopping. She put on her hat and coat and went out. As she was going down the hall stairs she noticed someone bent over the letter boxes. It was a youth. He was intent on what he was doing. His fingers were busily seeking entry into one of the little boxes on the wall.

Mrs. Grady froze on the steps, watching the youth: she wished she could turn invisible, she wanted that much to continue to watch. The youth's fingers were picking away at the box when he glanced around and locked eyes with the enthralled spectator. Mrs. Grady started, feeling a momentary guilt; the youth jumped back, gave Mrs. Grady an accusing stare, and then turned to run. There was a baby carriage standing near the door, and in his frantic flight he did not allow for its presence, as he ran with his head half turned. He crashed into the obstacle and fell to the floor with a bellow as the carriage rocked and giggled on its springs as if it had been tickled. He twisted on the floor, made an effort to rise but sank back with a gasp.

First alarm and then fear had swept through Mrs. Grady. Now she felt a certain cautious pity as she stared at the prostrate youth. She was uncertain what should be done. When the carriage had ceased to rock, she began a slow advance down the stairs, one hand riding the bannister, her eyes fixed on the youth.

As she passed her mailbox she glanced in. She saw there the familiar tan envelope with the cellophane window which contained her monthly check. So that was what he had been after. She looked down at him, savoring the superiority a standee feels, looking down on the fallen.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

He groaned, not from pain alone, but because this was the most absurd question.

"What is it?" she asked. "Your leg?"

He nodded, grimacing. Now he managed to sit up on his hands. He looked down at his throbbing ankle. His face revealed considerable strain. As he peered at his foot, she examined him. He was not more than twenty. His long black hair had not been cut for some time. His black leather jacket had silver buckles. It hung apart over his T-shirt. His blue jeans bound tight around his thighs. His face

changed; it reflected intense displeasure, self-directed. He looked up at Mrs. Grady.

"Now," she said, "wasn't that foolish of you. You ought to be more careful. You might have injured yourself seriously."

"All right, lady," he said. "Here I am." His voice held a sour resignation to his bitter defeat.

"Can't you move?" Mrs. Grady asked.

"No, I can't move. If I could move . . ."

"Oh dear." Mrs. Grady pinched her underlip. "It's your ankle, isn't it?"

"I fell on it," the youth said.

They regarded each other. The youth seemed expecting to hear something which he could answer. His face showed a certain churlish anticipation.

"You probably have a sprain," Mrs. Grady said. "Well, we can't leave you just lying here. Here," she said offering him her hand, "let me help you up. Easy now." The youth extended his hand and clasped hers. Throwing his weight awkwardly on his good ankle, he managed to rise. He stood with the injured ankle folded back from the floor, one hand on the wall for balance.

"You young people," Mrs. Grady said with a doleful shake of her head, her voice soft with sad pessimism, with implied foreboding. "I don't know what's to become of you."

She assisted him up the stairs. It was an agonizing journey. Finally they reached the top and the youth leaned against the wall. Mrs. Grady unlocked the door. She swung back the door and the youth limped in, setting careful weight on his injured foot. She directed him to a great cushion chair which he sank into, with a sigh. He watched his concerned hostess slide a footstool towards him. He extended his throbbing leg upon the footstool.

Mrs. Grady removed her coat.

"We'll have a look at that now," she said. She knelt and unlaced his ankle-high work shoe and very lightly slid it off. Then she peeled down his sock and gazed critically at the ankle. She made a solemn humming sound. "There's quite a swelling," she announced. "You'll have to soak it."

"Look, lady . . ." the youth began, but he was overruled.

"Now you look, young man," she said. "You have a very painful and incapacitating injury there. And I'm going to take care of it. Don't worry, I know what to do. I'll soak it for you and then bind it. After a little while you'll be able to walk on it again."

"Then what? You turn me in?"

Mrs. Grady stood up. "Turn you over to the police?" she said hesitantly. She hadn't given any thought to that yet. It was in the back of her mind, a tantalizing temptation. She was reluctant to give it recognition. "We'll talk of that later," she said. "But first we have to see to your injury. That's the most important thing." And she bustled off to the kitchen, humming to herself.

The youth's face registered puzzlement and suspicion. He looked as though he was confronted with something he had heard about, but had doubted.

He watched as Mrs. Grady heated kettles of water in the kitchen. Then she poured the hot water into a wide pan over which she then dipped a box of Epsom salts, releasing a thin stream which hissed into the water. She brought the pan in and put it down in front of him. He slid his foot from the stool and advanced it gingerly into the potion, then sprang it back.

"It's hot," he wailed.

"Oh, a grown lad like you," Mrs. Grady said reproachfully. "Now come on," she coaxed. "That's what you want. Now just put your foot in there." With a grimace the youth obeyed. "What's your name anyway?" Mrs. Grady asked.

"Tobin," the youth said sullenly.

"Well, Mr. Tobin, what were you doing downstairs at my letterbox?"

"It was obvious what I was doing."

"Trying to steal my check. That wasn't very nice."

"You shouldn't leave it there like that."

"I was just coming down for it. Here, let me take your jacket," Mrs. Grady said, rising from the chair she had taken opposite. The youth sat forward and squirmed his arms and shoulders from the jacket. Mrs. Grady took it and as she was about to hang it behind the door she felt an instrument in the pocket. Putting in her hand, she found a switch blade.

"Oh dear," she said, holding up the knife. She pressed the button and the silver blade snapped out with a sharp click and poised rigidly. Mrs. Grady shuddered as though holding a snake. "What an awful thing," she said.

"I need it," Tobin said, embarrassed. "For protection."

"For protection? From what?"

Tobin shrugged.

"That's the trouble with you young people today," Mrs. Grady said. "Switch blades, gangs, violence, brutality. Whatever goes on inside your heads, I don't know. It was never that way when I was a young person. Oh, we had our share of crime all right, but it was

never as brutal as what goes on nowadays. Thieves never carried things like that," she said showing him the knife. Unable to close it she put it down.

Tobin shrugged again. He was not impressed. To him Mrs. Grady was merely detailing progress. It seemed proper.

"I used to do housework for the Hascombs," Mrs. Grady said. "Do you know who the Hascombs are?"

"No," said the youth.

"Well, they're just some of the richest people in the world. That's who *they* are. They have a Long Island estate that's big enough for them to have their own polo field. In his later years Mr. Hascomb was a judge. He used to tell me of the young people that came before him —people like yourself, Mr. Tobin. He was shocked by the brutal nature of their crimes; but what was worse, he said, seldom did he ever see the slightest shade of remorse or any indication whatsoever that these people wanted to learn a better way of living. It was simply dreadful. Why today, may I ask, does it take eight or ten of you to rob an old man, and then why must you kick him senseless after you have his money?"

The youth shrugged again. "Everybody does it," he said.

"Have you done it?" Mrs. Grady asked. She looked at him with sad disapproval. "Shame on you," she said.

Tobin sighed. He took his thumbnail between his teeth. He had heard this kind of talk before and it bored him. But then he heard something else that caught his attention quickly.

"You want to know if I'm going to tell the police about you," Mrs. Grady said. "Suppose I don't? Lord knows I don't want to. But if I let you go how do I know I won't be subjecting some innocent person to your deviltry? How do I know that tonight or tomorrow night you won't be out preying on people?"

The youth pondered this. He looked down at his reddened foot in the water. It symbolized his helplessness.

"You young people are absolutely awful," Mrs. Grady said. "Suppose I were to take a club and beat you now, because you're sitting helpless? Would that be right? And I could have every justification, you know—you tried to steal the money I need to live on. I'm a widow, alone in the world."

"I can't help it, ma'am," Tobin said, letting his hand drop. "It's the way things are. That's how it is."

"Does that mean you have to give in to it? Didn't it ever occur to you that you might try to make it a better place?"

"These things have been going

on a long time. Some get caught, some don't."

"Of course crime is as old as the world. But what I'm saying is how terribly brutal it's become. There's really no need for it to be that way. It's senseless. When I was young, crime was different. There were a lot of gentlemen in it. It was done with more finesse, less brutality."

The youth pondered again, gnawing at his thumbnail once more. How many people had tried to reform him so far? It began in school with his teachers, then his parents, his older brother, then certain city officials. He had listened cynically and skeptically to it all. Words came easy to people. Some people uttered them so smoothly and effortlessly it seemed they did not really care, that they were speaking only because they felt it an obligation, that they were relieved when they could stop, when Tobin was removed from their presence. He had always supposed they would be shocked and disbelieving if he had promised reformation. He never did. He only listened, because he had sensed the hollowness behind their words.

"If I turn you over to the police," Mrs. Grady said gravely, "it will be very bad for you. I suppose you have a record."

"I've been mentioned," Tobin said laconically.

"Robbing the mails. It's quite a serious charge. You'd be put behind bars for a long time. How old are you?"

"Twenty."

She seemed to be stricken by this. She said it to herself. Twenty. It was a tragedy.

"But then," she said, "if I let you go, who knows what innocent person might suffer for it?"

"Perhaps no one would suffer," the youth said suddenly.

Mrs. Grady felt elated. But she dared not show it. She studied him, testing his sincerity. She tried to appear casual, lest her thoughts be revealed in her face.

"How do I know you mean that?" she asked.

"I've been in jail before," Tobin said. "I'll be honest with you. I didn't like it. I don't want to go back, ever. I suppose eventually I will go back, if I keep on like this."

"So, you do see that much," Mrs. Grady said. She felt a flicker of excitement. "Are you man enough to make a promise and hold to it?"

"Yes," the youth said.

"To promise to change your ways and lead a decent life?"

"Yes," the youth said. "You're right. I know you're right. It's never been put to me this way before. I feel you really mean it, that it means something to you to have me go straight."

"It does," Mrs. Grady said. "I can't bear the thought of you going around hitting people over the head."

"I'll be honest with you—it won't be easy."

"But you will try?"

Change your ways, Tobin, old boy, the youth thought. Find the right path and adhere to it. The new life. It amused him, in a sardonic way.

"Yes," he said. "I'll try."

Mrs. Grady didn't know what to do. Her mind devoted itself completely to the problem. It became extraordinarily complex. She saw the whole world involved. It was as though she were to make a judgment of universal proportions. She began to wonder if fate wasn't taking unfair advantage of her, considering the magnitude of this dilemma; but then she realized that a duty had fallen upon her and that she would have to make a decision.

She frowned like a magistrate. She did not want to send this youth to jail. His destiny was now in her hands. This great power made her feel humble. Then she thought: What would Oliver do? Oliver had been a very stern man. But he also had his compassionate side. He had often announced that men did not have sufficient understanding for each other. She looked up at where Oliver was frowning from the wall in a tarnished gold frame. But his expression never changed. The problem remained with Mrs. Grady.

She had the youth's promise. Suppose it was a genuine promise? Suppose she sent him to jail at the very moment he was seeking to redeem himself? If this happened, then such an action on her part would be unforgivable.

The youth spoke. "Are you going to turn me over to the cops?" he asked.

The question flustered Mrs. Grady. It pushed her forward to her decision before it had quite matured in her mind.

Mrs. Grady knew quite well that some people became helplessly caught up in a life of crime. She also knew that some found such a life irresistible.

"Do you realize what you're promising?" she said.

"Of course."

"You're promising to change your way of life. Perhaps it might be asking too much of you."

Tobin looked at her dubiously.

"At least promise me you'll stop hitting people over the heads, and stop carrying those awful knives and guns," she said.

"Why sure," the youth said.

Mrs. Grady clasped her hands. She was immensely pleased.

"You'll be doing yourself a great service," she said. "Oh, dear, I must sound like some old lady preacher or something. Has the water cooled? Here, I'll heat some more. You just sit there and relax. You're going to be all right now. I can just see that you're going to be all right." She took the pan away.

Tobin watched her. When she had gone into the kitchen, he braced his arms and pushed himself forward, up from the great chair. He kicked away the footstool and carefully got to his feet. He let gradual weight shift to the injured foot. To his immense delight he could stand on it with a minimum of pain. He took a few steps and pronounced himself healed. Quickly then he put on his sock and shoe, lacing the shoe with lightning fingers. He straightened up, and his eyes began to fly about the room. Spotting a bureau he went to it and opened the top drawer. A flat tin box lay in one corner. He opened it and a wave of excitement swept over him as he saw jewelry resting regally on some fluffy cotton. He lifted a sparkling bracelet and let it dangle before his greedily appreciative eyes. He dropped it into his pocket. Then he took up the rest of the jewelry.

When he turned around he saw Mrs. Grady standing in the doorway watching him, the pan of water held before her. Her face was filled with dismay. For a moment he felt ashamed; but that soon melted.

"All right, mom," Tobin said. He moved toward her. He had a slight limp, but that was a minor impediment now with the jewelry burning in his pocket like a torch. He picked up the open switch blade. "I don't want to hurt you, mom," he said. The knife lay loose in his hand, the light glancing off the blade.

Mrs. Grady's eyes filled with reproach. "Why must you carry that horrible weapon?" she demanded. "Why don't you throw it away?"

"I'm getting out of here," the youth said. "I want to leave quietly. I want you to keep your mouth shut until I'm gone. You gave me a break and now I'm giving you one. If you say a word to the cops about me I'll come back and get you." With this ugly threat on his lips he backed toward the door. They stared at each other with the intensity of duelists, Mrs. Grady still with the pan of water held up before her like an offering. Then he was gone. She heard him running down the stairs.

Mrs. Grady gasped and put down the pan of water and rushed to the bureau. She knew what she would find. She looked into the gaping top drawer, into the empty

tin box, at the cotton cushion where the jewelry had rested. She clasped her hands.

"Oh," she said aloud. "Oh, *damn* him."

Tobin stepped out into the glaring sun. He looked up at the old woman's windows. He expected to hear a scream at any moment. So he ran. He ran one block and turned a corner, running with a perceptible limp. This grotesque appearance—a man running with a limp suggested the darkest of devious behavior—attracted the attention of two policemen in a squad car. They set after him immediately. They jerked to the curb just ahead of him and leaped out of wide-flung doors. Tobin gasped. Then he cursed to himself.

Shortly after, he was sitting in the police station, a figure of dejection.

"We found this on him," said one officer, dropping the switch blade onto his superior's desk. And now the officer said something that he had evidently been preparing as a great presentation, for he said it as though introducing a royal person. "And these." Following this pronouncement he laid on the desk before his startled superior a handful of splendid jewelry.

The superior officer almost leaped.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he whispered.

"It checks out," said the officer who had presented the jewelry, smiling like the father of twins. "Some of it's the Hascomb stuff. And the rest looks like it's from some of the other Long Island jobs."

The youth heard and whirled, first to his right and then to his left. All he could say was:

"Listen, I didn't pull those jobs!"

But all he heard were voices that sounded deceptively paternal, but which he knew were warming up for sterner things:

"Sure, kid. Sure. It's a tough break. Tell us all about it, now."

TONY DOMPINO loved his wife. If you would have told Tony that someday he would kill her, he'd have said, "Go away, you crazy fathead before I swat you one. You got a nerve, passing a remark like that. I'd kill myself sooner than I would Aggie."

But look what happened.

Clancy's Machine and Tool Works said no overtime one evening, so Tony got home earlier than usual. When he opened the door of his Brooklyn apartment, he heard a sound he couldn't believe.

It was a sound like an angel had busted loose all over the place.

He closed the door quietly behind him and listened.

It was a sound that was like pure crystal. It was a sound that when you heard it you didn't need nothing, just that sound. It had it all. It made you understand. It gave you joy, it gave you sadness. It put you into a dream. It peeled away the world. It was a sound that once heard you had to keep hearing. It was a sound that was singing.

Tony walked through the apartment and in the bedroom was his wife, Agnes, and she was making the sound.

When Tony came in she shut up quick.

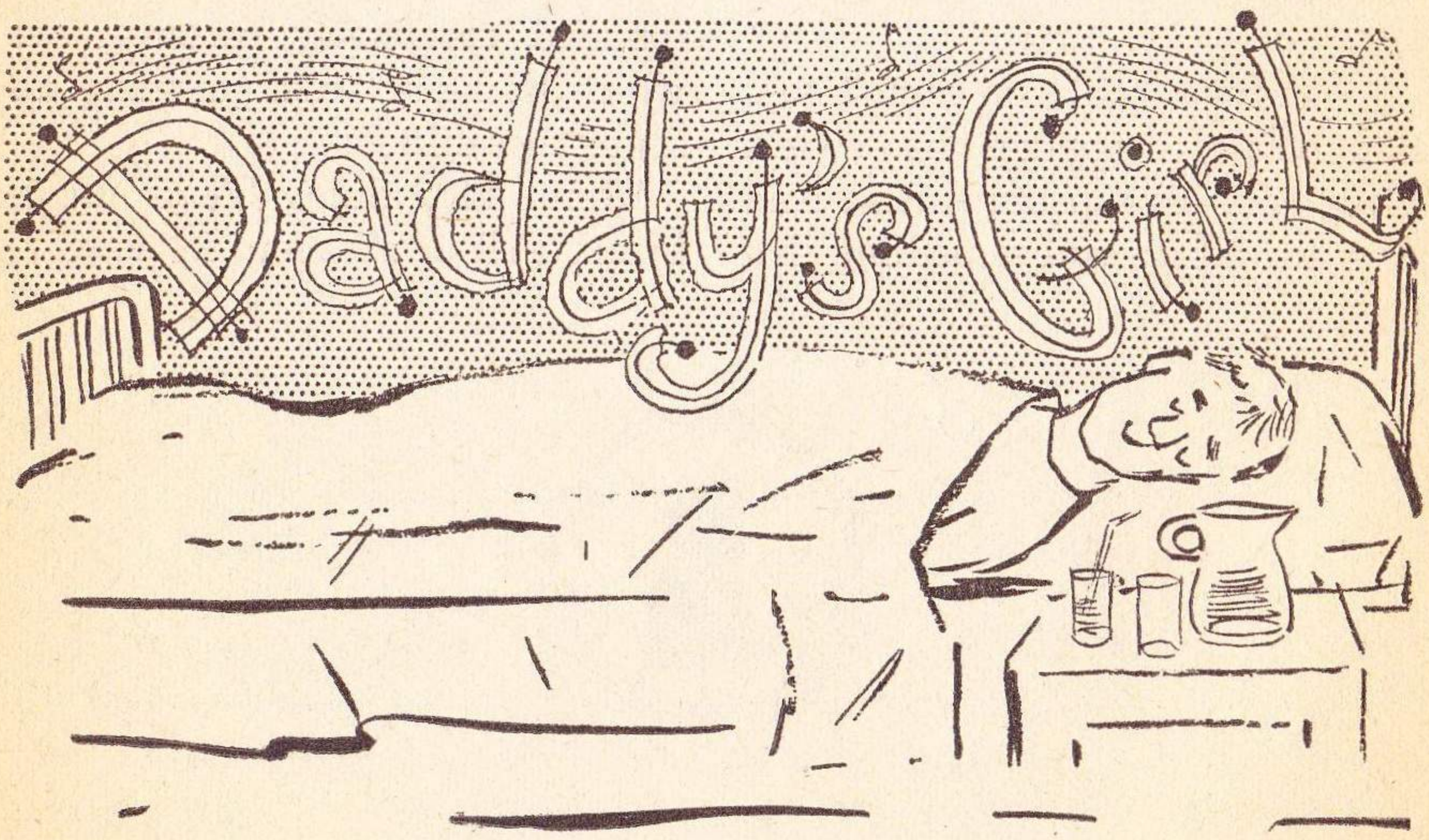
"Aggie, I didn't know you could sing like that," Tony said.

"Oh, that was nothin'," Aggie said.

"Nothin'? Whaddaya mean nothin'?"

"Nothin'."

"Don't give me that," Tony said. "I listen to opera. We got hi-fi. Radio. Television. I go to the movies.



Saints and sinners alike, have heard voices which were inaudible to the average ear. A shattering experience, you will agree, unless your ears are especially attuned to melodies unheard.

I never heard nothin' that good. Let's hear some more."

"No."

"Whaddaya mean, no?"

"I don't sing for nobody."

"Well, I'm your husband, ain't I? You'll sing for me."

"No."

Tony looked at Aggie. He'd known her ten years. He realized that in all that time he'd never heard her sing. Not once. How come she'd been holding out on him? Here was a thing he never knew about Aggie. Maybe there were other things he didn't know about Aggie. He'd thought they were, like they said, one. Maybe Aggie didn't figure it that way. A pain twisted inside Tony.

"O.K.," Tony yelled. "Don't sing. Who needs your stupid singing? Who needs it?"

Tony went into the bathroom and took off his shirt and undershirt and began to wash. His hands were shaking, he was that bothered. He wanted to hear that singing again. And Aggie wouldn't do that little thing for him.

Tony went out to get a fresh undershirt and there was Aggie, her eyes soft and sorry. She put her arms around Tony. Tony was hairy. He had hair all over his arms and chest and belly and shoulders. He was big and barrel chested. Aggie liked all this. She said he was a real man. Aggie put her arms around him and ran her fingers through the hair on his back and said, "Tony, don't be mad."

"Who's mad?" Tony yelled.

"Please don't be mad. I can't ever sing for you or nobody else. Don't ask me. But don't be mad at me."

"Why can't you?"

"I can't."

"You mean you just sing to yourself?"

"Don't ask me."

"O.K.," grumbled Tony. We'll see, he thought.

A new thing had moved into his head. That sound. Even at work he kept hearing his wife's singing. Low and haunting. A thing that ought to be heard again. A pure thing that should be his like Aggie should be his. That meant peace and delight. Why should Aggie hold out on him?

He asked her again, several times, figuring he might get her in the right mood. She wouldn't sing.

One night, Tony took her out, dinner, a show, three different night spots. When they got home they were plastered, but Tony didn't forget what he was after. He opened a bottle and gave Aggie another drink. He put her next to him on the sofa and began singing Home on the Range. He sang the whole thing himself. Aggie didn't sing a note. He sang three more cowboy songs, coaxing Aggie to join in, but she wouldn't. Tony gave her another drink and sang La Donna E Mobile, and that didn't do any good. Tony sang O Sole Mio. He sang Smoke Gets In Your Eyes. Aggie went teary and sentimental and he said, come on, come on, but she wouldn't sing. Then Tony started on Annie Laurie and somebody yelled out the window, "Cut out that racket you lousy drunks and let a guy get some sleep around here damn it," so Tony said, "the hell with it" and fell on the rug and began to snore and Aggie fell on top of him.

Another time, there was a party and the bunch was around the piano, singing, and Tony yelled, "Quiet! You want to hear singing that is singing, listen to the wife. Tell the man what to play, honey."

"Tony, how could you," Aggie said and got her coat and started home, and he had to chase after her like an idiot.

But Tony didn't give up. He needed to hear that angel sound like he needed his right arm.

There was a guy in the shop, had a smart head. Tony told him about the whole thing, and the guy said, The trouble is obviously Mental.

"Mental, huh?" said Tony.

"Obviously," the guy said. "Obviously, she got a Block."

"A Block, huh?"

"Obviously. Somepin' must have happen to her, give her this Block about singing in front of people."

"So what do I do?"

"Take her to a head shrinker."

"A head shrinker. Hey, you trying to tell me the wife is crazy?"

"Who said that? All I'm saying is that she's got this one Block. One stinkin' Block don't mean she's crazy."

"Well, O.K.," Tony said.

Tony made an appointment with a head shrinker. The evening of the appointment he put on his hat and coat and said, "Come on, Aggie, we're going out."

"O.K.," Aggie said, jumping up. "Where we going?"

"We're going to see a head shrinker and don't give me no trouble about it."

"What for?" said Aggie, backing away.

"To get rid of this Block you got about singing."

"Oh, so that's it. You go if you want to. I'm staying.

"Now don't you want to be helped, Aggie?"

"I don't want no help. I don't want to be bothered about this no more. Leave me alone, will you?"

So they had a fight, and Tony slapped Aggie down, and then he was sorry, and they finally made it up, but Aggie didn't get to see the head shrinker.

Tony went over to Bensonhurst to see Aggie's brother, Phil, who lived there in an apartment with a wife and three kids.

"Sure," Phil said, "I heard her sing."

"Why won't she sing for me?"

"She stopped singing when she was about sixteen."

"Why?"

"She never told me. But it was after Pop died."

"You think that had somepin' to do with it?"

"I think so. Mom thinks so. Why don't you go see her?"

Tony didn't like Aggie's Mom. Aggie's Mom didn't like Tony. But he went to see her in her Bronx apartment.

"She was very attached to her Daddy," Aggie's Mom said. "When she sang, it was for him. When he died, she wouldn't sing for nobody else, not even me."

"That don't make sense," Tony said. "What good did that do?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't talk about it."

"Well, I'm her husband. She'll sing for me."

"Don't make me laugh. She wouldn't sing for her own Ma, why would she sing for a bum like you?"

Tony went home and said to Aggie, "So you stopped singing on account of your Daddy dying."

Aggie looked at Tony and said, "So you found out."

"You still mourning or somepin'?" Tony asked.

"No, I ain't still mourning."

"So why don't you sing?"

"I only sang for my Daddy."

"Can't you sing for your husband?"

"No."

"Ain't a husband as good as a Daddy?"

"A husband is different than a Daddy."

"Well, some ways, ain't a husband better than a Daddy?"

"Some ways, maybe. But some ways a Daddy is better."

"What ways?" Tony yelled. "What ways is a Daddy better?"

"Never mind."

"I had a Daddy too," Tony yelled. "You think I never had no Daddy? I didn't develop no Block when my Daddy died."

"You didn't have my Daddy."

"Oh, nuts."

"You don't know nothin' about it," Aggie said, beginning to look mad. "I was little and Daddy was big. No husband could seem that big to his wife. I was weak and Daddy was strong. No husband could seem that strong. Daddy loved me with a big strong love. A husband loves you, he wants something back. Daddy didn't want anything back. Daddy fixed all my troubles. Plenty times, a husband just gives trouble. When I was with Daddy I was in the warmest safest place in the world. I wanted to give Daddy something and what did I have that was good but my singing? I gave it all to him and I got none of it left now for nobody else."

Tony's mouth opened and closed a few times. He said, "Well, O.K., O.K." He went into the kitchen and opened a quart bottle of beer.

He didn't say anymore about it afterwards. He just kept figuring how to break Aggie loose from her Block. Because he couldn't let go. Because Aggie's sweet singing was still in his head, faint and vague, and he wanted to hear it clear and real and just for him, and if he couldn't he'd always feel an emptiness.

But you got to keep your mind on your work at Clancy's Machine and Tool. Every machine is a killer if you let it get at you. One day, a machine got Tony.

It didn't kill him, but for a long time all he knew was pain, and then he knew a little more, and then he woke up and he saw that he was in a private room in a hospital and that Aggie was sitting next to his bed. Tony knew that he couldn't afford a private room. Once, a buddy of his started to die in a hospital and they put him in a private room even though he couldn't pay for it and he died there without any extra charge. Tony figured this was the same deal.

"Aggie," he said, "am I dying?"

"Of course not, you big ape," Aggie said, her eyes red and teary.

Tony figured it looked bad, but he was so weak that he didn't much care. He closed his eyes. He heard Aggie say, like from far away, "Tony, my darling, you want I should sing for you?"

Tony didn't answer but he gave a little smile.

Aggie started to sing.

It was like a wave, lifting him up, soft and sweet and strong so that the pain and everything else slipped away. Tony knew that only one thing was beautiful and it was this, and though the sky might be beautiful with all the millions of stars twinkling from the furry black, it was only this; and that though Heaven might be beautiful, Heaven was this; and that though a cold glass of beer might be beautiful and the shape of a girl beautiful, they were this; and that though the straight true rush of a bowling ball to a strike, and the thudding hoofs of a champion horse might be beautiful, they were still this, because this was all beauty, all of it wrapped up. Tony wanted to die right then, so he could die happy.

But Tony didn't die. He made it. A few weeks later, he was limping about the house, on the mend. The doctor said that soon he would be as good as new.

He was happy. Aggie had sung for him. She would again, he was sure. The Block was busted, Tony figured.

He needed her singing, now worse than ever because he'd had it for himself and the memory of it was teasing and demanding. He wanted to be hearing her sing forever, as long as they were both alive. Since his accident, it seemed somehow that her voice was firmer in his head, adhesive, like a silken band around his brain. It promished the beauty of reality. It softly veiled off other sound and thought, never completely leaving him.

When Aggie started singing to him, Tony thought, he wouldn't need this memory anymore.

But Aggie didn't sing.

At last, Tony asked her if she would.

"No," she said.

"Whaddaya mean, no?"

"Like I said, no. I don't sing for nobody."

"But you sung for me."

"That was different.".

"Because you thought I was dying?" Tony yelled. "Do I got to be dying to get a song out of you?"

"That wasn't the reason I sung to you."

"What was the reason?"

"Never mind."

"Cut it out," Tony yelled. "You sing, all right. You sung to me once. You sing when you're alone. What's it all about?"

"When I'm alone I sing to my Daddy."

"That's what I figured. Do you talk to him too?"

"Sure I talk to him."

"Does he answer you back?"

"Sure he answers me back."

"What does he say?"

"Never mind."

"Never mind, never mind," Tony said. "O.K., so how come you sang to me?"

"My Daddy told me to."

"I see."

"Yes. He told me, 'I think the poor slob is going to kick the bucket, Aggie. Give the poor slob a song, Aggie.' So I did."

"I see." Tony looked at her. "Why are you smiling?"

"I ain't smiling."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Would I kid you, dear?"

"Are you kidding me so I won't bother you no more about singing? Or do you really believe your Daddy talks to you?"

"Forget it," Aggie said.

"So you won't sing for me?"

"Not unless my Daddy tells me to."

"Who needs your stupid singing?" Tony yelled and walked away. He sat down in a chair and stared out the window. And her voice was in his head.

It was there, a sweet strong wave, holding all beauty, holding the sky and the stars and a cold glass of beer and the shape of a girl and the rush of a bowling ball and the thudding hoofs of a great-hearted horse and everything else that was beautiful. And it was not for him and never had been.

It was only for that stinking ghost of a Daddy.

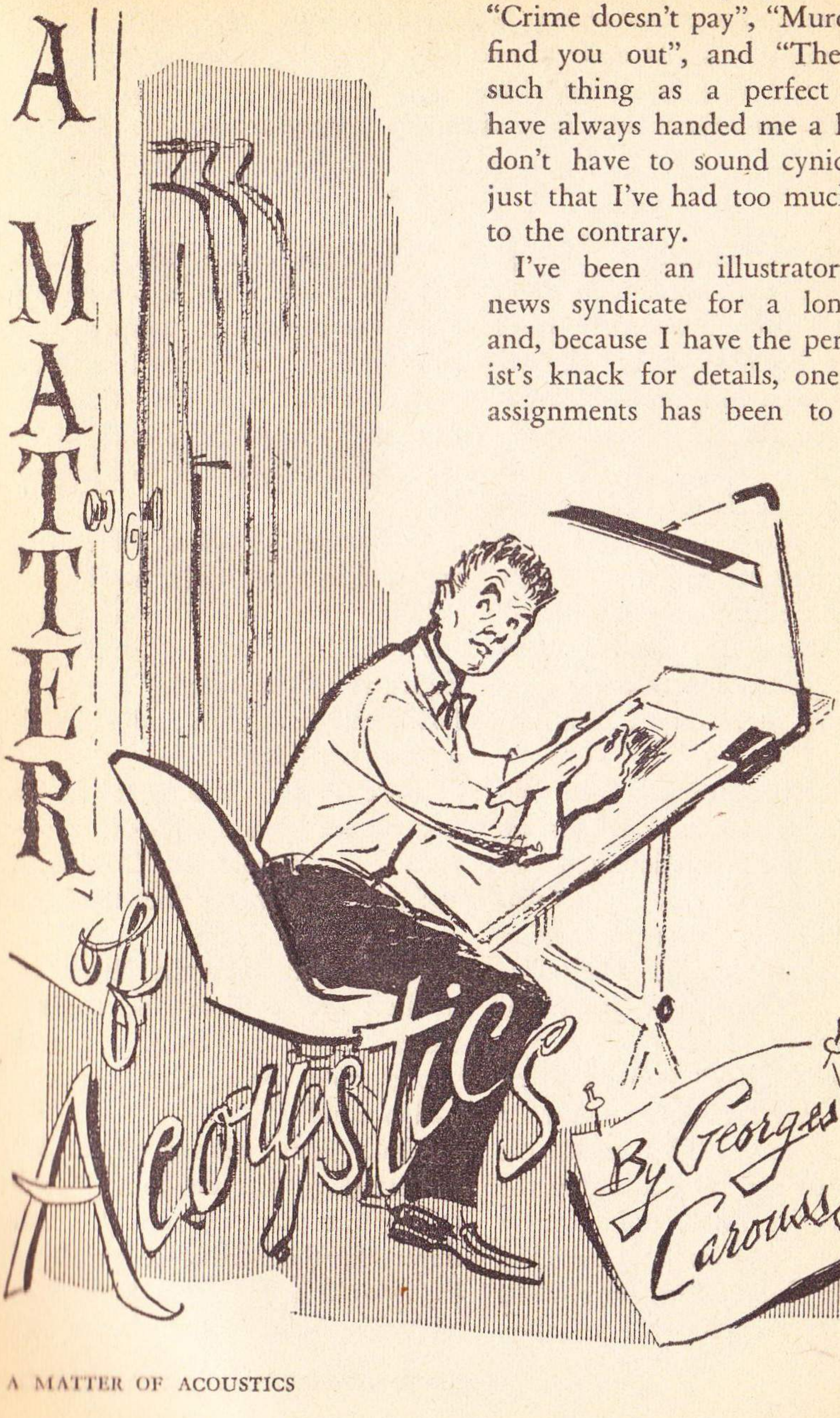
And all he had was a teasing voice in his head.

A few days later, Tony killed his wife.

"It wasn't just on account of she wouldn't sing to me," Tony told the police. "It was that she needed to be with her Daddy."

The police couldn't make much sense out of what Tony was telling them.

A Matter of Acoustics



THOSE old saws people use about "Crime doesn't pay", "Murder will find you out", and "There's no such thing as a perfect crime", have always handed me a laugh. I don't have to sound cynical; it's just that I've had too much proof to the contrary.

I've been an illustrator for a news syndicate for a long time and, because I have the perfectionist's knack for details, one of my assignments has been to sketch

Walls have ears is an old saying, familiar long before the modern inventions of wired walls, or furniture, or tapped telephone wires; in fact, long before telephones were invented. It is true in this tale, otherwise modern in its circumstances and setting.

courtroom scenes where photographers aren't allowed. You don't have to sit through too many cases before it becomes quite obvious that crime is a darn profitable business. About the only reasons why murders are solved are, because somebody squeals on the murderer, the murderer squeals on himself—psychiatrists call that "a subconscious desire for punishment" —or the murderer takes so many elaborate precautions to cover himself up, that he leaves a trail a mile wide.

The perfect crime has to be simple; no fancy murder methods, no complex alibis, no obvious motives. Like the murder of Sam Berringer. That was about as perfect as murder can ever be. The police still don't realize how perfect it really was.

Somebody killed Sam by firing one shot into his heart from a .25 caliber automatic. That much the police could tell by examining the body and the small, but effective bullet. The rest was a complete blank. No fingerprints, no obvious motive, no suspect with an alibi. When the police finally admitted that it was a perfect crime, my syndicate decided to wrap up the story by doing a Sunday feature on perfect crimes, including this one. My editor called me in and handed me the assignment to illustrate it.

"Why me?" I asked. "I'm over my ears in work right now."

"You lived in the same apartment building as the Berringers, didn't you?" he asked. "You must have seen both him and his wife around the place."

"Sure. Passed them in the hall a few times. Always nodded. We're real polite people in Greenwich Village. But I never met them socially."

"You never met the characters in the other perfect crimes socially either," he said. "So that makes you eligible. Now, the layout I had in mind . . ."

That's how editors think. Of course, there was no point in my telling him that even though I had never met the Berringers socially, I knew quite a bit about both Sam and his wife, Elise. Knowing

about them was due to an acoustical freak in the construction of the reconverted apartment. It was one of those old buildings that had been ripped apart and modernized, and when it was, something happened to the acoustics in the place. You probably know about the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, and how the acoustics are so perfect you can hear a pin drop way off in the distance? Well, by some construction quirk, the acoustics in my apartment worked the same way. Not through the whole flat. Just in one closet. From that closet, I could hear perfectly everything that went on in the apartment on the floor above me and diagonally across the hall. The Berringers lived there. In fact, they had moved from my flat to the bigger one above just before I rented my place.

I found out about the acoustics of that closet by accident. I was stowing away some of the real arty canvases I had painted before I turned commercial, when I heard the woman upstairs singing. Her husky voice came to me as clearly as if she was in that dark closet with me. It was a weird, intimate sensation.

I did a lot of special assignment work, and worked home most of the time, and I found that if I put my drafting table in a certain spot and sat with my back to the open closet, I could hear every word that passed between the Berringers as clearly as if they were in the room with me. Call it eavesdropping, if you wish, but I was lonesome. Having voices in the room with me while I worked made the place feel less empty. Naturally, I never mentioned it to anyone or complained about it to the management.

By that acoustical freak, you might say that I knew the Berringers better than any one else in New York. They were from Texas, and they had made no friends, which was no surprise. Sam Berringer was a stinker.

He was one of those thin, blond, spoiled guys, with a surly mouth that made him look pretty instead of handsome. Apparently his family was rolling in oil and he was an only son. But his old man had kicked him out of the plush-lined nest so he could prove whether or not he was man enough to stand on his own two feet, and eventually manage the family fortune. Sam met the challenge by marrying Elise and letting her support him. Somewhere along the line, he also conceived the idea that he was a poet, and that someday, when inspiration knocked at his door, he would write a great epic.

All this came out little by little,

when Sam had too much bourbon, or just naturally felt sorry for himself, and raved and ranted about his cruel, cruel fate.

Elise was as uncomplaining and quiet as he was whining and noisy. She was a beautiful creature, with large, luminous, dark eyes, and a pale, ethereal complexion. I could see how a "poet" would go for her, and think of her in terms of "cool zephyrs", "diaphanous gossamer", and junk like that. For all her seeming coolness, there was something about her that suggested deep-smouldering embers; embers that would blaze to white fire if the right breeze—meaning, the right person—caressed them. I think what first gave me that impression was the way she moved; with the sinuous grace of a cat.

Naturally, we nodded when we met in the hall, and a few times we exchanged such inane remarks as:

"Hot, isn't it?"

"Terribly. But I like the heat."

No. That isn't quite accurate. We did speak once. It was after I had been in my apartment about two weeks. She knocked at my door and when I opened it, she said, "I'm Mrs. Berringer from the floor above. We had this flat for a few months, and I thought I'd tell you that the defrost button on the refrigerator doesn't work. The only way to defrost, is leave the door open a bit, and keep emptying the drip tray."

It was a lame excuse for knocking at my door, but when I asked her to come in, she refused. Yet, before she left, her eyes passed quickly over the room and I noticed them flicker when she saw the open closet door behind my drafting table. In spite of the sketches lying around, she didn't even make the usual comment, "Oh, I see you're an artist." As if she didn't care, or, as if she already knew. She just glanced around the room and walked out. But that flicker of her eyes was unmistakable. She knew the secret of that closet.

I became positive of it as I listened to the conversations above me in the evenings that followed. She was no longer talking only to Sam. Her voice would change just a trifle and she would be talking to me, drawing Sam out for my benefit. It was then that I found out about Sam and his wealthy parents. It was then that I found that since he didn't have his father to support him and his mother to coddle him, he had married Elise to do those things for him.

It burned me up that a girl like her should be willing to stick to a pale worm like Sam and support him while he sat around looking at ball games on TV, drinking bour-

bon and waiting for inspiration. I had the feeling that Elise was trying to tell me the reason why she stuck to him through the choice of words in her conversation. A few times I thought I had it, but I couldn't be certain.

"You'll write your epic," she said one night. "I know you will. You're the greatest living poet. You'll write it, and then you'll be a success and we'll both be able to go back to your home."

"How can I work, being cooped up in this lousy dump?" he accused her as if it wasn't she who was paying the rent. "I had servants all my life . . . a big house . . . comfort . . . trees outside my window. Trees . . . That's it! That's what I need; trees. We could have trees if we could get a house in Westchester. Isn't it time they gave you a promotion at the bank?"

"I'm a secretary," she said. "Not an executive."

"If there's no future at the bank, why don't you find something else? You're capable of bigger things."

"I'll try, dear," she said lightly. Then her voice took that odd tone she used when she was talking also to me. "Even *you* might be surprised at the things I'm capable of."

She came in a few nights later all excited.

"I've been offered a job as an assistant buyer with a department store," she told him. "It'll mean some travel, but you could manage alone and . . ."

"No!" he shouted. "I know all about buyers and salesmen on the road. Drinking and carousing around and raising hell, and . . ."

"I don't drink and I don't carouse," she said and there was such repressed white fire in her voice that I put down my pencil and pushed my stool back nearer to the closet. "Sometimes I wish I did. Believe me, if I found the right man . . ."

I heard him laugh uncertainly, frightened by her anger.

"Now you're talking silly," he said. "You're not the type."

Brother! How little you know! I wanted to say. *You just give me a week with your beautiful, smouldering Elise . . .*

Thinking of the cat-grace of her body, I missed a good bit of what followed upstairs. When I became conscious of their voices again, Sam had started feeling damn sorry for himself and his voice was filled with tears. Elise said, "Poor Sam. Poor baby. Everything will be all right. Everything." Her voice was soft and warm. Like a purr. I slammed my pencil down and went out for a drink.

But that incident affected both

Sam and me. I kept thinking, *"A week with smouldering Elise . . ."* and Sam got to brooding about Elise "carousing around" as he called it.

He went into jealous tantrums. From that day on, she couldn't be five minutes late coming home from work, without Sam putting her through a third degree. Where did she have lunch? With whom? Did anyone try to pick her up on the bus?

He even accused her of flirting with Mr. Tenelli, the grocery man, who had a fat wife and nine kids.

When she got tired of listening to his tirades, Elise would walk out, and go and sit on the front stoop and smoke a cigarette. I made a point of meeting her in the hall a few times when she was coming down, but she just nodded and walked by. Well, no. Not quite. Always, her eyes clung to mine for an infinitesimal fraction of a second too long.

One night, she told him that she was going out to mail a letter to his folks, and he stopped her.

"What are you writing to them all the time?" he wanted to know.

"I just write to tell them how wonderful you are," she said.

But he forced her to give him the letter and he tore it open—I could actually hear the paper tearing, with those fantastic acoustics —and he read it out loud. And sure enough, it was a letter telling his parents how wonderful he was, and for them not to worry because she loved their son so much and was trying to take such good care of him.

"Hm . . ." he said. "I guess it's all right. I'm sorry . . ."

He sounded pleased; as pleased as a child that has been patted on the head. But I felt shivers running up and down my spine and was goose-flesh all over. The letter told how wonderful he was, all right, but there was something in its wording, in its careful exaggeration, that reminded me of only one thing. An obituary.

Then, one night, they had an argument, and he slapped her. I don't remember what the argument was about. To hear that slap, and her startled cry, seemed to make my mind go suddenly blank.

"I could kill you," she said softly. Then, as if she found the wording inadequate, she repeated even more softly, "If I were a *man,* I *would* kill you."

I listened for a few moments, but there was no other sound from upstairs and I snapped off my light and went out.

I met Elise coming down the stairs. She turned her face, as if to hide the red mark on her cheek from me, and passed by me.

I caught up with her in the hall.

"You look like you need a drink," I said.

She turned and looked at me, and the smouldering glow of her anger seemed to make her eyes even more luminous.

"I just might," she said. "I just might."

Then a veil seemed to cover the glow and the anger and she glanced up the stairs and smiled. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile. She had small teeth. So small, that in that dim light, they seemed almost as if they were pointed.

"But, really, no," she said. "I'll just sit out on the stoop for a while."

"Some other time?"

She looked at me for that fraction of a second too long, that fraction of time that is the most important in all eternity, and I felt something inside of me tremble.

"Of course," she said softly.

She came to me that night. I'm quite sure of it. I know it sounds ridiculous to have doubts about a thing like that, and yet, there are times when I do. I'm sure you'll understand. Didn't you ever have a dream so real that you were certain it was reality . . . or experience moments of reality so unreal that you were certain they were part of a dream? It was like that with me.

I think the reason for it was the darkness. The utter and complete darkness.

The sound of the key in the lock woke me. I remember that I was not surprised, as if I had been lying half-awake, expecting it. With that thin metallic sound, complete and instantaneous awareness flowed through me. I felt things in a flash so rapid that there was no time nor need to think in words. I knew that it was Elise . . . that she had kept the key to my apartment . . . that she was using it . . . that each night, for many nights, I had lain half-awake waiting for her to use it.

It was dark in my room. I turned over on my side and reached for the lamp. A voice whispered.

"Please . . . no light . . ." A whisper is not a voice. It has no identity. It is nothing.

My room faces an alley and a blank wall. It was dark. More than

dark. I did not know whether my eyes were open or shut. I listened, and for a few moments, I heard faint rustling, then it stopped and my sense of hearing disappeared too.

I felt her there in the room, as a blind man must feel the presence of his beloved. I felt her through every naked nerve of my body, through every vibrant desire. I felt her with my whole being, no longer hampered by sight and the reality of sight, nor hearing and the reality of hearing. In that complete blackness, I closed my eyes better to see the alabaster glow. I felt its warmth long, long before I touched it.

And even then, she used darkness. She used it to hide in, to tease me, to draw me groping after her. In that sightless and soundless void, we were as lovers in the sunlight, and sometimes she ran from me with silent laughter and hid in a forest, and sometimes she let the waves of the sea carry her deep beyond my reach . . . but never for long . . . never forever.

In that empty nothingness of blind space, I found the greatest fulfillment I have ever known.

I remember the weight of her head against my shoulder, the scent of her hair, the warm stirring of her breath against my throat. The last thing I remember was thinking that soon it would be dawn and I would see her.

I was alone when I woke.

It was three days later that Sam Berringer was murdered.

Elise had to work late at the bank "clipping coupons", whatever that was. She came home and prepared Sam's supper, because he claimed he couldn't boil water without burning it, and like a petulant child he did everything to delay her leaving him. He had a headache, he said . . . he didn't feel hungry . . . maybe if they had a cocktail before dinner, it would give him an appetite . . .

"You know I don't like cocktails," she said, but Sam went ahead and mixed them anyway. He was still fussing over his dinner when she got up and left him to go back to the bank. I heard him slam his fork down on the table in his peeve.

An hour later, someone knocked on Sam's door, interrupting the final inning of the twilight game he was watching on TV. When Sam opened the door, someone pressed the muzzle of a .25 caliber automatic against his heart and pulled the trigger. A few of the tenants heard the muffled shot. Most of them mistook it for another one of the hundreds of shots fired each evening on the kid's TV programs, but somebody finally

called the superintendent just in case. The super saw blood seeping out from underneath Berringers' door and called the police.

That's about all there was to it. The police swarmed all over the place for a while, going over the Berringers' apartment with a fine tooth comb, but they found nothing. They questioned all the tenants—and found nothing. Some of us had heard the shot, and some had not. Some knew the Berringers by sight, as I did, but no one knew them intimately, or had exchanged visits with them.

The cops picked up Elise at the bank and brought her home. All she could do was sob, "Why would anyone want to kill Sam? He didn't know a soul in New York. He was a poet. He wasn't interested in people. He wasn't interested in anybody . . ."

And that was that. No clues. No motives. No nothing. The perfect crime.

Two things did happen in the weeks that followed that may be of interest to you. They certainly were very disturbing to me.

The first was that Sam's mother and father came from Texas and stayed in the apartment with Elise, to comfort her in her sorrow. That, of course, prevented me from seeing her alone and doing a bit of comforting of my own. When I coudn't stand it any longer, I went up to their apartment . . . to express my sympathies.

Elise met me at the door. The black she wore accentuated the cool, pale alabaster of her skin. Her eyes were luminous, but expressionless.

"It's one of the neighbors," she said over her shoulder to the old couple sitting inside. "Mister . . . Mister . . ."

"Drake," I said. "Steve Drake. I live downstairs."

I sat for about five minutes listening to the old folks tell me how wonderful Sam had been, and how wonderful Elise had been to him.

"We lost a son," Mrs. Berringer said tearfully patting Elise's hand. "But we have a wonderful daughter now."

The old man sniffed and nodded.

I got out of there as soon as I could. Elise walked me to the door.

"It was kind of you to come," she said. "Thank you . . . for everything."

She looked at me for that one fraction of a second too long, then one of her eyelids flickered in a shutter-quick wink.

She left for Texas with her new "parents" two days later. She left me no message. Nothing.

I hadn't expected that. I refused

to accept what my instinct told me. I was still trying to figure it out, when my editor tossed me the job of illustrating the Sunday feature on perfect crimes. I couldn't turn him down.

I did the illustrations absent-mindedly, trusting my years as a professional and my natural zeal for accuracy to stand by me until the job was done. I got the backgrounds for some of my drawings from old police pictures we had in our morgue. The rest I filled in as best I could from the imaginary reconstructions of the unsolved crimes. The editor liked the job.

He thought my illustration of the Berringer case was one of the most perfect I had ever turned out.

It was.

I didn't realize how perfect until I came out of my daze long enough one Sunday morning to see my illustrations in print. By that time, the editions had hit the stands. Millions of them. People all over the country were looking at my illustrations. You probably were one of them. You, of course, had no way of knowing that, in my unconscious zeal for artistic accuracy, I had made some very serious mistakes in one of them. It was in the one of the Berringer murder.

The illustration showed Sam Berringer standing in the doorway of his apartment. He looked every bit the poet with the smoking jacket he was wearing and the highball in his hand. In back of him was the room, perfect in every detail to the two cocktail glasses, the bottle of bourbon on the table and the ball game on the TV set. There wasn't much shown of the murderer. Just his back, and the hand holding the small automatic beneath Sam's heart.

You, and the millions of others who were looking at the illustrations at the same time that I was, could have noticed nothing wrong with these details. But then, you

could not have known that the ball game was over by the time the body was discovered. For that matter, you could not have known that Sam was holding a highball glass in his hand when he was shot, or about those two cocktail glasses or about . . .

Of course you could not have known. Only the police—and I—knew those things.

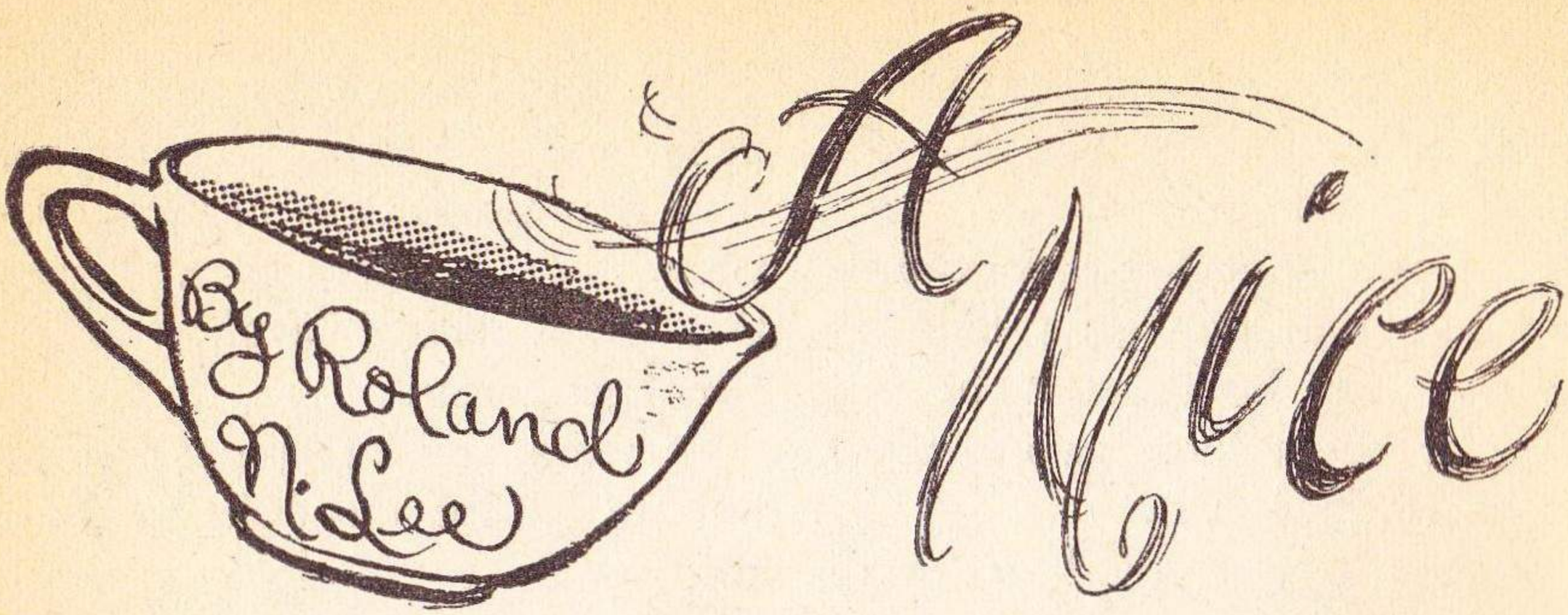
So you see, like I told you at the beginning, those old saws about crime not paying and there being no perfect murders are just the bunk. This perfect crime paid plenty.

Sure, I'll probably get the chair for killing Sam Berringer. But it's like I told you . . . The only criminals who get caught are the ones who get over-elaborate—which I didn't, get squealed on—which I was not, or squeal on themselves out of the subconscious desire to be punished. I suppose that's what I did when I let a few million newspapers publish what amounted to a confession . . . I confessed.

But Sam Berringer's real murderer will never get punished. Elise didn't make any of these mistakes. She's in Texas now, playing the role of doting daughter to the Berringer fortune.

Of course, Elise may get tired of waiting for the old folks to die—and people in Texas sometimes take a long time dying—and she might help them a bit in the process. If she does, I don't doubt that she'll try to find someone to do the helping for her—someone who's real lonely and in his loneliness dreams big dreams of alabaster turned to white fire. If she finds someone like that, she'll look at him with the promise of that fraction of a second that in all eternity seems the longest, then she'll move away with the grace of a cat . . . and wait.

Only, I don't think she'll ever find acoustics as perfect as those that connected her apartment with my closet. She might get impatient. And she might try something more elaborate . . .



THE NIGHT he came it was raining slow and drizzly, and the air was cold for July. I was all set to tell Mrs. Coombs I was leaving, but he changed my mind. He was about fifty years old, small in build and had small features that made him look like a mouse. With his gold-rimmed glasses, he looked like a scholarly mouse. I figured him for a drudge.

After Mrs. Coombs had shown him the room, they both sat down in the front room while she asked him questions. I just sat there pretending to read the paper. Her phony brown hair was swept into a net, and those pale eyes with no lashes were fixed on him. Mrs. Coombs was about fifty too, but she didn't look like a mouse. She didn't act at all like one, either.

"The room is nine dollars a week, payable in advance," she told him. "It's worth more, but that's what I've been getting. It's a nice clean room, no dust or dirt."

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "Nice and quiet. Would it be all right if I moved in tonight about nine-thirty?"

"Of course you can move in tonight. The room is always ready. I believe in keeping things ready. What did you say your name was?"

"West, James West."

"Well, you're just as welcome as you can be to the room, Mr. West. You seem like a fine person to me, just a fine person."

I almost choked at that, and it

Beware the landlady who is overly attentive, bearing a nice cup of cocoa, as an excuse to enter one's room. Take the cup from her hand in the door way, if you would remain untroubled in the privacy of your own room.


Cocoa

must have flustered West because there was a silence before he answered. "I better get my suitcase."

"Are you married, Mr. West?"

This time there was a long pause before he answered in such an odd voice that I peeped over the top of my paper. "I was. My wife died."

"Oh, she did? Well, I'm alone too—except for Mr. Holder who boards here. My husband was killed. My friends all tell me they don't see how I bear up, but we have to, don't we?"

"Yes, we do."

"Of course we do. What kind of a job do you have?"

"Oh—why, I'm a clerk."

"You don't make much money then, do you?"

"No."

"Well, maybe you will some day."

Considering his age, this didn't seem likely. West coughed and stood up. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Coombs. And I'll be back at nine-thirty."

She went to the door with him. "That's perfectly all right. I think we'll get along just fine, don't you?"

So he came back that night at nine-thirty sharp, dragging a battered old suitcase and thanking Mrs. Coombs at every other step. She hovered over him all the way up to his room, and well she should. She was robbing him blind on the room. She was still up there asking questions and telling him how she had to bear up when I went out. I had a date with Rose that night.

From the beginning I could tell that something was going to happen. I could feel it in the musty air of that old gray rattrap, which looked just like a dozen other old rattraps on the same street. There was something electric in the air between those two dull looking people. I decided to stay a while.

Mrs. Coombs showed a strange interest in her new lodger. When he got home from work around six in the evening, she would meet him at the door with what she probably thought was a cheerful smile and ask, "And how are you this evening?"

"All right," he would reply. He wouldn't look directly at her, maybe because her pale blank eyes disconcerted him. Then she would follow him upstairs, talking all the time and throwing in a question now and then. She would tell him to turn on the light, that he was perfectly welcome to use the light, but he would say he didn't need it. Finally she would tell him they were going to get along just fine—as though they hadn't been—and then go downstairs.

One evening she brought him

up a steaming cup of cocoa. I was in my room at the time, but I never heard her come up. She must have scared West. She had a trick of never seeming to enter a room; she just appeared in it.

"I thought you might like a cup of hot cocoa. It's nice and hot. You need something like this."

Peering around the door, I could see her profile in West's doorway. She had on a new dress and a bare touch of rouge, but I don't think West noticed.

West thanked her in his timid way and she went on to make him feel welcome—as only she could. "That's perfectly all right. You're just as welcome as you can be. Now the couple that were here before didn't appreciate anything. He was all right, but she just tried to take over my whole house. Why, when she got their meals, she was in my kitchen over an hour sometimes."

"Oh, they cooked here, did they?"

"Yes, I let them use the kitchen. Why, she'd have run me right out of my own house if I'd let her. She even wanted to bring her girl friends here."

That one gave me a kick. I'd asked her once if I could bring Rose around, and she nearly hit the ceiling. Said she was running a respectable house and "that woman"—as she called Rose—wasn't going to run her out of her own house. She had no objections to male friends, though.

"You don't have many friends, do you?" she asked West.

"No."

"No, of course you don't. Well, I think you're just a fine person. You're quiet and you don't take a lot of baths and use up a lot of hot water. I think we'll get along just fine, don't you?"

"Oh yes."

"Sure we will. Sure we will."

So, every evening after that she used to take him a cup of cocoa. At first he didn't seem eager, but later he appeared pleased as though he felt happy somebody was taking notice of him.

It was about two or three weeks later that I came home from work one night and was walking down the hall to my room. West's door was open and on the rickety old table was a photograph of a woman. I walked in to look at it. She was about thirty, with blonde hair and regular features, but she looked reckless around the eyes. Then I heard West coming in, so I went to my room. Mrs. Coombs came up the stairs with him, jiggling the cup of cocoa and talking a steady streak.

I heard her stop short and she must have seen the picture. She

couldn't have been in his room all that day. The cocoa cup almost fell out of her hands.

"Who's that?" she demanded hoarsely.

"That's my wife," he answered.

I could see her advance on the picture as though it were alive. "I thought you said your wife was dead."

"I did." His voice sounded a little shaky.

"What have you got her picture here for then?"

I swore to myself. It was just the kind of fool question she would ask, one with no answer. West made the mistake of trying to answer it.

"I—I like to remember her."

"What for? She's dead, isn't she? What does she care?"

I could see West trembling. When Mrs. Coombs walked toward him as though to smell his breath, he shrank back. "What are you shaking for?" she rasped. "Have you been drinking?"

"Oh no. I don't drink. You know that."

She turned and came out, the cocoa still in her hand. Her face was working and she was talking to herself as she went down the stairs. I remember noticing that the wind was beginning to blow outside. It always wailed through one of the spouts.

Ten minutes later I heard her voice in West's room. "Were you smoking?" she demanded.

"Yes, I was. Isn't that all right?"

"Well, I can't have any smoking here. I just can't. I'm willing to do my part, but I have to draw the line somewhere."

"But—but you never said anything before . . ."

"Well, I just can't have it. My friends all tell me I shouldn't put up with it. They *all* tell me." And down she went, muttering.

For a week or two afterward West got no cocoa. Then one night Mrs. Coombs met him at the door as though nothing had happened and held out to him the joyful hope that they were going to get along just fine. She even brought him his cocoa. But if he thought by this that the unpleasantness was over, he must have had an awful jolt. It was just starting. Mrs. Coombs had her hunting eye fixed on the dead wife's picture and all that it represented.

One evening she drifted up the stairs with a picture in her hand. As usual, she must have startled West. He was easy to startle anyway, and living under the same roof with her wasn't helping any. I could see her walk purposefully toward the wife's photograph, glancing slyly at West the while. "I brought you a nice new picture, a

pretty landscape, for your room."

After a short silence he answered. "Thank you very much. I'll hang it on the wall."

"On the wall? Why don't you put it in that frame?" She was staring at him, but pointing at the photograph.

"Well—Mrs. Coombs—I couldn't do that."

She gripped her picture so tightly that it almost crumpled. "Don't you like my picture?"

"Of course I like it and I appreciate everything you've done, but . . ."

"But you'd rather have that woman here, is that it?"

"But, Mrs. Coombs, she's—"

"Don't Mrs. Coombs me, mister. If people don't appreciate things—!"

"I appreciate everything, Mrs. Coombs, but I would like to have my wife's picture here. That isn't too much to ask, is it?"

Somehow I was hit by the poor slob asking if it was all right for him to have his wife's picture.

"I'll tell you what *I* think," said the landlady. "*I* think that one never cared for you very much, that's what I think."

"That isn't true!" cried West.

"Oh, isn't it? Well, she's a lot younger looking than you, mister, and it wouldn't be the first time—"

"Shut up!"

There was a short silence. "Don't you tell *me* to shut up in my own house, mister. Don't you tell me. When rooms are hard to get, people ought to be grateful they have a room! They ought to!"

The hell of it was I think he thought he ought to be grateful too. He said nothing while Mrs. Coombs went on about people not appreciating things. She didn't refer to the wife's two-timing him again, but I knew she had noticed his reaction. When she had finished, he asked quietly:

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Do what you like, mister. Do what you like."

After she had gone down, I could see West sitting with his face in his hands. Then he got up heavily, went to the closet and dragged out his old suitcase. He didn't have much to pack, but it took him a long while as he seemed uncertain how to go about it. Sometimes he would stand stock still. Then he would wipe his balding head, blink behind his glasses and resume.

I was glad my light was out when Mrs. Coombs suddenly materialized in the dark hallway. She was carrying the cup of peace, and she stopped coyly at West's door.

"Are you leaving?" she asked in her heartiest voice.

"Yes."

She set the cup down. "Well, I think you ought to stay, I really do. You're a fine person, just as fine as you can be. And I think we'll get along, don't you?"

"Well, I don't know . . ." said West doubtfully.

"Of course we will. Of course we will. And if you want to smoke, you're perfectly welcome. I believe in making people feel welcome, don't you? Now, you go ahead and light your pipe and drink this hot cocoa. You need somebody to look after you."

West sighed and sat down on the bed. "If you think it will be all right . . ."

"Of course it's all right. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. You're just a fine person. Not like that couple that was here before. Why, she would have run me right out of my own house. She got so she locked their door all the time. And that bird of theirs almost drove me crazy."

"Oh, they had a bird?" asked West, absently sipping cocoa.

"Yes." Mrs. Coombs turned abruptly to go. "You unpack your case and enjoy your cocoa."

"What kind was it?"

"A canary. Do you want your room cleaned?"

"No, thanks. What happened to it?"

"Who said anything happened to it?"

"Why—nobody. I just wondered. Did something happen to it?"

"It died," said Mrs. Coombs, coming out into the hall. She stared at my door, and I almost felt as if those pale eyes could see me in the darkness. My skin crawled a little. West finished his cup and then began slowly to unpack his meager belongings from the case. What he didn't know was that the former lodgers had taken to locking their door *after* their bird died.

So West stayed on while the summer cooled into fall and rainy days made the old house seem even grayer than it was. Even now, when I think of it, a chill hits me. I can still see Mrs. Coombs stalking her prey, smiling a smile with no heart in it and saying innocent things that stabbed into West like daggers. Those pale eyes stayed on him. When that head turned to follow him it reminded me of the way a reptile's head turns. Sometimes she stopped his cocoa, then reinstated it. But he never made any more effort to move. He wasn't the kind of guy who could make changes easily anyway, and as time went on he seemed bound more and more to the old house. I

think he was trying to prove something—either to her or to himself. And me—every time I made up my mind to leave, the thought of that poor slob somehow pulled me back. I stayed to see it through.

One night during a friendly interval she was telling him how bad her previous lodgers were. West glowed under her favor. The two of them always got along well when she was running down departed tenants. Then she fell silent for a bit, swiping away with her rag at dust that wasn't there.

"She was a lot younger than he was though."

West's cocoa cup jiggled.

"She was stepping out on him—with younger men. But he was a blind fool. He just mooned over her."

This was a lie, of course, but it didn't matter. West probably knew it was a lie too. Mrs. Coombs dusted faster. "I wouldn't give a nickel for these young sluts nowadays. They're no good!"

West sat down, breathing unsteadily. Mrs. Coombs was working herself up into a rage without any help from him. She slashed harder at the elusive dust.

"I just wonder if that one cared!" she burst out, pointing at the photograph.

"She did!" cried West.

"Oh did she?" Mrs. Coombs was desperate now. "Well, she doesn't look like it to me! And I can't have people taking over my house! I just can't put up with it!"

After she had gone I heard West go to his closet. Then a gurgling noise sounded. He was drinking all right. Though we never said more to each other than hello, I almost walked in right then to tell him to pack and leave. But I knew he wouldn't. He had shackled himself to the place in his own mind.

It was just about two weeks later on a rainy October evening that I happened to get home early. Going down the hall, I saw Mrs. Coombs in West's room. I could tell she hadn't heard me. She was looking at the photograph, and her back was to me, but I could see her face reflected in the mirror above the table. Right then the mirror looked like a picture itself, poised over the photograph of the blonde girl, but the face framed in it looked like a demon's.

Her eyes were shining in unholy triumph and her lips were moving silently. She was executing what looked like a crazy dance of glee before the picture. She would mince up to it, then back away. Then she would reach out and give it a vengeful poke so that it teetered on its edge. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth.

At last she seized the frame and with a muffled cry smashed it down on the rug. Then she tramped on it over and over again, finishing by grinding her heels in the fragments of glass. There couldn't have been much left.

I dodged into my room as the front door opened downstairs. By the time West reached his door Mrs. Coombs was dusting happily away. She gave him a cheery "Why, hello there," as though he had caught her completely by surprise.

West stared at the picture on the floor and I could see him tremble.

"Oh, I broke your picture today," she said brightly. "I was dusting and I accidentally knocked it off."

West knelt down and ran his fingers over the mangled picture, indifferent to the cuts of the glass. "It looks like it's been stepped on." His voice was very low.

"Nonsense! I'll get you a new picture. I knocked it off dusting. Like this—see?" And she swiped a pencil off the table with her dustcloth.

"No you didn't," he said.

"Now, don't you fret about it. I'll get you a nice new picture for your room. There's some cocoa on the table. It's nice and hot." Evidently she had been counting on his seeing the light and coming to terms with her, on her terms.

"I think you smashed this purposely, Mrs. Coombs."

She whirled around. "Are you calling me a liar, mister?"

"It couldn't—it couldn't have been accidental," he muttered.

"It *was* an accident. And I won't be called a liar in my own house. Who are you to be getting so high and mighty here? This is my house, mister!"

"Why can't you leave me alone?" cried West with unusual violence. "What do you want anyway? I don't want anything from you! Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Mrs. Coombs made a sound that was supposed to be a laugh. "What do I want from you? What makes you think I want anything from you? Who would want anything from you?" She stopped because her voice went out of control, but she advanced on West, fairly spitting at him. He didn't realized that he had said the worst thing to her that he possibly could. "Sure I smashed her picture and I'd smash her too if I had her here, the lousy little witch! Do you see that?" She waved a letter at him. "Do you know what that is?"

West shrank back as though from fire.

"We'll see who's the liar now. This is the letter I got from the

County Records Office. It says there is no record of the death of a Mrs. James West, but—there is a record of her divorce from James West and her marriage one month later to Philip Linden. And *she* got the divorce!"

West sank down in the chair. "No . . . don't . . ."

But Mrs. Coombs swooped down on him. "And you told me she was dead! Why, you lying flunky, who would want *you?* She didn't want you. She was sporting around with other men, younger men, better looking men, wasn't she? You ought to be grateful I let you stay here. You're nothing but a penniless old clerk. And you ask me what I want from you!"

West got up and for a second I thought he was going to hit her. I hoped he would. His face was chalk white. "Get out," he said.

Mrs. Coombs retreated to the door and surveyed the wreckage. "As for you, mister, you just be grateful for what people give you, grateful, do you hear!" She screamed the last words as the door slammed in her face.

I went out with Rose that night, but all I could think of was West's stricken face. I kept hearing those screams about being grateful. One thing I decided on for sure: I had stayed around long enough. I was leaving whether West did or not.

When I got back to the old house late that night, West's light was still on. For some reason, instead of going into my room, I knocked on his door. There was no answer. I opened the door, slowly at first, then more quickly. He was lying on the floor in front of the chair, his body rigid, his features contorted. He hadn't died easily.

On the table was the cup of cocoa, but it didn't look like the cup of peace any longer. I felt West's pulse just to make sure, though I knew he was dead. Then I went downstairs without waking Mrs. Coombs. The police had to be called.

They arrested her before the next day was out. A rat killer containing sodium fluoride was found in the cocoa dregs, and in the furnace the police located the poison can, scorched, but still identifiable. The attempt to hide the can looked bad, and when they learned of her nightly cups and quarrels with West, they felt certain. I wasn't the only one to testify about those quarrels. The paper boy had heard some things, as had two of the neighbors. When the former lodgers testified that they thought their bird had been poisoned, that did it. She was found guilty, but

with a recommendation of mercy.

A plea of insanity might have saved her, but she insisted she was innocent. She said she had gone out for a walk shortly after I left and that West must have gotten the poison from the kitchen then. But the jury wouldn't buy that. She was her own worst witness. On the stand the hate dripped out of her, especially when the prosecution brought in West's divorced wife.

I had a few bad moments after the verdict—not that the trial had been easy. She turned as they were leading her away and shouted at me, "Mr. Holder! Tell them I didn't do it! Tell them! You know I didn't do it! You know I didn't do it!"

The curious part of it was that I *did* know she hadn't done it. That is, she didn't poison him. He had killed himself. The final, decisive act had been his. The poisoning of his mind and the murdering of his pride and self-respect and dignity, those were hers.

When I went into West's room that night, something else was sitting on the table beside the cocoa cup—the can of rat poison. He must have gotten it from the kitchen while Mrs. Coombs was out. Under the smashed photograph which he had put back on the table was a penciled note. It read: "I can't take it anymore." He wasn't one to waste words.

Before calling the police I destroyed the note and quietly set the can in the furnace. The fire blackened it, but I was pretty sure the police would find it—as they did. With no indications of her innocence left, the circumstances and her own character took care of the rest.

Rose has broken up with me. I think she guessed the real story, but I wasn't going to admit anything. And even if I told her, how could I explain it? You couldn't get something like that across to a person in a thousand years. The way I look at it, the old witch got just what she had coming. They don't make laws enough to cover everything.

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The ENGINEER'S CAP

by DONALD HONIG

THE three most talkative women on Chester Street met every morning in Joseph Tompkins' grocery store to discuss local topics.

"Well," said Mrs. Fairley, "I hear that Mr. Gregg is about to move out and ask her for a divorce. He wants to marry that blonde tigress we've seen him with."

"And I hear," said Mrs. Duffy, "that Mrs. Gregg is quite upset

about it all. I don't for the life of me know what she sees in that scoundrel. You'd think she'd want to be rid of him, but she's been more than melancholy over it. Mr. Gregg told my man that he was quite worried about her, and that he hoped she wouldn't do anything foolish."

Give a small boy an engineer's cap, and he becomes an engineer, forthwith, in his own mind. No mechanical device is safe from his tampering fingers, all as a result of his new headgear.

"My God," said Mrs. Tinny, sitting rather imperiously, watching him with a face that was calling for a decision, was blonde, extremely attractive Helen.

"you don't think she would, do you?" She was quite properly aghast, not that she was completely sure as to what it was that Mrs. Gregg might or might not do—suicide, murder, etc.

"What is it going to be, Jim?" she asked (for perhaps the tenth time that morning). "I can't wait forever. You've got to choose, you've got to make up your mind."

"Stranger things have happened," Mrs. Fairley said knowingly.

"It isn't that easy, Helen," Jim said. He did not like being pressed by Helen anymore than he liked being thwarted by his wife. "Kay and I have been married for almost nine years. The least I can do is respect what we once had. It just isn't that easy to break it off."

"Well," said Mrs. Duffy, "I do hope and pray they'll be able to work their problem out."

"It is if you want to." Helen said bluntly. "You do want to, don't you? You admit yourself that there's nothing between you anymore. I don't know what you're waiting for."

"If only for the sake of the little boy," Mrs. Tinny said sadly.

"There's the boy, for one thing," Gregg said.

"Speaking of that young rascal," said Mrs. Fairley, "do you know what he did yesterday? He hit a baseball through Mrs. Pickett's window!"

"And there's me, for another. How long do you expect me to wait? You have to start showing me that you're really sincere about this thing."

Everyone made sighing sounds of dismay and despair, honoring the mischievous powers of six-year-old Jamie Gregg.

"Well, the truth is, Helen, Kay

In an apartment not far from Chester Street, Jim Gregg was sitting on the sofa contemplating a glass of straight Scotch. Lines of concern made his face appear much older than it was. Across from him,

won't give me the divorce. I spoke to her about it last night. She absolutely won't do it."

"Can't you make her change her mind?"

"Unfortunately, she's a very stubborn woman."

"And unfortunately, I'm a very selfish one," Helen said with some heat. "I don't want to share a man with another woman." Now she rose, squaring her hands on her well-rounded hips and glared at him. He was unable to meet her gaze, furrowing his brow and staring into his drink as though he might find an answer there. "Why didn't you tell me that right away?" she demanded. "You must have known for a long time that she would say that."

"I don't think I can change her mind," he said almost casually.

"Then what's the use of any of it? We're certainly not going to go on like this; at least I'm not. If you think you're just going to keep me like a. . . ."

"Just a minute," Gregg said, looking up at her now, silencing her. "I never said that. I said that it was going to be all right and it will be. I'm not ending it, it's going to go on, it's going to be just the way we want."

"How?"

"Leave that to me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I said, leave it to me."

"You said you can't change her mind."

"Whether I can or not, it's still going to be our way," Gregg said, an odd, flat finality in his voice. He put the drink down, watching her coolly; he had impressed her now, and knew it.

"What are you planning?" she asked.

"Never mind that. What difference should it make to you anyway—as long as you get what you want?"

She regarded him for a moment, shrewdly, and then nodded as if entering a pact with him.

"That's right," she said. "It makes no difference—as long as I get what I want. But don't involve me in anything sticky, Jim."

"Don't worry, you're not going to be involved in anything. Nobody is going to be 'involved.' In a little while it's going to be all right," he said, putting down the drink and getting up.

"Where are you going now?"

"I'm going over there."

"You're going to see her?"

"Yes."

He went to her and put his arms around her; her kiss was strangely flat, mistrustful.

"You can do better," he said quietly.

She did.

After Gregg had left, she sat down at the window, gazing out at the day. Dark rain clouds were gathering over the rooftops. The city would be hit by a storm later. It seemed to be an appropriate gathering, but she was not thinking of any symbols. She was thinking of Gregg. He was an odd person, she thought; strong at times, at other times quite weak and vacillating. He was not the most admirable person. His strength was a petty sort, asserting itself only when he became frustrated with his weaknesses. There were people like that and sometimes they did foolish things. She wondered what he was going to do now. She had a disturbing feeling about it. His determination seemed to her quite desperate and perhaps reckless. But she did want him; to her it was really quite inexplicable, seemed positively foolish at times, but it was what she wanted. So she really didn't care what he did, or how; just as long as it was done and over with.

When he left Helen, Gregg walked towards Chester Street. As he neared his neighborhood he began taking a circuitous route, wanting to have more time to think, to plan the method for carrying out his decision. He would try Kay once more, but she would be unyielding. He hated her for that. She seemed like a small, willful woman to him, a petty impediment. It seemed now that she had always dominated him, always kept him from the things he most wanted. That tenor of thinking seemed to give him a certain justification. He felt unfairly put upon, not just in this instance, but for a long time; so any retaliative measure he might take would be justified.

His thinking finally straightened out, he now headed directly for the apartment in the old brownstone building. Glancing up at the dark clouds, he construed them as some great leaden force urging him on, some monumental judgment made for his benefit. They seemed a very part of his situation, his mood, his resolve; it was as if they were waiting to enshroud his past and conceal it forever.

As he stepped into his street he saw Jamie. Father and son saw each other almost simultaneously. The boy leaped from where he had been sitting on the stoop and ran toward his father.

"Daddy!" the boy cried with excitement. "Will you buy me an engineer's cap? I must have one!"

"What's all this about?" Gregg asked, lifting the boy into his arms for a moment and swinging him around, then putting him down again.

"I must have an engineer's cap. There's one in Lombardo's window. Someday I want to drive a train."

Gregg took his son by the hand and they walked down the street towards the toy store.

"Where is your mother?" Gregg asked.

"Oh, she's upstairs."

When they neared the store the boy broke away and ran to the window and stood there jabbing his finger against the glass, imploring his father to hurry on lest the magic hat wither from neglect.

"There it is!" Jamie exclaimed, filling with excitement.

Gregg came up to the window, looked at the white and blue striped hat and smiled at the boy. "Is that what you want? All right. Let's get it."

A few minutes later they emerged from the store. The coveted hat was crowning the excited boy who now felt rocketed on towards great achievements. With puckered lips Jamie simulated train whistles and the sounds of wheels and pistons; but his father hardly noticed, his mind somberly occupied, his eyes moving up to the rows of windows that eyed out from his house, his teeth sinking firmly into his underlip. At the brownstone stoop they stopped and without taking his eyes from the windows he released the boy's hand.

"You'll play here for awhile, Jamie," he said.

"Can I play in the rain?" the boy asked.

"Rain?" Gregg asked, looking down at the boy. Then he glanced back up at the mounting dark clouds that were rapidly obscuring all light. "No, you can't. If it starts to rain, go down into the basement and play. But don't come upstairs unless I tell you to. Will you do that?"

The boy, in the midst of terrific pride and excitement, nodded. He pulled forward on the visor of his outlandish cap and pulled the cord of an imaginary whistle, not watching his father slowly climb the steps and go into the house.

Gregg went up the hall stairs like a man ascending some ancient gallows where martyrs once mounted. He felt a peculiar ironic grimness, made the more profound by the persistent rectitude he felt. He turned at the landing, and pulling the house key from his pocket, went to the door and unlocked it and went in.

The rain was just hitting the windows and the clouds cast a weary gloom over the rooms. She was there, but had put on no lights. In fact, she was sitting with her head slumped on the kitchen table,

asleep, apparently a victim of her own despair. At the sight of her he became quite still, furtive. The opening and closing of the door had not disturbed her. He watched the still, unruffled coming and going of her breathing; it was as if she had already consigned herself to the fate he had planned for her. It was going to be easier than he had hoped.

Now he began to plan and devise and calculate. Only the boy had seen him come in. No one had been on the street or in the hall. He had an endless latitude of action. His heart leaped with excitement as his mind worked with deadly coolness and subtlety.

Moving stealthily, he went inside and in the bedroom found a handkerchief and several lengths of rope. Coming soundlessly back to the kitchen he looped the handkerchief over his wife's slumped head and suddenly pulled it over her mouth as she jerked up her head, and knotted it behind. As she began to struggle (and now this was the worst, the most dreaded part of it) he struck her in the face, knocking her to the floor where she momentarily lost consciousness. When she came to a few moments later she found herself helplessly bound, hands and ankles, staring up at her husband. The sound of falling rain filled the starkly still kitchen, drumming.

"Now you can see how sincere I was about this thing," Gregg said. "Now you can see how important it is to me. I asked you, Kay; I asked you to put an end to something that no longer had reason to exist. But you wouldn't. All right. Now I'll do it."

Gregg closed the kitchen window. Then he closed the door. Once more he looked down at his wife.

"I'm going to do this very sweetly for you, Kay," he said. "Some husbands make a bloody and painful massacre of it, with knives or hammers or guns; but I'm going to be most gentle with you. You just close your eyes and go to sleep. People will say what an awful thing it was, that you just couldn't bear to live any longer."

He went to the stove and began turning on the jets, one at a time, until from each of the four jets there rose a deadly almost inaudible hiss. He avoided looking at each as he backed toward the door. He began to feel ill; he wanted to get out as quickly as possible.

The plans were running through his mind: he would leave the boy at her sister's (telling the sister, of course, that he had left Kay in a most depressed frame of mind) and come back later and 'discover'

her. He would untie her and then call the police and lament over the terrible tragedy. Oh, he would accept some of the blame, for having been a philanderer, but that would be a minor and inconsequential stigma, and well worth it.

"Goodbye, Kay," he whispered without looking at her as his wide-eyed, voiceless, helpless wife squirmed frantically on the floor.

Gregg went downstairs and outside. The rain had almost stopped. He called Jamie from the basement and the boy popped out, running excitedly, the engineer's hat on his head. Taking the animated boy by the hand, Gregg said, "Your mother's not feeling so well, Jamie. Come along and we'll go to a movie." Without protest, the boy took his father's hand and followed. When they got to the corner, Gregg looked back at the windows. Then he turned and went quickly on.

The following morning the three most talkative women on Chester Street met in Joseph Tompkins' grocery.

"Isn't it awful," Mrs. Fairley said. "I think it's an absolute shame and tragedy."

"But does anyone know why?" asked Mrs. Duffy.

"No," said Mrs. Tinny. "It happened and no one yet knows why."

"What's all this talk this morning?" Mr. Tompkins asked.

"Haven't you heard?" Mrs. Fairley asked.

"If I'd heard," the grocer said crankily, "I wouldn't be asking, now would I?"

"Well," said Mrs. Fairley, "the police came last night and arrested Mr. Gregg. No one knows why."

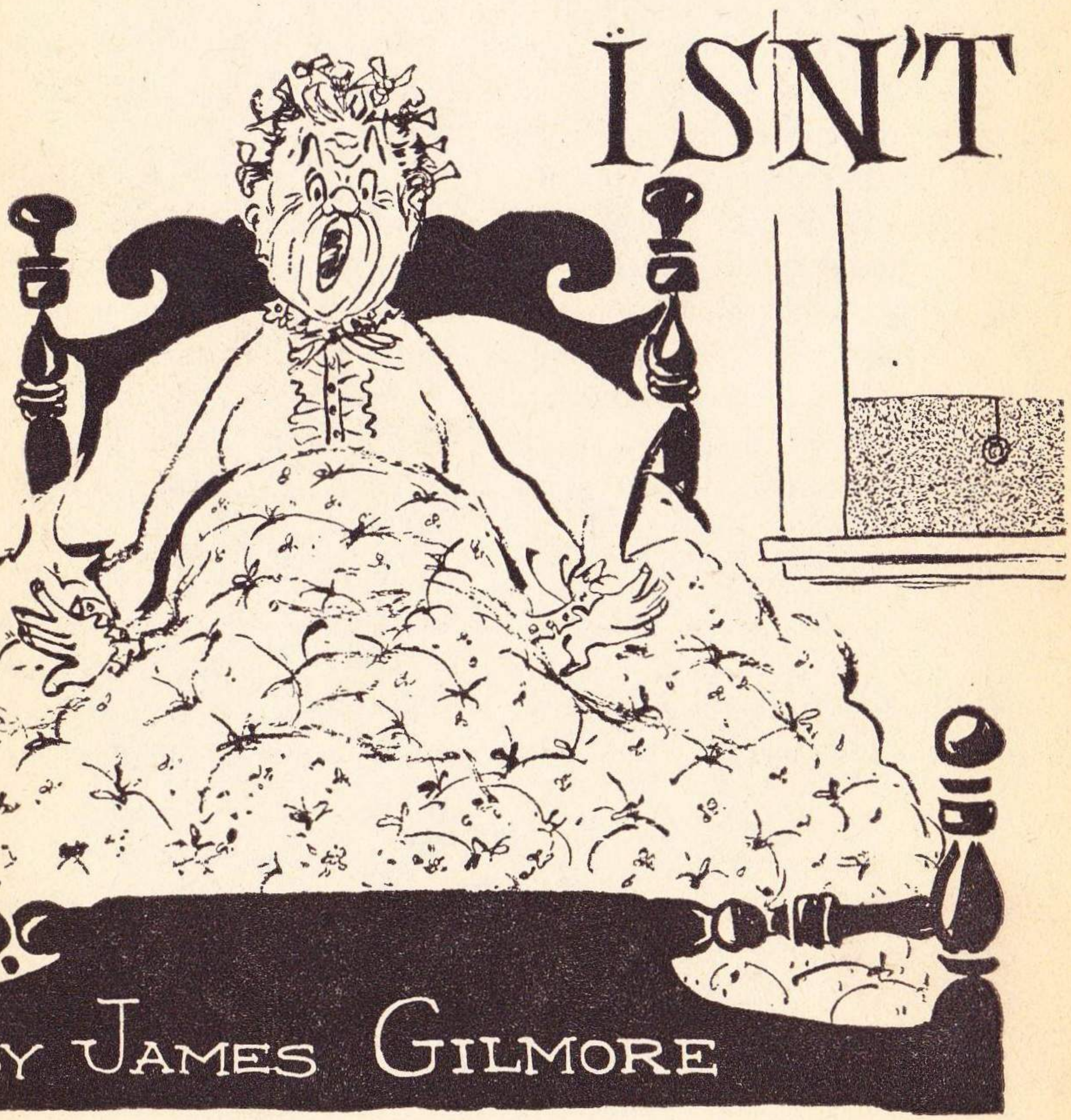
"He had a bad side to him," Mrs. Duffy said. "I always said it."

"And that little Jamie is right off the same branch," Mrs. Fairley said. "Why, do you know what he did yesterday? He was fooling about in the cellar and turned off the gas for the whole house."

"Did he? Well," Mrs. Tinny said righteously, "a boy like that deserves a good whipping."

THE THIRTY-THREE years Ira had spent as a Certified Public Accountant had taught him the importance of details. Details and figures were his life, the only things he really trusted or understood. And now, as his train slowly pulled out of the Minneapolis Depot and snaked its way across the old stone bridge over the Mississippi, he sat back in the privacy and comfort of his compartment, put on his steel-rimmed bifocals and studied the details of his master plan for the last time.

As he did, a self-satisfied smile crept across his lips. He looked upon the plan as his work of art, his masterpiece. It was Ira Hovel's blueprint of the perfect crime. Oh, he knew others had tried it before and failed; but, then, they didn't



have his training or passion for detail.

He took out a pencil, wet the lead with the tip of his tongue, and crossed out item number one. It had already been accomplished. Ira's wife, Emily, and his mother-in-law, Bertha, had driven him to the depot and seen him board the 11 p.m. train to Chicago. During the past seven years it had become a regular Sunday night ritual. He smiled again as he thought how fortunate he was to have a client with a branch in Chicago. The weekly trip to check their books had been the inspiration for his plan. Without it, he would have given up hope long ago. And at fifty-seven a man needs hope.

Ira crossed out the second item on the list. It, too, was a simple detail. All he had to do was tell the porter he didn't want to be disturbed—no matter what—until the train reached Chicago. To make sure the man followed his orders, he had tipped him five dollars. He knew he wouldn't be disturbed.

The third item was hardly more difficult. Ira merely had to slip off the train when it reached St. Paul without being seen. To accomplish it, he'd just walk to the last car, where the porter didn't know him, and get off. He knew from years of experience that porters and conductors are too busy with boarding passengers in St. Paul to pay any

IT A PERFECT

Among the flora and fauna of these United States, I read somewhere recently, is a plant called "the mother-in-law plant", whose distinguishing characteristic is that it is almost impossible to root out, once it has taken hold in the chosen spot it calls home.

attention to one getting off, especially one as inconspicuous as himself.

In a way, item four had proved to be the most challenging. Ira needed a car for the forty-five minute drive from the St. Paul Union Station to his home in the Minneapolis suburb of Edina. At first he planned to rent one, but he finally gave up the idea as too dangerous. The rental agencies required positive identification; he would have had to sign for the car and shown his driver's license. He just couldn't afford to take chances like that. He finally solved the problem by buying an old, but perfectly serviceable, 1951 Ford. It cost him exactly two-hundred and fifty dollars, a lot of money for one night's work, but with so much at stake it was worth every last penny. Ira had driven the car to the station parking lot the morning before. It was there now, waiting for him.

The fifth item was the most important of all, and by far the most difficult. It would be difficult because, basically, Ira was a very proper man; violence and crime repelled him. And since murder was the most violent of all crimes, it held a particularly repugnant position in Ira's mind. But what was he to do? Even at the age of eighty-three, his mother-in-law, Bertha, was much too healthy, and much too stubborn, to die all by herself. And Bertha had to die, it was the only way Ira could live.

The method of the murder had also posed somewhat of a problem. Ira had absolutely no working knowledge of firearms, besides they were noisy and, he imagined, quite messy. He finally settled on strangulation—it was quick, clean and quiet. And, since Bertha, in spite of her monstrous personality, was not a large woman, he couldn't imagine that it would be any trouble at all. Getting into her bedroom would not be difficult—her room was on the ground floor in the back of the house—he had even unhooked her screen window that very morning just before church. And he knew Emily wouldn't hear a thing, even if Bertha managed to scream before she lost consciousness, because she always took a sleeping pill when he was out of town.

After it was over, he planned to take a few of the knick-knacks Bertha had scattered about her room, something that easily could be disposed of later, to make it look like a simple case of robbery and murder. And, of course, he would wear gloves so there wouldn't be any fingerprints left behind.

Yes, Ira thought, item five would be easy enough, so long as he did-

n't get squeamish at the last moment. And he didn't see how that would be possible.

Everything would be downhill after that. Item six consisted of nothing more than driving the car to the airport. He allowed himself a full hour for that, even though he knew it would take only twenty minutes. He'd leave the car in the free parking lot, where passengers were allowed to park their cars for long periods of time without any charge. In about a week's time, he'd pick it up and sell it to a junk yard. There would be nothing to tie the car to the crime.

At 2:10 A.M. he would proceed with item seven, boarding Flight 412 to Milwaukee. He had made the reservation under the name of William Hill three weeks before and had reconfirmed it that afternoon. He wasn't worried about bumping into any of his friends on the flight. It was a nightcoach. Ira's friends were either quite well off, or else they traveled on expense accounts. They'd never dream of taking a coach—especially one leaving at 2:10 A.M.

The flight to Milwaukee would take one hour. Even if the plane were delayed, a remote possibiliy because the weather was perfect and the flight originated in Minneapolis, he would have plenty of time to complete item eight: reboarding his train when it arrived in Milwaukee at six A.M. This would be simple, too. For the past year he had left the train every Monday morning when it reached Milwaukee to buy a paper. It was an eccentric habit, and one the porter was well aware of. He knew no one would question him when he got back on the train. Once he was on the train it would be over. He'd have a perfect alibi and his masterpiece would be complete.

"St. Paul!" the conductor yelled as he walked by Ira's compartment. Ira looked out the window. They were backing into the St. Paul Depot. There was just time for one more little detail. He held up his master plan and lit a corner of the paper with his cigarette lighter. Just before the flames reached his fingertips, he put it in the ash tray. He waited patiently until it was completely consumed then carefully broke up the pieces of ash with his pencil. When the train stopped, he removed his bifocals, put them in their case, tucked it into his inside coat pocket. He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. It was exactly 11:27. The train was right on schedule.

* * *

As Ira climbed the long flight of stairs to the St. Paul Union Station

waiting room, he mentally crossed item three off his list. He had left the train exactly as planned and, just as he had expected, no one paid him the slightest attention.

He walked quickly through the waiting room and out the front entrance. The car was right where he left it. He slid in behind the steering wheel, turned the key in the ignition and pressed the starter button. The motor turned over, but refused to start. The choke, Ira said to himself, how could you forget a simple detail like that? The used car salesman had explained the car didn't have an automatic choke. He reached over and pulled it out about half way. The car started at once.

Ira paid the parking lot attendant and started the forty-five minute drive home. He felt a strange sensation in his chest and his hands felt clammy on the steering wheel. Don't panic now, he told himself, you've planned this too long. He stopped for a red light at Kellogg and Wabasha. While he was waiting for it to change, he looked about the car. It wasn't what he was used to driving; the upholstery was faded and worn and it had a slightly musty smell. But the motor ran smoothly and the clutch, transmission and brakes were good. It would do very nicely.

As the light changed he noticed the radio on the dashboard. The salesman had said it worked, and Ira wondered if it actually did. He turned it on. The tuning dial lit up and the vibrator tube began to buzz. Within a block the car was filled with music.

Ira was glad the radio did work. The music would soothe him on the long drive. Ira had never been one to keep up with popular music, the classics were more to his liking, but he did recognize the tune that was playing: *Thanks for the Memory*. It had been quite popular that damp, miserable fall in 1938 when Bertha had come to live with Emily and him.

His mind couldn't help drifting back to that black day. Bertha had just been widowed. Since Emily was her only child, it was natural that she should stay with them during her period of grief, a grief that even then Ira suspected didn't exist. At first Bertha talked of moving out to the Coast to live with an unmarried younger sister. But the weeks dragged on to months and the months dragged on to years and now, twenty-two years later, she was still with them. Once in a while, usually at the end of January, when the Minnesota winter was at its worst, she talked of moving out to the Coast to live with her sister. But Ira was almost certain she never would. She en-

joyed tormenting him too much; it was the only pleasure she had left in life.

Ira probably could have put up with Bertha if she had withdrawn and kept to herself, but she didn't. Quite the contrary, she took over the household and ran it with an iron hand. And Emily, poor Emily, was completely incapable of standing up to her mother.

Somehow it seemed to be the little things that hurt the most. Ira had always wanted a dog to take the place of the children he and Emily had never been fortunate enough to have. But Bertha didn't like dogs.

Ira had always wanted to see the world, but Bertha was too old to travel and they couldn't leave her home alone. Consequently, the only traveling Ira ever did was his weekly trip to Chicago and the monthly flight of fancy he took when the *National Geographic* came.

But the crowning blow, the event that finally spurred Ira into putting his plan into action, had taken place just a little over three weeks ago. Bertha had just received a letter from her sister on the coast. The sister was lonely, she needed companionship during her last years, and she pleaded with Bertha to come and live with her. Bertha was still in the process of making up her mind when Ira came home to dinner that night. He believed she might have gone if it hadn't been for Emily.

"Oh, Mother, you can't go," Emily said tearfully when Bertha read the letter to Ira.

Ira was dumbfounded. "But your Aunt Kate needs her," he said.

"So do we," Emily said. "I don't know what I'd do without Mother."

It was the first time Ira realized Emily no longer felt the same way about Bertha that he did. Bertha's domination had become so complete during the past twenty-two years that Emily had given up her yearning for freedom. She was content to have Bertha run her forever.

"But Emily," Ira said desperately, "think of your poor Aunt Kate."

But it was too late.

"Emily's right," Bertha said. "She needs me more than Kate does. Besides, California is so far away—and it's such a strange place—I don't think I'd ever feel secure out there. No, I'll stay here in Minneapolis with you till the day I die."

And Ira was sure she would. His plan was the only escape left now. As much as he hated to do it, he had to kill her. He owed it

to himself and to Emily, whom, in spite of her mother, he dearly loved. After all, the twenty-two years of hell he had had to endure gave him the right to enjoy the few good years he had left.

Ira parked the car a block from home and walked down the alley to his garage. The house was completely dark, just as he expected. He took out his pocket watch and held it up so he could read the face by the feeble light that came from the street light in front of the house. It was 12:15 A.M. He still had plenty of time, and he wanted to make sure that Bertha and Emily were asleep, so he took out a cigarette. When he was finished, he stamped out the cigarette and pulled on his leather gloves. Then he made his way to the back of the house, being careful to keep in the shade of the lilac bushes.

Ira stood outside Bertha's window and listened. He could hear her snoring peacefully in her bed. This is it, he said to himself. He carefully opened the screen and climbed in the window. The inside of the bedroom was black as India ink, but he had memorized the exact position of every piece of furniture in the room. He started for Bertha.

As he reached her bedside, his knees suddenly felt weak, and he could feel the fear and excitement welling up inside of him. He pulled the gloves on tighter and reached for her throat. As he did he heard a strange, panting noise and realized it was his own breathing. His arms felt leaden and he pulled them back, letting them hang at his sides. He flexed his almost paralyzed fingers to loosen them. He tried to reach for her throat again, but his arms refused to move. For some strange reason he just couldn't do it. Drops of perspiration began to run down his face. The room started to spin. His whole careful plan seemed to explode in his mind. A long sob came involuntarily out of his choked throat. He reeled backward, stumbling over Bertha's old maple rocker. At the sound of his fall, Bertha snorted and sat up in bed.

Ira picked himself up and lunged toward the window, upsetting a table and knocking a lamp to the floor in another series of crashes. Bertha screamed, a horrible, piercing scream. He half jumped, half fell out the window, tearing the screen off along the way. "Murder! Murder! Murder!" Bertha shouted. He rolled over and somehow managed to get to his feet. The light went on in Bertha's room. He crashed through

the lilac bushes and ran across his neighbor's back yard. A yapping dog came out of nowhere and started snapping at his heels. He was sure he'd have a heart attack any second and the whole, terrible nightmare would be over.

When Ira reached the car, he tore the door open and jumped into the driver's seat. His hands were shaking so he barely got the key into the ignition. Don't forget the choke, he told himself. He pulled it out and pressed the starter button. The motor turned over about ten times but refused to start. He pulled the choke out further. It still wouldn't start. Then he smelled gasoline fumes and realized he had flooded the motor by choking it when it was still warm.

Ira sat back and tried to remember all the things one is supposed to do to start a flooded motor. He pushed the choke in and held the gas pedal all the way down to the floor boards as long as he dared. Then he tried again. The motor groaned, sputtered and finally caught. He put the car in low and drove down the street with the lights off for two blocks.

As he turned east on Fiftieth Street he saw the flashing lights and heard the siren of an approaching police car. He pulled over to the curb and watched it go by, knowing only too well where it was going. Bertha or Emily hadn't wasted any time in calling the police.

Ira tried his best to keep under the thirty mile an hour speed limit as he headed down Fiftieth Street toward the airport. At Upton Avenue he had to stop for a red light. As he sat there, wondering what could go wrong next, he heard a sudden screech of brakes behind him. He just had time to look up at his rear vision mirror. He was horrified by what he saw. The headlights reflected in the mirror weren't going to stop.

The impact of the crash knocked Ira's car half way across the intersection. His first impulse was to step on the gas and get out of there, but the jar had knocked his foot off the clutch and the motor had killed. By the time he got it started, the other driver was at his door.

"Say, what'sa matter with you, buddy? Don't you know there's a law against parking in the middle of the street?" the man said, opening Ira's door.

"I wasn't parking," Ira said as he got out of his car. "I was waiting for the light to change."

The other man pushed Ira. "Don't get wise with me, buddy!" he said, slurring the words together. For the first time Ira real-

ized the man had been drinking.

"But I assure you, I was just waiting for the light to change."

"Oh, you were, were you," the man said, following Ira as he walked to the back of the car to inspect the damage. "For your information, buddy, the light was green."

"It was red," Ira said as firmly as his courage would allow. He was somewhat relieved when he saw there were no visible signs of damage to his car, although the other car had a broken bumper guard.

"It was green," the other driver said, pushing Ira again. Then he noticed a small crowd beginning to gather. "Somebody call a cop. I demand my rights!"

"Oh, I wouldn't call the police," Ira said, trying to soothe the man. "Very little damage has been done."

"You afraid of cops?" the man asked.

"No," Ira lied, "but after all, man, you've been drinking."

The man swung wildly at Ira, missing him by a good two feet. "All I had was one beer," he said, "and you're trying to hang a drunk charge on me."

"I'm not trying to hang anything on you. I just want to settle this without any fuss," Ira said.

"Well, it's going to cost you plenty," the man said, staggering back to inspect the front end of his car.

Ira took out his billfold. "Would fifty dollars do?" he asked.

The man looked up at Ira, trying to focus his eyes. "A hundred and fifty would be more like it," he said loudly.

"But your car is hardly scratched," Ira protested.

A young man about nineteen stepped forward and sided with Ira. "If you ask me, fifty dollars is plenty," he volunteered.

"Who asked you?" the man said, swinging at the boy. The boy gave him a little push and he sat down on the pavement. "Well, I guess you're right," he said, making no effort to get up. "I'll take the fifty."

"I wouldn't give him a cent," the boy said, looking down at the drunk with disgust.

"Who asked you?" the man snapped again.

"Here," Ira said, "take the fifty dollars and buy a cup of coffee."

"Don't want any coffee," the man said as he took the money and got to his feet. "But I'll buy you a drink." He tried to put his arm around Ira.

"No, thank you," Ira said, fending him off.

He made his way through the laughing crowd to his car. About six blocks later he noticed a clock in a drug store window. The

hands pointed to 1:50. That can't be right, Ira thought. He pulled out his pocket watch and found that it was the correct time. If he didn't hurry, he'd miss his plane. He stepped on the gas, but instead of accelerating, the engine coughed and died. He put in the clutch and coasted over to the curb.

Ira pushed the starter button again and again until the battery completely died. "What now?" he said out loud. Then he noticed the gas gauge. It was on empty. But that's impossible, he thought, I filled the tank before I took the car to the parking lot yesterday. Then it dawned on him; the crash had apparently caused a small rip in the gas tank.

Now Ira really began to panic. His plane left in just fifteen minutes. How was he going to get to the airport without a car? He decided he'd have to hitchhike and got out of the car. Then, for the first time that night, Ira had a bit of luck. He saw a cab coming down Fiftieth Street toward him. He stood in the middle of the street and flagged it down.

"Where to?" the cabbie asked.

"The airport," Ira said, his voice quivering with emotion. "And please hurry. I've got to catch a 2:10 plane."

"We'll never make it," the cabbie said as he pushed his flag down.

"Well, you can try," Ira pleaded. "It's a matter of life and death."

Ira's disheveled, frantic appearance must have convinced the cabbie that it was because he really tried. At times the cab's speedometer hit 45 miles an hour and they ran through two stop signs on Thirty-fourth Avenue.

It was exactly 2:10 A.M. when the cab screeched to a stop in front of the terminal building at Wold-Chamberlain Field. "Here," Ira said, throwing a ten dollar bill at the cabbie, "keep the change." He ran into the terminal and across the drab waiting room to the ticket counter. "Am I too late for Flight 412?" he asked the ticket agent, who was posting arrival times on the flight schedule board.

"It's just pulling away from the ramp now," the agent said, turning around.

"Well, stop it," Ira shouted.

"Can't," the agent said. "Once they leave the ramp we can't call them back."

Ira felt faint. "When's the next flight to Milwaukee?"

"Seven A.M.," the agent answered.

"But that's too late," Ira protested, "much too late."

"Sorry, sir," the agent said, a little irritated. "It's the best I can do."

Ira walked away from the ticket counter in a daze and collapsed in

a heap on one of the hard, wooden waiting room seats. It was at least five minutes before his mind began to function again. Then he tried to work out the details of another plan. But the complete collapse of his masterpiece had so shattered his faith in details that he found it impossible to concentrate.

Strange as it may seem, Ira wasn't afraid of going to jail. That would be a pleasure compared to living with Bertha for the rest of his life. The thing that bothered him most was that there was no hope of escaping her now, no hope at all.

But he still had to try to keep Bertha from finding out about the horrible thing he had tried to do to her. His failure, and the fact that he would resort to such a terrible thing, would be just one more thing for her to lord over Emily. No, if only for Emily's sake, he had to try to cover up his tracks. But how? He couldn't reboard the train in Milwaukee, the on-time-departure of Flight 412 had seen to that. What about Chicago? If there was a flight to Chicago maybe he could get back on the train there and somehow save his alibi.

Ira got up and went back to the ticket counter.

"When's the next flight to Chicago?" he asked.

"Three-thirty A.M.," said the agent.

"And what time does it arrive?" Ira asked.

"Four fifty-five," the agent answered.

"I'd like to buy a ticket," Ira said with renewed hope.

While Ira waited for the flight to leave, he called an all-night garage and asked them to pick up the car. He couldn't afford to have the police spot it as an abandoned car. They might call Emily and ask her about it.

Ira had always been fearful of flying, but as he boarded the plane to Chicago he wasn't the least bit afraid. If it crashed, everything would be solved.

But the flight to Chicago was uneventful. The steady drone of the engines, and Ira's mental and physical exhaustion, combined to put him to sleep right after take-off. And he didn't wake up until the plane had taxied to a stop in front of the terminal at Midway Airport.

Ira was waiting at Track 18 when the Minneapolis train pulled into Union Station at 8 A.M. He told the man at the gate that his invalid mother was arriving and he was allowed to go down to the platform. He boarded the front car of the train and walked through the diner to his car. He took his over-

night bag and briefcase out of his compartment and walked to the end of the car.

"You sure look like you had a bad night, Mistah Hovel," the porter said as he helped him off.

"Terrible," Ira said.

When Ira reached his client's Chicago office, he went right to the Accounting Department. He knew there would be a message from Emily waiting for him there and he steeled himself against making any kind of a reaction that would give himself away. Mr. Ashley, the head accountant, met him at the door of the department, looking very grave.

"Good morning, Ashley," Ira said in his usual brisk manner. "Let's get right at the books, shall we?"

"Better call your wife first," Ashley said. "She's been trying to get you ever since we opened."

"Oh? I wonder why," Ira said. "I do hope nothing has gone wrong at home."

"Use the phone in my office," Ashley said. "It'll be more private."

"Why thank you, Ashley," Ira said. He placed a collect call to Emily. It took about thirty seconds to complete.

"Ira?" Emily asked.

"Yes, dear," Ira said. "Anything wrong?"

"Oh, Ira, something terrible happened last night—"

"Terrible?"

"A burglar broke into Mother's room—scared her half to death. She's leaving!"

"Leaving?"

"Going to Aunt Kate's in California—"

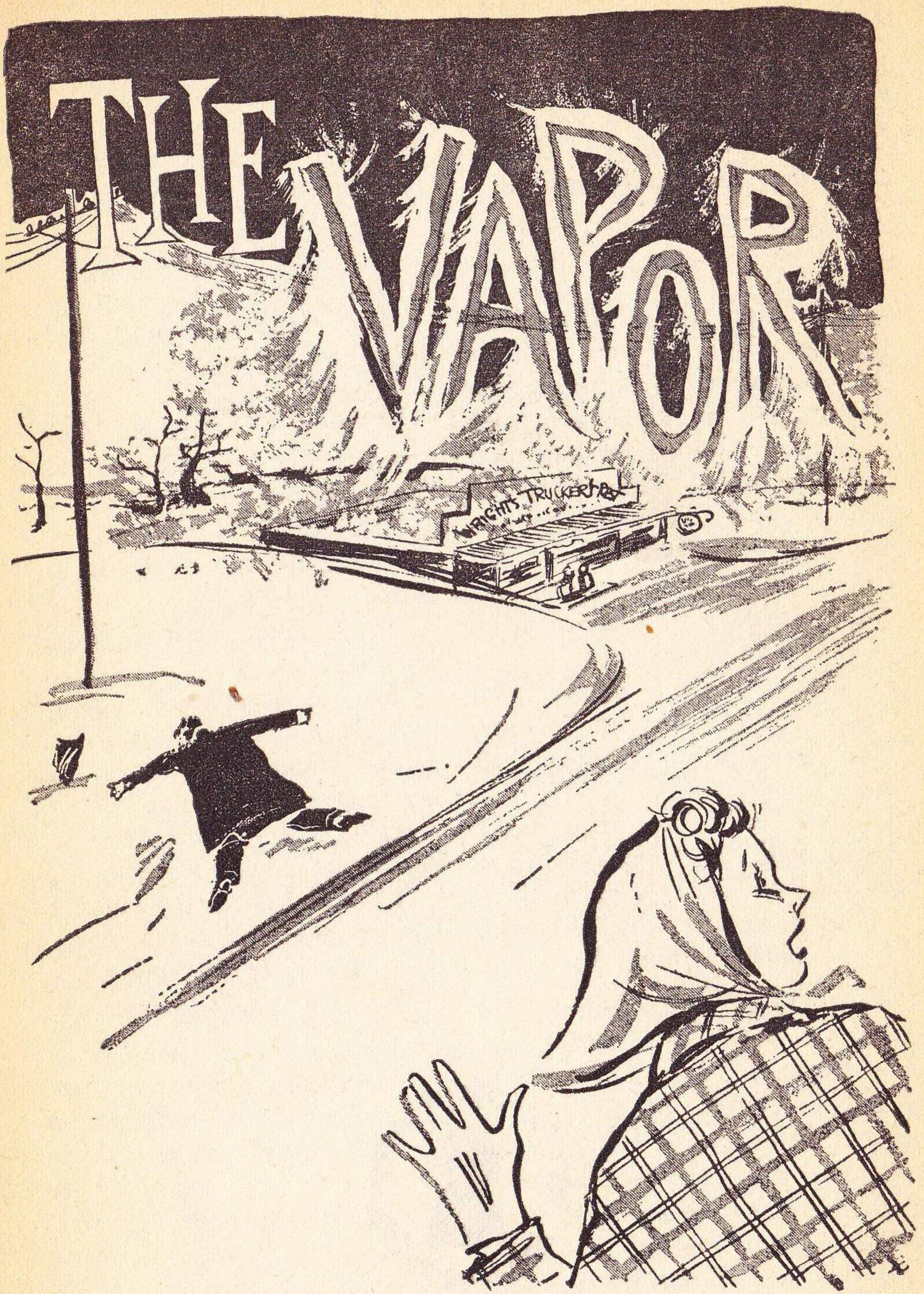
"But I don't understand," Ira interrupted.

"She's afraid of being murdered. Says she won't stay in this house another night. She's already made her reservations. Isn't it awful?"

Ira sighed. "Well, I think we'll be able to manage somehow."

"I know, Ira," Emily said. "But Mother was frightened half to death. It's a perfect crime—"

"Yes," Ira said, "a perfect crime."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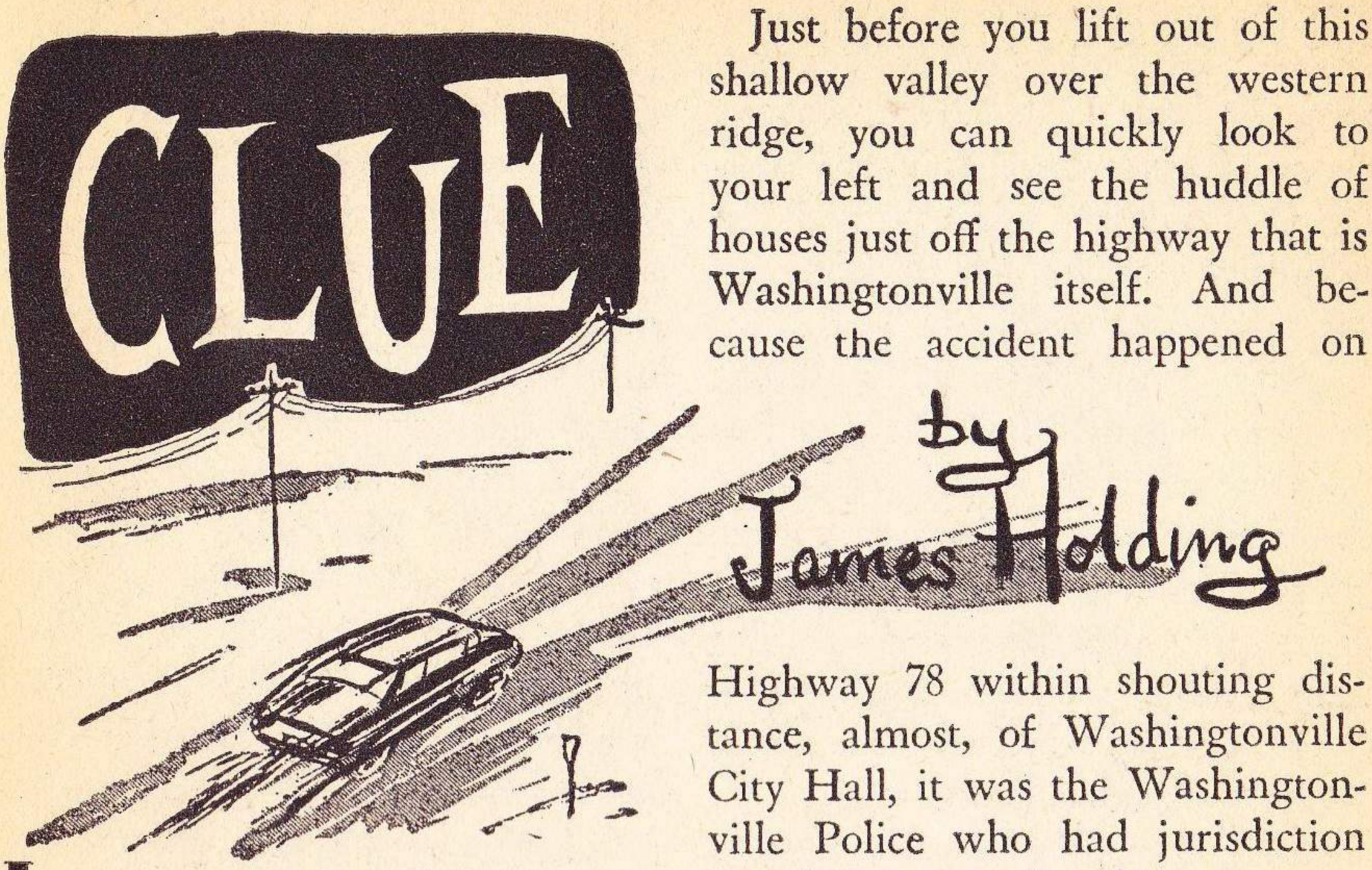

IF YOU want to go to Washingtonville, Pennsylvania, you go east from Pittsburgh on Route 78 for about twenty miles toward the Riverton entrance to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. As you approach Washingtonville, you dip down past a big new shopping center and run along the bottom of a shallow valley past seven gas stations, three roadside markets, two branch banks, a yard full of trailer rigs waiting for assignment, and several fairly clean cafes that cater largely to truck drivers.

Just before you lift out of this shallow valley over the western ridge, you can quickly look to your left and see the huddle of houses just off the highway that is Washingtonville itself. And because the accident happened on Highway 78 within shouting distance, almost, of Washingtonville City Hall, it was the Washingtonville Police who had jurisdiction and Lieutenant Randall who was largely responsible for handling the case. Randall would never have caught up with the killer without the help of a waitress named Sarah Benson.

At 5:30 A.M. on December 16th, a 1954 Plymouth sedan, following Route 78 east, labored heavily up the slope of the ridge that formed the western boundary of Washingtonville's little valley. The car had engine trouble; the motor was run-

One might think the title of this story a contradiction in terms, since vapor is essentially an intangible, evanescent thing, while a clue, in order to fulfill its function, is essentially tangible.

ning very unevenly and the car jerked and hesitated in its progress. The road had been plowed clean of yesterday's 5-inch snowfall, but piles of snow edged the highway and the still-dark morning was bitter cold.

Inside the sedan, Hub Grant said to his wife, "If I can coax her up this hill and over, maybe we can find a gas station or garage open on the other side. We've sure got to get something done to this baby before we can make Connecticut in it."

His wife nodded anxiously. "It's so early, Hub. I'm afraid nothing will be open yet. We should have stopped at one of those motels back there."

"I wish we had," Hub admitted.

The car topped the ridge. Washingtonville's valley lay before them, snow-covered, silent, and marked by only a few lonesome-looking lights along the highway ahead.

Hub said, "There's a gas station. Let's try it."

He urged the reluctant car toward Amos White's gas station half way down the gentle slope of the hill. And the Plymouth's engine chose that moment to conk out completely.

Hub took advantage of his downhill momentum to pull to the edge of the highway where the car buried its right wheels in a bank of plow-piled snow and came to a cushioned stop. Hub opened his door and got out into the chilly darkness. No sign of dawn showed yet. He walked into Amos White's service station and saw that it was deserted. Amos didn't open up until seven o'clock these winter mornings.

Hub came back to the car. "Nobody there." He looked down the road toward Washingtonville's sparse lights. "Guess I'll try down in the valley. Looks like something might be open." He beat his arms against his sides. "Boy, it's cold out here! You sit there and wait for me, honey, and keep the doors locked. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. "I'll wait here."

"I won't be long, I hope." He slammed the car door and walked down the road toward the shopping center.

It was 5:41.

At that moment, Sarah Benson was walking from her home on Washingtonville's outskirts toward the concrete ribbon of Highway 78 where it touched the periphery of the town at the shopping center. Sarah was bundled up in a heavy plaid coat and wore a green scarf over her Titian hair. It was her week to open up Wright's Truckers' Rest and prepare the first

enormous urn of coffee for the sleepy, chilled truck drivers who would soon begin arriving. They were regular customers, most of them; they knew that Wright's opened at six A.M. sharp, that Wright's coffee was good and hot, and that Sarah Benson was the best-looking waitress between New York and Chicago.

When she reached the highway, Sarah walked toward Wright's cafe, a hundred yards down the road from the shopping center parking lot. It was awfully cold, must be near zero, she thought. And still dark. No one was about. Only an occasional car or truck swished past her on the concrete. She was reaching into her bag for the key to Wright's Cafe when she heard a man's footsteps on the road behind her.

She turned in surprise and saw a dark form approaching from the west, his lanky figure silhouetted for her against the snow bank that edged the highway. He saw her at the same time, apparently. For he lifted an arm and called, "Hey, there . . . !"

Whatever he intended to say, he never finished it. A car rocketed down the highway toward him, coming fast on the outside right-hand lane of Route 78, the one he was walking in. He was suddenly caught in the beam of the approaching car's headlights. Sarah could see him make a startled move toward the snow bank beside him to avoid the on-rushing vehicle. But he was too late.

Transfixed by horror, Sarah watched the car swerve wildly as the driver applied his brakes with a scream of rubber against the road; she saw in slow-motion detail the heavy, pinwheeling arc described by the pedestrian's body after the sickening sound of its impact against the car's bumper; she saw the body come to rest in grotesque, spread-eagled limpness on the snow bank not twenty yards from where she stood.

It was only as a dazed afterthought that she looked at the car again. It slowed almost to a halt, its stoplights glowing red, and Sarah thought it would stop. But then, with a snarl of desperately applied power, it gathered speed and made off down the highway toward the eastern ridge of the valley.

Sarah couldn't believe her eyes. "Stop!" she shrieked after the vanishing car. "Stop!" She thought she was going to be ill. "You hit a man!" Even while she screamed, the tail-lights of the murder car winked out over the eastern ridge.

Sarah tried to control the trembling of her legs and the heaving of her stomach. She ran to the

motionless man in the snow bank. When she saw that nothing could be done for him, she returned to the cafe, opened the door with her key, switched on the lights inside, and telephoned the Washingtonville police.

It was 5:55.

Lieutenant Randall and the police ambulance arrived at the scene of the accident at 6:05, just as the first faint glimmer of daylight showed. By then, a lot of cars and a truck had stopped beside the snow bank, drawn by the sight of the spread-eagled body and the bloodied snow, and by Sarah Benson's slim figure standing beside it, waiting for the law.

When Randall arrived, he detailed a policeman to send the curious on their way when it was certain none of them had witnessed the accident, and dispatched the hit-run victim to Washingtonville Hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival of multiple external and internal injuries, including a smashed skull.

Randall sat down at the counter of Wright's Truckers' Rest and talked earnestly with the only witness to the accident, Miss Sarah Benson. She was being as helpful as she could, though she was still pale from shock and wisely sipping a cup of her own coffee, black, to settle her nerves.

Randall was full of driving urge to get a description of the murder car as quickly as possible, but even so, he couldn't help noticing with approval how pretty Sarah Benson was—how well her Titian hair set off her creamy skin and level blue eyes.

"What kind of a car was it?" he asked her.

"I don't know. It was dark. And coming toward me, the headlights blinded me. I couldn't tell anything about it."

He sighed. "I was afraid of that. But after you saw the car hit the man, you looked at the car again, you say . . . as it was going away from you?"

"Yes, I did."

"And you didn't recognize its make?"

"No. It seemed to be a dark-colored sedan, all one tone. That's all I can be sure of. And that it's stoplights were on, bright red, before the driver decided to run away."

"Those stoplights," Randall said. "What shape were they?"

"Round, I guess," Sarah said.

"You guess? Don't you know?"

"No, I can't be sure."

"Big and round, or small and round?" Randall insisted.

"Medium and round, I guess,"

said Sarah. "I didn't really notice. I was so shocked . . ."

"You saw the back of the car," Randall interrupted her rudely, "with the stoplights on and nothing between you and the car. Surely you saw the license number or at least the license plate. Think hard, please."

"I'm thinking, Lieutenant."

"Well, was it a Pennsylvania license? Or New York?" He was still hopeful. "Did you see it?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid not."

"Damn it," Randall said, "you *must* have!"

She smiled at him sympathetically, conscious of how anxious he was to elicit a description of the car from her. "No," she said very quietly, "I didn't see any license plate."

He flushed. "I'm sorry, Miss Benson. But a description of the car, *some* description, is essential if we're to have any chance at all of catching this man. You understand that, don't you? If you didn't see the license plate, did you notice anything else about the car? A dent in the rear fender, maybe, a cracked back window, luminous tape on the bumper, anything at all?"

She closed her eyes and conjured up the horror of fifteen minutes ago. She was silent for a long time. Then she opened her eyes and said, "I can't remember anything more. There was this cloud of white steam coming out of the car's exhaust pipe and it sort of hid the back of the car, I guess."

Randall stood up. "Well, thanks very much. We'll have to do the best we can with a general description. There is evidence of damage to the front end of the car. We found a piece of metal in the road that broke off the grill." He turned to go, then paused. "Could you come down to headquarters sometime today and sign a statement? It will be helpful to have an official eyewitness record."

Sarah finished the last of her coffee and reached for her coat on a hook behind the counter. "I'll come now," she said. "Jenny can handle things here until I get back." Jenny was a sallow-complexioned bottle blonde already serving coffee and doughnuts to four drivers at the far end of Wright's long counter.

"Good," said Randall, "I'll drive you in. Come along."

It was 6:24.

When Amos White arrived at 6:45 to open up his gas station for the day, he found a Plymouth sedan stuck in the snow right beside the apron to his place with a

young woman sitting alone in the front seat, her chin in her upturned coat collar for warmth and a very worried look in her eyes.

Amos unlocked his service room. The young lady climbed out of the car and came in and asked in a timid voice if she could use his telephone. Amos said yes, and heard her call the police. And he kindly helped her over the first awful moments when she discovered from the police that she was a widow . . . that Hub Grant, her husband, had been killed by a hit-run driver, identity so far unknown.

Amos' watch said seven o'clock.

All these events occurred in a little more than an hour in Washingtonville on the morning of December 16th. Then, for the subsequent six hours until one o'clock, nothing happened at all.

At least, it seemed that way to Lieutenant Randall. Of course, he flashed his meager description of the wanted car to State, County and Turnpike Police and asked their cooperation in spotting and holding the car and driver. And he fine-tooth-combed the stretch of Highway 78 between the shopping center and the eastern ridge in the forlorn hope of locating another witness who could come up with a better description of the hit-run car than Sarah Benson had been able to supply.

But he had no luck.

That is, he had no luck until one o'clock, at which time he was eating a ham-on-rye at his desk at headquarters waiting for some word on the car. The desk sergeant downstairs called him and said there was a woman to see him. When she came into his office, it was Sarah Benson.

He hastily swallowed the bite of sandwich he was working on and stood up awkwardly. "Well," he said. "You again, Sarah."

She raised smooth brows at his use of her first name but didn't comment on it. She sat in a straight chair across from his desk. "Me again, Lieutenant. I've thought of something that may prove helpful."

"Good for you," he said. "What is it?"

"You remember my statement about the car . . ." she began tentatively.

"Sure." He took the typed statement off his desk and handed it to her. "What about it?"

She read slowly from the statement: "A cloud of white steam was coming out of the car's exhaust and I couldn't see the license plate or any other identifying marks."

Randall stared at her. "So what?

You told me that this morning. The car smoked. Probably needs a ring job. I've already given the boys that information."

A lively animation marked her manner now. "That cloud of steam," she said, leaning forward in her chair, "wasn't an oily kind of smoke. It was whiter, like mist, as I told you. Or the white vapor that your breath makes on a cold morning."

Randall said, "Yes? And what about this white vapor?"

She replied indirectly. "You know Wright's, where I work? It's right across the highway from Jensen's trucking depot, where all his trucks stand waiting for loads."

He nodded.

"Well, I've watched those trucks go out on cold days. And it occurred to me that after they've sat in the yard all night in the cold, their exhaust smoke looks just like what the hit-run car was giving out this morning."

Randall merely stared at her in puzzlement.

"And when trucks drive into our place after running all night, they never give out that white exhaust vapor."

Randall's eyes widened and he sat bolt upright in his chair. "Hey!" he exclaimed.

She smiled at him. "That's right," she said. "I called my brother on the phone to check it. He's a mechanic in a garage in Pittsburgh. And he says that's right."

Randall swung around in his chair, grabbing for his phone. Over his shoulder he said, dismissing her, "Thanks a million, Sarah. I'll call you."

When he called her later, at her home, she answered herself. "Oh, hello, Lieutenant Randall," she greeted him. "Any news?"

"Plenty," he said with satisfaction. "The State Police picked him up outside of Allentown an hour ago, thanks to you, Sarah. His car has a dented front end, a broken grill that ought to match up with the piece of metal we found in the road, and traces of blood and hair. We've got the whole thing lined out." He hesitated in unaccustomed embarrassment. "I'd like to tell you about it, Sarah."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," she answered. "I'm listening."

"Well, I mean . . ." he rubbed a hand over his hair irritably. "Personally."

She ignored that. "Then the clue of the white vapor *did* help?" He thought he detected a teasing note.

"Sure it helped." His own voice was laced with chagrin. "Until you called it to my attention, it never occurred to me that white steam

from an exhaust pipe in cold weather usually means that the car motor has only very recently been started. I kept thinking of the hit-run car as one from a distance, passing through here without stopping. But the white exhaust vapor made it clear that the guilty driver was either a local, or somebody who had stayed here all night. Because it showed that his car engine had just been started before the accident . . . and had been sitting in the cold for some time quite close to the accident scene, I tried the simplest thing first, and hit pay dirt right away."

"Where *did* the car start from?" she asked.

"The Buena Vista Motel. The fellow pulled in there at three yesterday afternoon from the west, slept till five this morning and started out again. His was the only car that left any of our local motels or hotels that early this morning. He was driving a dark blue Ford sedan, Pennsylvania license number VN 167. It was all on the record at the Buena Vista. After I fed that information to the boys, said 5:45. they had him in twenty minutes."

"Good," she said.

He changed the subject abruptly. "Why did you go to all that trouble—to telephone your brother and so on—just to be helpful to the police?"

"Because I wanted to help you catch that hit-run driver." Remembered horror was in her voice. Then she laughed a little. "And besides," she added, "I took a liking to you, Lieutenant."

"Good," said Randall. "Fine. I hoped that might be part of it. I've got another idea I'd like to check with you now."

"If it's the same idea that my truck drivers get about me, you can forget it," she said.

He cleared his throat. "I think you have a flair for police work, Sarah. Can't I take you to dinner tonight so we can talk it over?"

She hesitated only long enough to worry him slightly. Then she said softly, "That would be lovely."

Randall cradled his phone and glanced at the round, discolored police clock on his office wall. It

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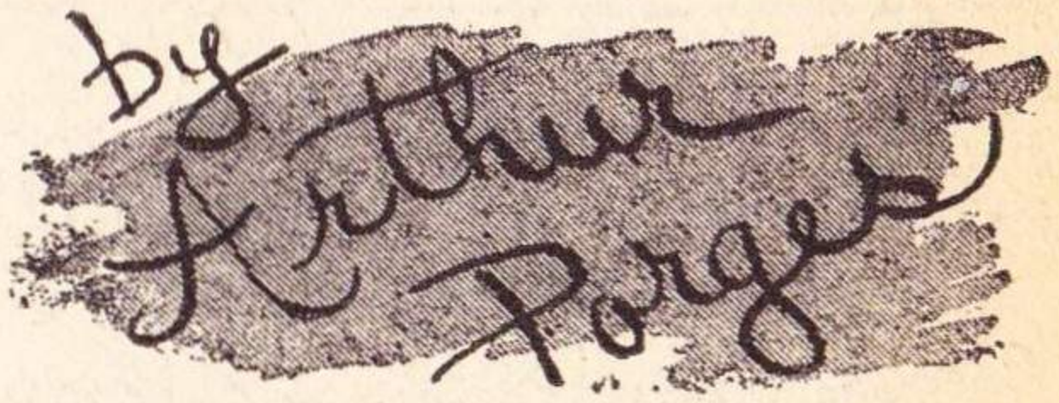
Calculation is an exact and exacting process, essential to every-day transactions. By how slight a miscalculation a well-laid plan may become a blunder, is clearly shown here.

In Africa it may be possible to hate an enemy to death; in Los Angeles, although the city is more unreal at times than any village of the Dark Continent, it just won't work. Wilbur Dunn had been trying for some days now, sitting in his room with anger and resentment flowing through every fibre of his body.

Wilbur was a young thirty. He was healthy, athletic, handsome, and bone-lazy. Such a man finds life intolerable without money—lots of it. Not for him the drudgery of store or office. He wanted to be one of the fortunate few, the golden youth of California, who spend their carefree days by the pastel swimming pools with spectacular blondes, and their evenings on the town with more of the same.

Of course, Wilbur might have had quite a decent career as a professional man, since his Aunt Grace did send him to college. But all he'd managed to learn were a few social graces, and a sound tennis technique. Otherwise, he'd flunked in turn, mathematics, history, botany, chemistry, and even—this is almost incredible—an education course. But then he'd taken this last only to be near a certain girl. Quite a waste; she married a medical student.

The infuriating aspect of all this present frustration was that until last week Wilbur's passport to such a dream world of boating, surfing, and nightclubbing had been virtually a certainty. As the only living relative of his Aunt Grace, he had been in line to inherit roughly one third of a million dollars, all in blue chip stocks—not stamps, mind



you—stocks. This wasn't because the old lady thought too highly of her nephew. He was charming, attentive, and good to look at, but a wastrel. Still, blood was thicker than water, charity begins at home—Aunt Grace was strong on such proverbs. And she wasn't the type to endow cats instead, or hospitals, or missionaries.

Of course, it meant a few more


A Miscalculation

years of cautious sponging on Wilbur's part; he'd be stuck in this old house with its eighteen drafty rooms, instead of an apartment in Westwood. Aunt Grace was seventy, quite frail in build, but tenacious of life, with an appetite like an anaconda after a hard winter. Still, it oughtn't to be more than five years, Wilbur thought. With luck, maybe much less—even tomorrow. Not many anacondas could survive all those gooey pastries the old gal lived on. For a third of a million, Wilbur could wait patiently, pinning his hopes on one particularly indigestible type of cream tart she favored.

And then, with his future assured in value, although the timetable was uncertain, Wilbur Dunn suddenly found his dream world dissolving into a bleak vista of endless scrounging. For into the life of Aunt Grace had come Colonel Derek Valentine. He was himself another Wilbur with thirty years added. He was tall, veddy British in manner, smooth as an oiled snake, and the hell of it was—from the nephew's point of view—genuine enough to stand investigation. When he saw his Aunt succumbing, Wilbur had tried hard enough to find Valentine's Achilles heel, only to discover that the old boy had really been an army officer. Only a captain, but a valid one, with service in India. And he did have a distant connection with an English family of respectable lineage. To be sure, he was not exactly the pride of his relations, but the man's raffish past only made him more devastating to the old lady. It was, Wilbur reflected sourly, the inevitable result of too many bad romantic novels. What a pity TV had come so late in Aunt Grace's life.

In any case, the unhappy nephew saw the handwriting on the wall in very large and depressing letters. Aunt Grace would surely marry the fortune hunter; the colonel would be her new heir. Maybe Wilbur would get a small legacy—the horrible old house, with its crushing tax bills—but definitely not enough to finance a career in the neon dream world he had sought so long. Blondes, fifths of good liquor, and swimming pools all come high, even in Southern California where they outnumber the oranges.

And so Wilbur sat in his room, full of hate and frustration. He saw through the window the sunny streets below, the jammed freeway some blocks down, the tanned, sturdy children playing; and the world was sour on his tongue. If only Aunt Grace hadn't met the colonel at church; or if only she had been considerate enough to die

before that smooth character had taken her in; if only—at that moment one of the tall palms just outside the glass, whipping in a stiff breeze, shed a big frond. The feathery shaft, some four feet long, with a thick, woody base, just missed a boy on the walk. Undisconcerted, he seized it with delight, and waving the thing like a club, pursued his shrieking companions. They vanished around the corner.

Wilbur watched them out of sight, bemused. A falling frond. You had to look out for those palms in windy weather. Every now and then somebody got conked. Usually it meant just a bruise; possibly a slight concussion if the tree were tall enough, the frond extra large. An old person like Aunt Grace, with a thin skull —why, she might even be killed. Those trees on the street were at least forty feet tall—one or two, higher. That one in the middle of the block, for example. A frond from it could give you quite a sock. What did one weigh? Surely a pound, at the very least. Wilbur's deceptively candid brown eyes narrowed. It was a cinch. All he'd have to do would be to get her out there on some dark night—a windy one—and slug Aunt Grace with the woody butt. A good tennis swing. Then he'd let out a yell, carry her in, and phone the doctor. What a pity; they'd been walking along, and down came the damned frond—a million to one shot, but the sort of thing that actually happened at least once a year in Los Angeles. Why couldn't it have hit him instead? The thing couldn't seriously injure a husky young man. Why a poor old lady? Even if they suspected something, nobody in the world could prove it didn't happen just as he said. The money would still be his, and the colonel could hunt another pigeon.

Wilbur's mental activity was now at a peak. It wouldn't do to fool with a frond out there now, in daylight, but after dark . . . Yes; then he'd heft one, and see if the scheme really made sense.

So about nine in the evening, when Aunt Grace was hypnotized by a nauseating audience participation program, Wilbur slipped out for an informal botanical investigation. The fronds were disappointingly light; so much so, in fact, that he was in despair. The woody base was almost like balsa. Nevertheless he swung one of the bigger branches in a whistling vertical arc, and decided that even seven or eight ounces can deliver quite a whack. But the way to be sure was to strike first with something more effective, and then see to it that the frond was properly stained with blood.

It took some careful thought, but Wilbur finally realized that he needed something similar in shape and texture to the frond, and hard enough not to leave any tell-tale splinters in the wound. He found it in the hardwood leg of an old sofa that had been stored in the garage for many years. The piece of mahogany was about ten inches long, and quite massive at one end. It was hard and slick enough not to splinter. Besides, he would be careful to use no more force than was necessary. It would never do to have a wound that couldn't have been caused by a falling frond.

Wilbur fixed a special pocket inside his topcoat to hold the little bludgeon. All that he needed now was a windy evening. In March that wasn't too much to expect; and, sure enough, one came along, just right, on a Friday.

"Auntie," Wilbur said at dinner, smiling at her warmly, "did you notice that the 'Parisian' is showing a fine love story tonight—the kind you go for."

She took a large bite from a rich cake the size of a deck of cards.

"Who's in it?"

"One of your favorites—Efrem Zimbalist." He could see that she was interested. Efrem was right out of E. Phillips Oppenheim.

"Well," she said slowly, reaching for a cream tart, 'What's My Awful Secret' isn't on tonight—some silly talk about the atom instead, so you do have an idea there. But I wouldn't dare go out alone," she added sharply. "It's four blocks down dark streets."

"Of course not, dear," he reassured her. Odd, how the old skinny ones who wouldn't be molested on a desert island populated entirely by sex maniacs were the most afraid of assaults on their virtue. "I meant to treat you."

"Hmph!" she snorted; and he read her mind easily enough. The treat would come from her own money, naturally—his 'allowance'. Nevertheless, her face softened, and she agreed, not averse to being seen with a personable young man.

"I'm a poor substitute for the colonel," Wilbur added slyly, "but I'll do my best."

She reddened. "Don't talk nonsense, Wilbur. Colonel Valentine is only a friend."

There was a banshee-like scream as a gust of wind shook the old house.

"My, it's really blowing tonight," she said.

"Remember," he said lightly, "it's an ill wind that blows nobody good." He gave her a fond glance. At least the old girl would have a pleasant evening before going to the shades. And now and then he and the blondes would drink a

memorial toast to the giver of the feast.

The movie was definitely a success. Aunt Grace chattered about it in a shrill, unending stream as they walked the four blocks back to the house. When they reached the last side street where Wilbur had noted the king size palm, he was keyed to concert pitch. Right in the middle of the block, with the towering tree swaying above, was a particularly shadowy stretch where a street light had burned out. Walking a short distance behind the old lady, Wilbur slipped the weighty mahogany stick from its holster, and struck a single shrewd blow over his aunt's ear. Without a sound she crumpled in the middle and fell. Hastily he stooped and felt for her pulse. Nothing. He put one ear to her heart. Nothing there, either. Jumping up, he looked for a suitable frond. There were plenty around, the wind having been busy, but the first two were on the light side. The third had a heavier base. It would do. He pressed one rough edge against the wound. Mustn't rub. A falling frond strikes just once. All that was needed was a little blood on the base. He checked the old woman again. She was dead all right. And he was rich.

Wilbur took a deep breath, then uttered an inarticulate cry. He picked up his aunt's body and stumbled towards the house. Inside he laid her on a couch and called first the family doctor, then the police. The latter came more quickly, and found Wilbur red-eyed, thanks to vigorous rubbing with his knuckles, and seemingly on the verge of tears. He explained the unfortunate accident; and the officer, obviously a conscientious type, went out with a flashlight and retrieved the very frond, still wet with blood, responsible for the death of Aunt Grace. As for the bludgeon, long before any suspicion was aroused, that would be hidden where nobody could find it even with a dowsing rod and a pack of bloodhounds. There would be questions, naturally, but he would be ready. The key point to remember, he kept telling himself, was that no matter how unlikely the accident might seem, nobody could *prove* it to be impossible. Yes, a perfect plan, executed without a flaw. All you blondes look out! Here comes Wilbur, a-bulgin' and a-bilin'.

But the next day came a man from the District Attorney. He questioned Wilbur at some length about the accident, was shown the exact spot under a fifty foot palm, and expressed his sympathy. He

seemed to know that Wilbur was now richer by one third of a million dollars; this disturbed the murderer, but only briefly. More annoying was the way the fellow hefted a frond.

"You'd never think this is heavy enough to hurt anybody," he remarked, giving Wilbur a cryptic glance.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied calmly. "Don't forget it fell about fifty feet."

"That's true," the other agreed. "Nature is funny at times."

"You said it." Wilbur's voice was full of relief.

So sure was he of his position, that when they arrested him a few days later, he repeated the story with great coolness to a police stenographer, and signed it with a steady hand, even smiling a little to show his conscience was clear, and that he couldn't be panicked.

Then they brought in Sergeant Slater. He was carrying the fatal frond.

"This is the thing that killed your aunt, I believe," the sergeant said gently. He was a big man with mild eyes. "It seems too light to cause a serious injury."

But Wilbur was ready for him. It is true that he'd flunked physics in college, after flunking it in high school. So it was hopeless for him to try making sense out of the chapter on falling bodies in his aunt's encyclopedia. But there was Danny Harris, who used to make all the night spots with him, and was now an engineer. Good old Danny had briefed him thoroughly on the subject. Yes, Wilbur was ready to take on Slater any time.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, with simple candor. "I felt the same way, so I checked up. A frond weighs about six to ten ounces. The tree was roughly fifty feet tall. An eight ounce object, falling fifty feet, has the same striking force as a twenty pound weight dropping a foot. When you put it that way, there's nothing to wonder about."

"That's very good reasoning," Slater said with approval. "Of course, you forget air resistance. That slows down a feathery frond quite a bit.

Wilbur tensed a little. Damn that Danny; he'd goofed there. What a lousy engineer! Then he remembered another point.

"The wind might have had some downward force, too."

"I guess it could have happened," Slater said mildly. "At least, nobody could prove in court that it's impossible. And so you maintain," he added almost mournfully, "that this frond killed your aunt."

"If it has blood, that's the one. Otherwise, naturally, I couldn't be

sure. They all look just alike to me."

"That was your mistake," Slater said, his eyes not so mild now.

Wilbur paled.

"What do you mean?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I mean that we can't beat you on physics—too much a borderline deal there. But you did show us exactly where your aunt was struck, presumably by this particular frond, since it does have her blood on it. Quite a windy night, they tell me."

"You bet it was," Wilbur snapped. He was tiring of this bulldogging. "And that's the way it happened, too." They'd never shake his story. All he had to do was hang on. The sergeant had admitted a falling frond could kill somebody; at least, the theory couldn't be disproved for a jury.

"Some wind that must have been," the sergeant said. "It blew this frond about a block."

"What do you mean?"

"You picked the wrong frond, fella. This one came from an entirely different kind of palm tree —and the nearest one is a block away from where you claimed this fell. Believe me, I know—plants are my hobby. As I said, your physics can't be proved wrong, but your botany is lousy."

"But how—?" Wilbur gulped. Then he closed his mouth and felt sick. Those damned kids, of course. Playing with the fallen fronds; carrying them from one street to another. How the hell could he tell the difference, and in the dark? One branch from a palm looked just like the next. Yet, obviously they weren't really the same. And he had to draw a cookie cop with a thing for botany—what a lousy break.

The sergeant must have read some of these reflections on Wilbur's face, for he said with a cold smile: "Not a big difference, but quite definite to the trained eye. Botanically, that is. Otherwise, the difference is greater—about one third of a million, I understand."

He didn't say anything about a bigger difference still—the one between life and death—but Wilbur was thinking it over.

A NOVELETTE

DUNCH

CAU

BY

JACK RITCHIE

Punch Any Number

THE owner of the grocery store and I were the only ones in the place. I bought two packs of cigarettes, tore open the corner of one, and took my time about making a light.

He rang up the sale. "Stranger here?"

"Just going through."

He grinned slightly. "Care for a little gamble?"

"Depends on what."

He reached under the counter and brought out a punchboard. "Ten cents a chance."

It was one of the thousand-hole kind and it had cost him five dollars. About forty of the holes had

Ever since mankind discovered the first rudimentary counting method, the fascination with numbers has endured. Add to this the basic human desire for a large return on a small investment, stir well, and you have the punch called Punch Any Number.

already been punched and so he almost had his money back on that. A transparent plastic bag stapled to the side of the card held two flashlights, some tin cigarette lighters, and a few jackknives.

I took a few drags on my cigarette and studied the board.

"Man down the street got himself a flashlight," he said encouragingly. "Nice green one."

And probably spent a dollar doing it, I thought. The flashlights were worth maybe thirty-nine cents. "I'm already equipped. I got a jackknife and a lighter too."

He leaned forward on the counter. "In one of them little holes there's a piece of paper with the number 20 on it. If you get that, I pay you twenty bucks."

I didn't look convinced. "You're sure nobody's got it already? You're not handing me a used board?"

He was faintly aggrieved. "No, mister. The jackpot's still there."

A dime walked against 960 to 1 odds. I put one on the counter, took the key, and punched out a slot. I unrolled the tight paper. Nothing.

I fished for some more change. "Just like peanuts. Try one and you can't stop."

I lost thirty cents more and then punched out eight down and seven to the right on the center panel. I unrolled the ribbon and handed it to him.

His mouth dropped.

"First time I ever won anything in my life," I said.

It took him a little sad headshaking before he recovered enough to ring up a No Sale and hand me two tens.

The next punchboard was at Swede's Tavern, a block farther up the main street.

I collected another twenty there.

That was all for this town. I drove on to Eaton City.

It began yesterday when Irene Rogers came into my office and told me what was bothering her.

"How long has your husband been missing?" I asked her.

"Sam was supposed to phone me on Monday, or at the latest Tuesday. He didn't."

It was Thursday afternoon. "He hasn't been gone long. Maybe he's just on a drunk."

"He doesn't drink. Except for a small glass of beer now and then when he has to."

"I don't want to drive business away, Mrs. Rogers, but why don't you go to the police? There are a lot more of them than there are of me and they've got a nice efficient Missing Persons Bureau."

She was in her middle twenties

and her green eyes seemed to weigh everything they saw. "If there's nothing really wrong, I don't want to get Sam into trouble."

"How could that happen?"

She studied me thoughtfully. "Anything I tell you is just between us? It doesn't travel?"

"It stays with me."

She took that. "Sam and Pete—that's Pete Cable—have themselves a little business. Pete goes on the road and sells punchboards anywhere he can—taverns, grocery stores, filling stations. The cards go for five dollars apiece. Each board gives the usual prizes—cheap knickknacks—but there's also a cash prize to make it really interesting. Twenty dollars. Whoever buys the board from Pete has to pay that money out of his own pocket when the number is punched, but even with that it still seems a good deal to a buyer."

She took a cigarette out of an ordinary metal case and tamped it on the lid. "There are a thousand holes at ten cents each on every board. The buyer stands to recover the original five dollars he paid for the board, plus about fifty before anybody punches out the money prize. After he pays out the twenty, he still has a nice profit. It could run to fifty dollars—depending on luck."

I lit her cigarette. "But it doesn't work out that way?"

"No. They're special boards and Pete knows which slot holds the money prize. He keeps a list of all the places where he's sold the cards and then phones it back to me. My husband follows his route three or four days later, buys a couple of gallons of gas, or a glass of beer, and gets invited to play the board. He wins the twenty."

I wondered if all of this still amounted to penny ante. "How many boards does Pete manage to get rid of on his trips?"

"Ten to fifteen a day."

I took twelve as a rough average. That meant that Sam Rogers, moving in Pete's footsteps, picked up about two hundred and forty bucks a day and they probably split that fifty-fifty.

Irene Rogers went on. "Pete always leaves the boards in small towns. We found that in the cities there's more of a chance of getting into trouble."

"You said that your husband was supposed to phone you. Don't you travel with him?"

"No. I usually stay at a hotel during the month or two we're in one territory. Right now I have a room in the Washington Hotel. Pete phones his list of places to me and I relay them to Sam on the road. He phones me every

third or fourth day, ordinarily."

"How long have you three been working this?"

"About three years."

Then give or take, Sam's share came to about thirty-five grand a year and I didn't think he bothered to give Uncle Sam any part of it. And I also thought about something else. Thirty-five thousand a year and a room at the Washington Hotel just didn't mix. It was a four-dollar-and-up place, and the up never went past seven.

"Does Pete know that your husband is missing?"

She hesitated. "No."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"I didn't think that he'd want me to come to somebody like you." She flicked ash into the tray. "Last Wednesday when Sam phoned, I gave him Pete's latest list. He should have gone through it by either Monday or Tuesday and then phoned me again. But I haven't heard from him."

"Maybe he just didn't get through with his collections."

She shook her head. "Even if he hadn't, he still would have phoned. At least by now."

"Where is Pete Cable now?"

"I don't know. But when he's in town he usually stays at the Medford."

And that told me that Pete Cable, at least, believed in living it up.

Her eyes flickered. "I'd rather not have you see him just yet. Not until you've given this a try by yourself."

"Do you have a copy of the list you gave your husband the last time he phoned?"

She opened her purse and handed me a sheet of paper.

I read the first few lines.

Rockford—

Jack's Garage—L-18-2

Vi & Dick's Tavern—M-9-11

Harold's Tap—L-6-14

New Auburn—

Red Star Market—R-12-16

Clover Tavern—M-17-1

"There are forty-seven places on the list," Irene explained. "The letters L, M, and R, mean the left, middle, or right panels. The first number means down. The second means to the right." She produced a photograph of her husband.

Sam Rogers had small tight features and he looked as though something always bothered him.

"What kind of a car was he driving?"

"A 1956 sedan. Dark blue." She gave me the license number.

I wrote that down. "A 1956 sedan?"

"Sam thought it better not to be too conspicuous. Some country people distrust a stranger in a new car."

Something else occurred to me,

though I didn't think it was too likely. "Have you ever thought that he might just have run out on you?"

Her face became expressionless. "If he did, I want to know about it."

I could have started from the top of Irene's list, but I thought it was more interesting to work from the bottom up. And I like twenties.

I got to Eaton City a few minutes after seven on Friday and stopped at Harrison's Drugstore. I bought another two packs of cigarettes and while I was lighting up, Harrison got around to his punchboard.

On the fourth try, I handed him the tape and looked surprised. "First time I ever won anything in my life."

He sighed when he handed me the twenty and looked up at the clock. "I should have closed at seven like always."

There was one other place in Eaton City. Turk's Service Station and Garage.

My tank was full, the oil okay, and the tires had the air they needed. I disconnected my horn and drove down the main street until I found the place.

A kid of about nineteen or twenty came out of Turk's small office.

"Something seems to be wrong with my horn," I said.

He nodded and pulled up the hood.

I got out of the car and watched him. "Are you Turk?"

He grinned. "No. Just work here. Turk's inside."

I glanced through the open garage door. Turk was a burly man under a car on the rack. He looked like he didn't care for what he was doing for a living.

The kid found the wire after a few seconds. "Just disconnected, mister. Must have slipped off."

While he was there, he checked the oil and the water, and then put down the hood. "Gas?"

"No. Filled up a couple of miles back and then got this trouble. How much do I owe you?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Didn't take more than a minute."

He was about to go back inside the station without bringing up the subject of the punchboard.

I put my hand on the door lever of my car. "Stopped in at a drugstore down the street. The man had a punchboard and I lost half a buck."

The kid wiped his hands on a rag. "Turk had one of them things too. Had it four days and along come somebody and hits the big number. Cost Turk twenty bucks."

That could have been Sam Rogers—or maybe some one else punched the lucky number. I clicked my tongue sympathetically. "Probably somebody driving a Cadillac. Some people have all the luck."

He shook his head. "No. '56 Ford. Sort of small man. Worried looking. I thought he was even a little bit sick. Came in around seven-thirty in the evening."

I thought I could figure it from there. Sam had stopped here and picked up the twenty. Then he went on to Harrison's Drugstore. But Harrison closed at seven or soon after.

The chances were that Sam had decided to spend the night in town—it was late enough to call it a day. He could pick up the twenty at Harrison's in the morning and move on. But he had never gotten there.

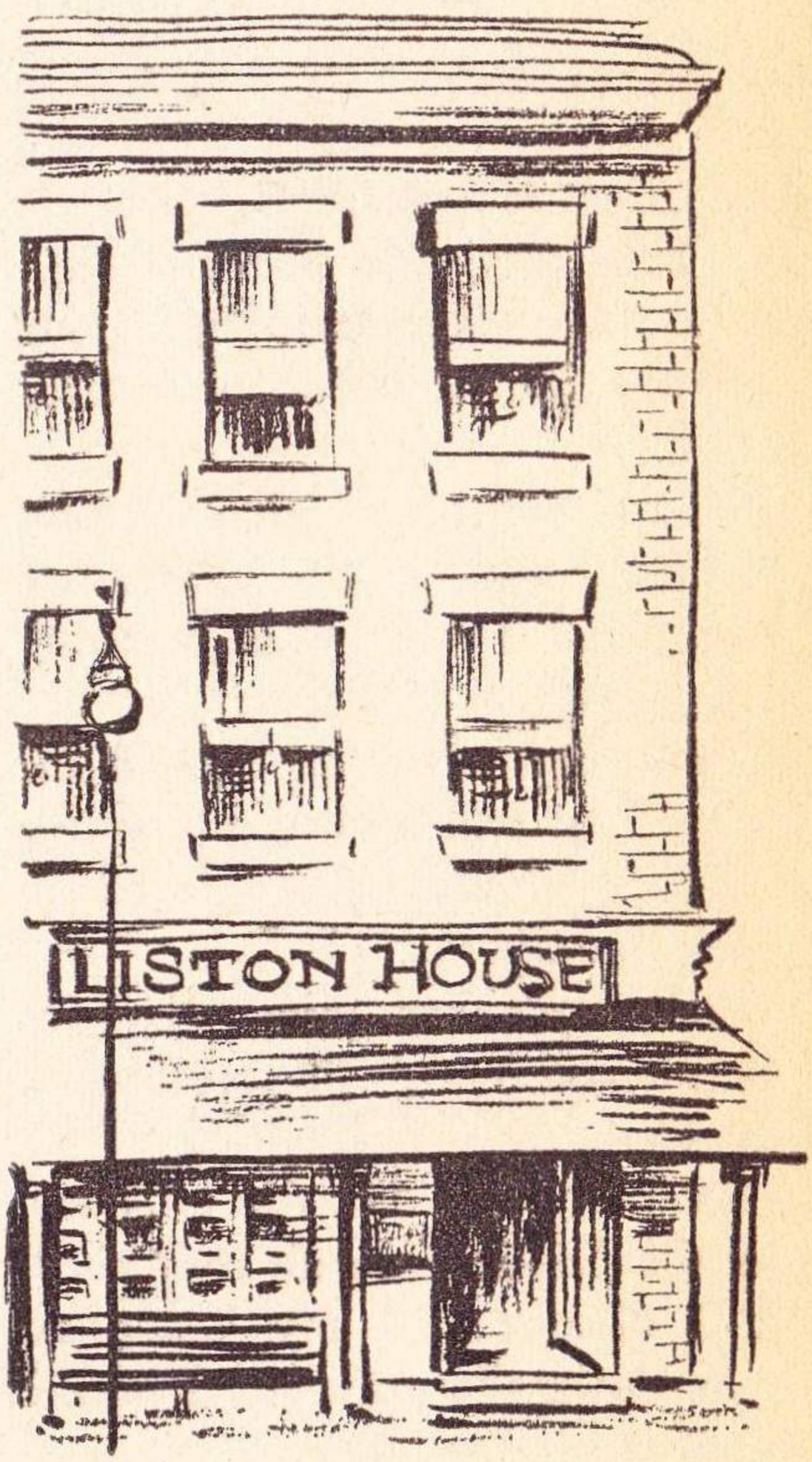
I stretched. "Long day on the road. Is there any place in town where I could put up for the night?"

"The Liston House is the only place we got. It's small, but everybody says the beds are good. Right down on Main Street, back a block."

I parked my car on a side street and took my overnight bag to the Liston House.

It was an old-fashioned three-story building and the lobby was empty. The man behind the desk put aside his magazine and rose. He was in his middle forties and wore rimless glasses. He watched me sign in. "Staying long?"

"Can't say. Got some business in town. Might take a couple days." I glanced at the names above mine and saw that I was the only one who'd registered today. "Business slow?"



"That's right."

I turned back a page of the register.

There was a trace of sharpness in his voice. "What are you doing?"

"Just checking to see if Sam got here. Sam Rogers. Friend of mine." I found his name. He had registered a week ago. I looked up. "What room is he in?"

The clerk swiveled the register back into place. "He's not here. He checked out after one night."

I raised an eyebrow. "That's funny. He told me he'd be here a week or more."

"Well, he wasn't. He left the next morning. Early."

I frowned thoughtfully. "Did he get a telephone call?"

"There was no phone call."

"Or a telegram?"

"No telegram." He moved a pen back and forth on the blotter a couple of times. "You say you're a friend of his?"

"We're like brothers. He tells me everything."

He got a key from the board. "You're in Room 204. Want me to show you?"

"Never mind." I picked up my bag. "You're the bellboy too?"

"I'm everything," he said sourly. "Bellboy, switchboard operator, everything. Seven in the evening until seven in the morning."

But I didn't think things were

too rough for him. There was a well-worn couch behind the counter and he probably slept most of the night.

I left my bag in the room and went out for something to eat.

Sam Rogers had spent the night at the Liston House—or at least he had registered. He could suddenly have decided to take off and disappear. I would have to wait until tomorrow to do the checking I wanted and then I thought I would know more.

After eating I went to a bar, mostly to kill time. There isn't much else to do in a small town on a Friday night.

I got back to the Liston at about ten-thirty.

There was a knock at my door a few minutes later.

The florid-faced man had a .45 in his hand. He backed me into the room and closed the door behind him. "You've been picking yourself up a little change, haven't you, boy? Twenty here and twenty there?"

I said nothing.

The smile didn't go to his eyes. "Where's Sam? Or maybe I should ask what you did to him?"

"You got the wrong man. I don't know anybody named Sam."

He shook his head sadly. "Let's not play that way. We both know who and what I'm talking about."

I shrugged. "All right. I know somebody named Sam. And I'm supposed to have done something to him?"

"It's a guess. How else did you get hold of the list? And don't tell me you just got lucky on those punchboards. Who the hell are you anyway?"

The .45 steady in his hand told me it was time to stop fooling around. "Mike Regan."

"That's just a name. Toss over your wallet."

He flipped it open and saw my credentials. He looked up.

"Mrs. Rogers hired me to find her husband," I said. "He's missing."

He worked on that a few seconds and then tossed back the wallet. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"Why should you be interested?"

"The name's Pete Cable. I guess Irene would have told you about me."

I nodded. "If you didn't know that Sam was missing, just what brought you here?"

He glanced at the automatic in his hand and then slipped it back into his pocket. "The last few weeks, Sam's been claiming that times have been bad. When he makes his collections, the odds say that about once in twenty times somebody lucky could get to the big number on the board before he does. I'm a reasonable man and I'll even settle for once in ten. But for almost a month Sam's been reporting that three or four times out of ten the number was already punched when he got there. I just didn't buy that.

"That's the way I began figuring it. I checked up and found he was lying to me."

"Why didn't you nail him down?"

"When he got through with the list you've been working on, I was

going to do that little thing. I got me a room in Sioux Falls—that's the last place on the list—and waited for Sam to show up. He didn't. That got me to fidgeting, but I still stayed there keeping an eye on the last board. Then one day I find that the big number had been taken. But not by Sam. By you. I got the description. I thought it might be a lucky shot by a stranger, but just the same I back-tracked. The next number was taken too. By you again. I wondered what the hell was going on. So I kept backing up. When I got here, Harrison's Drugstore was closed, but I went on to Turk's Service Station. I learned that you just picked up the number and were spending the night at this place."

I found a cigarette. "Sam registered here a week ago and then he disappeared. That's where I am now. Have you got any ideas about what might have happened?"

Cable did some thinking and then shrugged. "I don't know. Looks to me like he just skipped. Maybe he got the feeling that I was about to lower the boom. He probably headed for some place far away where he can get himself another partner and work the racket again."

"Why didn't he take his wife with him?"

Cable chuckled. "You don't know Sam the way I do. It wouldn't bother him none to leave her. The only thing he really loved was money and he was real tight with that." He brought out a cigar and unwrapped it. "What you going to do now, Regan?"

"What I'm paid to do. Look for him."

"It's a wide country. Lots of things to hide behind. But you're willing to travel as long as you get paid?"

"I got nothing against it."

He went to the door. "I'm getting a night's sleep here and then back to the big city. Medford Hotel. Give me a ring if you find Sam. Might be worth a couple hundred to me if I can get my hands on him."

When he was gone I locked the door.

Maybe Sam did skip. Or maybe he just planned to. But if he was a tight man with a buck, I thought he wouldn't make the move until he'd finished his collections—in this town anyway.

There was one other thing to consider. If you're planning to take off—from your partner and from your wife—you do at least one thing. You take your money along with you.

You don't leave it in a bank or a checking account. People can

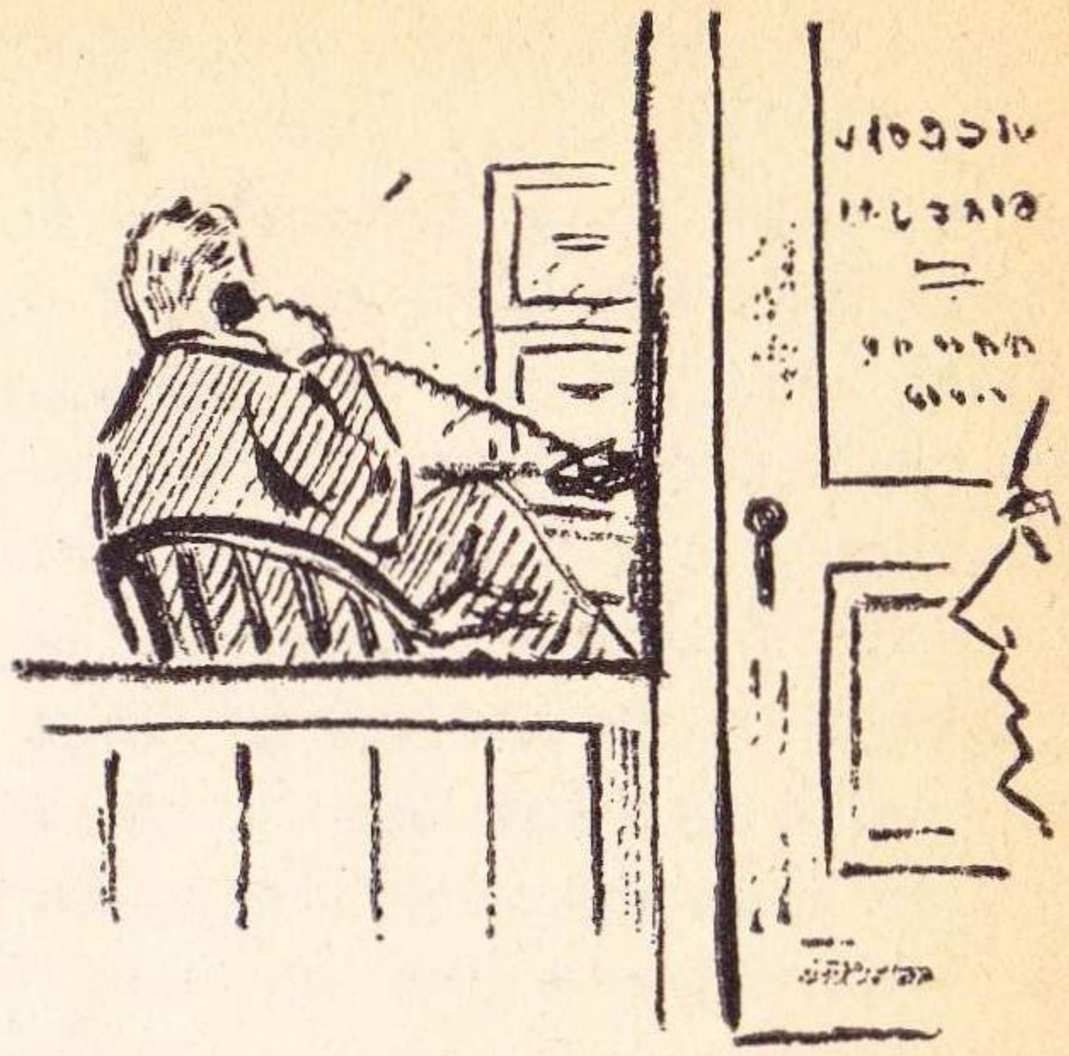
stop action on those things when you don't show up where and when you are expected.

In the morning I looked at the retainer check Irene Rogers had given me. The imprint showed that it was drawn on the Whitfield Savings Bank in St. Louis.

After a late breakfast, I took a walk through town and found that Eaton City had a branch bank. It was a small affair—the kind that opens four hours a day and even then doesn't do too much business. The building was small and one-storied and as far as I could see a girl clerk cashier and a man who might be her boss were the only employees.

I went into the cafe across the street, ordered coffee, and wondered how I could get the information I wanted now. I kept an eye on the bank and at ten-thirty I saw the manager reach for his hat. He came out of the bank accompanied by a man in overalls and they got into a pick-up truck. Probably a farmer negotiating for a loan, I thought, and the manager wanted a personal look at his assets. I thought they would be gone long enough for my purpose.

I went to the phone booth, looked up the number of the Eaton City Branch Bank, and jotted that down. Then I put in a long distance call to the St. Louis Bank.



When I got through and was channeled to somebody important, I said, "This is James Rhiordan. Eaton City."

"Yes?"

"I have a rather large check here just presented to me by a Mr. Sam Rogers. Twenty thousand dollars, to be exact. Mr. Rogers claims . . . *says* that he has a checking account at your bank."

He understood. "Your position with the Eaton City bank, Mr. Rhiordan?"

"Vice-president."

"And your number?"

I gave him the Eaton City bank phone number.

"We'll call you as soon as we have the information."

It would take Whitfield Savings only five minutes or less to find out how much Sam Rogers had in his account, but the reason for a call back was to make certain that

my curiosity was legitimate—that there *was* an Eaton City Branch bank and a Vice-President Rhiordan. Private citizens just don't call banks and hope to find out how much someone else has in his checking account.

I went across the street to the Eaton City bank and approached the girl. "My name is Rhiordan. Has there been a phone call for me? A message, perhaps?"

She raised an eyebrow.

I smiled. "I know it's an imposition, but you see I travel a lot and it's difficult for my bank to keep in touch with me should anything important arise. I suppose I could call every day myself, but sometimes weeks will go by in which I mount up long distance phone bills for no purpose at all. So we've decided that my bank would leave messages in the local banks of the towns on my general itinerary." I glanced at my watch. It was a quarter after ten. "I've made arrangements that my bank try to call between ten and ten-thirty, just in case I might be there myself." I smiled again. "There may actually not *be* a phone call—there usually isn't—but do you mind if I wait?"

A few moments thought decided her that she didn't mind.

Her phone rang four minutes later and she picked up the receiver. Her eyes widened slightly when she looked at me. "*Vice-president* Rhiordan?"

I grinned. "Yes. In St. Louis. But Henry is very stuffy. He always uses my title. Even on the phone." I reached for the receiver and then hesitated. "Do you mind if I take the call in there?" I indicated the glass-walled office behind her.

She was slightly dubious about that, but either my smile—and I turned that on—or the fact that I was a *vice-president* somewhere made her nod her head.

I went inside the office and picked up the receiver. When I saw her cradle her phone, I said, "Rhiordan speaking."

It was the same voice I'd heard before. "About that checking account. It's in the name of Sam and Irene Rogers. Our records show that there is only $536.27 in the account at the moment."

"I see." There was another possibility. If a man keeps a checking account at a bank, the chances are good that he keeps his savings account there also. "Please hold the line for a moment," I said.

I waited about forty seconds and then said, "Mr. Rogers is here and he says that there must be some mistake. He says that he had the money in his *savings* account, but that he's written you authoriza-

tion to transfer twenty thousand to the checking account."

"Just a moment, please," the voice said.

Three minutes passed and the voice was back. "Mr. Rogers *had* a savings account here—and in *his* name only. $35,812.39. But he closed it by mail and we sent him a draft for that amount ten days ago. We've since had a phone call from a Milwaukee bank and we verified the draft. Our information is that he cashed the draft there."

"Thank you for your trouble," I said. "I'll have to speak to Mr. Rogers."

"I'd do that if I were you," the voice agreed dryly.

When a man disappears with thirty-five thousand dollars he does it because he wants to—or because somebody else wants it to be that way.

I thanked the girl behind the counter and walked back to the Liston House.

The day desk clerk, a cheerful-looking man in his fifties, got up.

"I'm already registered," I said. I decided it wouldn't do any harm to ask him if he might know anything about Rogers. "I wonder if you could help me. I'm looking for a Sam Rogers. He was registered here a week ago and then he just seems to have disappeared. Perhaps he told you where he might be going?"

The clerk went over the book until he found Rogers' name and then thought about it. Finally he shook his head. "Afraid I can't help you. Never even saw him, as far as I can remember."

Then something did come to his mind. "There was a note on the pad to give him a call at six-thirty in the morning. I saw that when I came on at seven and it hadn't been checked off. I asked Bert about it—thinking that he might have forgotten to wake the man—but Bert said to cross it off. Rogers had already left. Bert's the night man here. Bert Dryer."

"I'd like to talk to Bert. Where can I find him?"

"He has a little cottage just outside of town. Sort of a rundown place and he lives alone."

I got more specific directions then drove to Bert's house. It was a ramshackle affair with two fifty-five gallon fuel oil tanks on a rack beside the kitchen window. A sagging barn and a few small sheds were on the property too. A beat-up old sedan was parked on the gravel driveway.

I pulled up behind it and went to the back door. There was no answer to my knocks. The car in the driveway told me that he was probably home, but if so, he was

playing possum for reasons of his own.

I went over to the barn and opened one of the big double doors.

Parts of a car were scattered around inside and someone had evidently been using a torch to cut the body into pieces. I thought it might have been a dark blue '56 sedan.

I looked for license plates, but there were none. However the motor was still there and I copied the block number.

I went back to the house and knocked once more. Then I tried the door.

Bert Dryer was there and he had a good reason for not coming to the door. He lay on his back on the littered kitchen floor. His wide open eyes were looking at nothing in this world. It had been a fast death and one bullet in the chest had done the job.

I went through the small living room and took a look at the bedroom. The house wasn't too clean, but as far as I could tell, nothing had been disturbed.

I wiped my prints off the back door knob and went to my car. I drove back to Eaton City and went to the phone booth in a drugstore.

I put in a call to the State Motor Bureau in Missouri.

"This is Sheriff Rhiordan in Eaton City, Wisconsin," I said. "I have an abandoned vehicle here carrying your state's license plates."

Evidently he reached for his pencil. "What's the number?"

I gave him Sam Rogers' license plate number. "And check out the motor number too. The plates might not belong to the car." I gave him the motor block number I'd copied in Bert Dryer's barn.

"It'll take ten, fifteen minutes," he said. "Want me to call back?"

"No. I'm not in my office. Won't be back there for a while either. Suppose I call you?"

That was all right with him. Getting a car identified wasn't as private as finding out somebody's bank balance and he didn't have to check up on me.

I made a chocolate soda last twenty minutes and then phoned him again.

"The license plates were issued to a Sam Rogers in St. Louis." He gave me the address of one of that city's hotels.

"What about the motor number? His car?"

"Yes. That checks."

I thanked him and hung up.

When you want to get rid of a car, you have your troubles. If you push it over a cliff or drop it into water, nine times out of ten, somebody will find it sometime and begin asking questions about it.

But if you take the car apart, cut it into pieces, and drop a fender here, a door there—in a dump, in the woods, in a lake, nobody's going to get too curious about why the piece is there. And it looked like that's what Bert Dryer had been doing with Sam Rogers' car.

But why?

It didn't take too much imagination to figure something logical. Suppose Bert had killed Sam Rogers. And why would he kill Sam? As far as I knew Bert and Sam had never seen each other until Sam registered at the Liston House, so that let out anything personal. And that left only one strong motive. Money.

Sam had been planning to skip out on his wife and his partner. He had closed his savings account in St. Louis and cashed the draft in Milwaukee. He had been carrying the money with him and somehow Bert had found out about it.

But now Bert was dead. I thought that meant that Bert had had help when he got rid of Rogers—someone who had been afraid that Bert might get weak—or someone who didn't want to share the money with him.

I made a call to the Washington Hotel and got Irene Rogers.

"I'm afraid I've got bad news for you," I said. "It looks to me like your husband is dead. It's my guess that he's been murdered."

There was a silence and then a calm voice. "Tell me about it."

I told her what I knew and what I suspected. "Did you know he had the thirty-five thousand on him?"

She hesitated and then made up her mind. "I might as well tell you. Sam and I were going to break with Pete after he got through with this last list. Sam withdrew his money from the bank and was carrying it with him. He's built that way. He didn't want it out of his sight. We were going to the East Coast. Did you go to the police?"

"Not yet. Should I?"

Her voice was definite. "No."

"They'll be in on it eventually. When Bert's body is found, the police will also learn that I asked where he lived. They'll question me and I'll have to tell all I know just to protect myself."

"If the police get hold of the thirty-five thousand I might have a lot of trouble claiming it. After all, Sam didn't get it exactly clean and legal. If you find the money before the police—and don't tell them about it—five thousand of it is yours. Does that impress you?"

"I'm impressed. I'll do the best I can."

When I stepped out of the drugstore, Pete Cable was standing

there, waiting, on the sidewalk.

He smiled. "Been busy?"

"I thought you were going back to the big city."

"I got to thinking things over and I decided that maybe there was more to all of this than meets the eye." He worked the cellophane off a cigar. "So I decided that maybe I ought to stick around and see how you operate. This morning I followed you to that little place outside of town and watched. When you drove away, I took a look in the barn myself and saw the pieces of a car. And I thought to myself that the paint job looked kind of familiar. Then I took myself to the house and opened the door like you did. The man was mighty dead, wasn't he?"

"I didn't make him that way."

He nodded agreeably. "Didn't say that you did. Didn't even think so. Besides I didn't hear a shot. But it got me to thinking more. Why should somebody be cutting up Sam's car? And why would somebody want to kill that poor little old man? Night clerk at the Liston House, wasn't he? So I came back here and drove along Main Street until I saw your car."

"Did all your thinking give you any answers?"

"Not exactly. But I always feel that when there's trouble, there's money at the bottom of it. Right?"

"Nice day today, isn't it?"

He puffed a light to his cigar and threw away the match. "I noticed while I was poking around that place the cops didn't show up. I guess you forgot to call them?"

"But *you* took care of that for me, didn't you?"

"Slipped my mind too." Now his smile disappeared. "Let's level. What's this all about? I'll find out sooner or later. Why play coy with me?"

"There's nothing to be coy about. I don't know any more than you do."

He glared at me. "There's a body in the house and in the barn there's a cut-up car. The police will get to wondering why the night clerk was going through all that trouble and they'll trace the car. That will bring Sam into the picture. The police will keep pulling on the string and that means that Irene, and you, and eventually me, will all get into the act. I don't know how clean you are, Regan, but I don't want too many people to know too much about me. I'd like to run, but my brain tells me to stay around if I want to protect myself. What the hell happened to Sam? Did he just skip out or is there something else I should know?"

"I haven't got a thing to offer you, Cable. I'm walking in a cloud

myself." I got into my car and pulled away from the curb.

And now I wondered about Pete Cable. Was his mind as blank about this as he said? Or was it possible that he had actually caught up with Rogers and gotten rougher than he had planned? But then how did Bert Dryer fit in on this? I didn't think that Cable would go to a stranger and say, "Look, I've got a body and a car to get rid of. How about lending me a hand? I found thirty-five thousand and we can split that for your trouble." And yet Bert Dryer was in on this up to his dead neck.

I glanced at the rear-view mirror. A two-tone Buick was following me and I had been expecting that.

I pulled up at a small department store and went inside. The Buick parked fifty feet behind my car. Now Cable had the choice of waiting for me to come out of the front of the store or the rear. He couldn't be in both places at once. He probably swore, but he decided to stick with my car. If I shook him, at least he'd make me walk.

I used the rear exit and followed the alley toward the Liston House.

I wondered about Irene Rogers. She'd been with Rogers for three years and it looked like Sam hadn't been spending much money on her. And he didn't seem to be the kind who ever would. Had she decided that this was the best time to get hold of the thirty-five thousand—when Sam had it with him, not in a personal bank account?

Did she need Bert's help to get rid of the body and the car? Or was he blackmailing her and she had then decided to get rid of him?

But if she had the money, why had she brought me into this at all? She didn't need me and she wouldn't want me to do any digging. She could simply have put the money away and reported to the police that her husband was missing—if she wanted to bother about that at all.

Then who was Bert Dryer's partner? If it wasn't Cable or Irene, who else was left? It could be anybody, but I thought I had one good bet left.

The day clerk at the Liston House looked up when I entered. "Find Bert?"

"I knocked, but I guess he wasn't home."

The day clerk was a small man. Just like Bert. Would it take two men that size to move a body?

A card table had been set in the lobby and a pinochle game was in progress. The players all seemed to be in their late sixties or the seventies. I lit a cigarette and turned back to the day clerk. "You

work here all day, every day?"

He smiled faintly. "Have to. I own the place. Frank Liston's the name." He watched the card players for a moment. "Long hours, but it's really not too hard. Mostly sitting and waiting for something to happen and there hasn't been too much of that in the last ten years. Sunday's my only day off. Hire one of the college boys to take over. Only twenty-one, but dependable."

I wasn't interested in the college boy. I didn't think Bert would turn to him if he needed help to cover up a murder.

"Do you sleep here?" I asked.

"No. My wife and I got a little cottage on Chestnut."

"Bert Dryer been with you long?"

"Twelve years." His eyes went past me to the front door and I turned. A burly gray-haired State Trooper was turning the old-fashioned brass knob.

"That's Sergeant Stark," Liston said. "Looks serious about something."

Stark approached the desk. "Frank, I've got some bad news. Bert Dryer's dead."

Liston's mouth dropped. "Dead? Did he have an accident?"

Stark shook his head. "It was no accident, Frank. He was shot. Jim Hagen delivered a load of fuel oil to Bert's place a little while ago and when he was filling the barrels he happened to look into the kitchen window. He saw Bert lying on the floor."

Frank Liston looked at me and I thought I'd better do the talking about myself before he did. "I was out there just an hour ago, Sergeant. I knocked, but there was no answer and so I came back here."

Stark regarded me with interest. "Why did you want to see Bert?"

I showed him my credentials. "I was hired by a Mrs. Rogers to find her husband. He disappeared about a week ago. I traced him to this hotel. He registered, went to his room, and, according to Bert Dryer, left early the next morning. I tried to pick up from there, but I hit a dead end. So I thought I'd go to Bert again, figuring that he might remember something else that might help me."

"What does this Rogers look like?"

I gave him the photograph.

He studied it. "Never saw him around here." He handed back the snapshot. "A missing man and a murder? Do we have a coincidence here, or do they touch each other?"

"I have no idea, Sergeant."

"You say that you traced Rogers to this hotel? How?"

I told him about the punchboard routine Rogers and Cable had worked up for themselves. He

would find out about that later anyway and it would look much better for me if I told him myself. "Cable is in town now. If you want to talk to him before he leaves, you might look down Main Street. I saw him parked there not long ago." I described Cable and his car.

The sergeant looked dubious. He seemed to be thinking that the disappearance of Rogers and the punchboard racket needed looking into, but did they actually have anything to do with the murder he was working on now? Evidently he decided that he couldn't afford to overlook speaking to Cable. He moved toward the door. "Don't leave town for a while, Regan. We might have more to talk about."

When he was gone I slipped into the phone booth and called Irene Rogers. "The body of the night clerk has been found. The police have talked to me."

"What have you told them so far?"

"Just that I was looking for your husband. The punchboards came into the conversation too, but I didn't mention that your husband was carrying thirty-five thousand dollars with him."

"They'll find out about that too."

"Maybe. But if I don't tell them and you don't, who will? The man who killed Bert Dryer? I think we've still got a chance to get to the money before the police do. They'll be wanting to talk to you too when they find the connection between Dryer and your husband. You can be expecting to hear from them."

"All right. I'll keep quiet about the money."

I didn't see Stark again until five that afternoon.

He eased himself into one of the lobby chairs. "We found your man, Sam Rogers."

I looked pleased. "Where was he hiding?"

"In the ground." Stark found a cigarette and lit it. "We had men going over Bert Dryer's grounds. First they found a little hole about a foot deep behind one of Bert's sheds. From the outline we could make out at the bottom, it looked to us like somebody had dug up a cashbox. One of those little metal ones that most folks have in their homes for personal papers."

"Somebody murdered Bert for his money?"

"We thought of that, even though Bert never made much money or was known to keep it. But then we found a spot of disturbed ground in the patch of woods behind Bert's place. We dug down about two and a half feet and found Sam Rogers' body."

"How did he die?"

"We did an autopsy this afternoon. He died of a heart attack." Stark dragged at his cigarette. "And in the barn we found pieces of a car. We traced it through the motor block number. It belonged to Rogers. By the way, the sergeant at the Missouri Motor Bureau says that this morning somebody else called him about that car. A Sheriff Rhiordan of Eaton City."

"Have you talked to him?"

"There is no Sheriff Rhiordan." Stark watched me. "You wouldn't know anything about that call, would you, Regan?"

I adjusted my halo. "I'm afraid not, Sergeant."

Stark stared out of the window for a few moments. "The parts of this puzzle are far apart and a lot of them are missing, but I'll try making up a story. It's the only one I can think of now. Rogers registered at the hotel. Sometime during the night he had a fatal heart attack. Maybe he managed to call Bert to his room for help before he died. Or maybe Bert just found him."

"That still doesn't explain why Bert should bury him."

"I figure that the reason was money. Rogers had enough of it with him to make Bert do what I think he did. He found the money and he decided it ought to be his."

"Then why not just take it? Why go through the trouble of burying Rogers?"

"Because the odds were strong that somebody was bound to know that Rogers was carrying it. His wife. Perhaps his relatives. If Rogers' body was found without the money, there'd be an investigation and Bert would be in for trouble. The money *and* Rogers had to disappear. If there was a police investigation, the authorities would eventually come to the conclusion that Rogers decided to disappear—for reasons of his own. Happens every day."

"But then somebody killed Bert. Why?"

"For the money. Either somebody found out that he had it, or Bert had help in pulling this off and his partner decided he'd rather have all of it, instead of having to divide it up between them."

"What time was Bert shot?"

"The coroner puts it at about ten this morning."

"Do you have any idea at all who might have done it?"

"I had a good one. I thought of Frank Liston. He seemed about the most logical person Bert might turn to. Bert didn't have many friends and Liston might be tempted. His business hasn't been too good. But if Liston was Bert's partner, he couldn't have killed

Bert. He never left the hotel at all this morning, from about nine until I got there. There was a pinochle game going on in the lobby—some of the retired folks get together every once in a while for a game—and every one of the players swears that Liston never left his desk all morning."

Stark got to his feet. "I'll have to ask you to stay in town a litle while longer. And I'd like Mrs. Rogers' address. I'll have to tell her about her husband and I'd like to ask her some questions."

I gave him the information and after I watched the patrol car pull away from the curb, I picked up my car.

When I pulled in at Turk's Service Station, the kid came out of the office.

This time I showed him my credentials. "Last night I asked you about a man who got the winning number on your punchboard." I showed him Rogers' photograph. "Is this him?"

The kid nodded. "That's the man."

"His name is Sam Rogers. I want you to tell me everything that happened when he was here. Everything. What he did, what he said."

The kid thought about it. "Well, he pulled in here at about eight in the evening. He had me check his oil, but the stick showed that he didn't need any. Then he mentioned that he'd tried a punchboard back in River Falls and he wasn't lucky. So I told him that we had one too and maybe his luck would change. We went inside the office and Turk got out the card. Rogers got the lucky number after two or three punches."

"Then he left?"

"No. He asked where Harrison's drugstore was. I told him, but I said that Harrison closed at seven, except on Saturday nights. Then Rogers asked if there was any place where he could stay for the night. I told him that there was the Liston House just down the street."

"And that was all?"

"No. He said he had a flat tire. His spare in the trunk. He got it on the road and had to change it himself. Turk said that we were pretty busy right then and it would be a while before he could get around to it. We weren't too busy, but Turk was still steaming at Rogers picking the lucky number and I guess he just wanted to get back at Rogers some way. So Rogers said he'd leave the tire there and what time did we open in the morning so he could pick it up. Turk said nine. Rogers thought that over and said that he'd hoped to be on the road earlier. So Turk

said he'd bring the tire to the hotel when he got through fixing it. Rogers should leave his car in the parking lot behind the hotel. Rogers paid him for the work right then and drove off."

I looked into the office. Turk was busy filling out what looked like order blanks at the desk. "Turk fixed the tire and then took it over to the hotel?"

The kid nodded. "About an hour later he got around to it. We took the pick-up and drove over."

"Did Rogers leave the key to his trunk here?"

The kid scratched his head. "Come to think of it, he didn't."

"When did Turk get back?"

"He didn't. Phoned me in about a half an hour and said he wasn't feeling too good. Told me to shut up the place for the night. It was about a quarter to ten then."

I looked at my car. "The tires look a little soft to me. How about some air?"

While the kid went at that, I walked into the office. Turk looked up for a second and then went back to his figures.

I put a nickle in the cashew machine and turned the lever. "Nice town," I said. "But I hear you got your troubles."

He looked up. "What troubles?"

"Heard you had a murder. Somebody named Bert Dryer."

He went back to his paperwork. "Yeah. I heard about it."

I did a little chewing and then, "Well, that doesn't concern me. Not my case."

His eyes came up.

"The department has me looking for a Sam Rogers," I said. "We traced him to this town and then he disappeared."

He took hold of two words. "The department?"

I nodded and brought out the photograph. "You wouldn't have seen him around here?"

His face became expressionless. "I don't have a good memory for faces."

I sighed. "Been after him for some time. The last information we had was that he was carrying thirty-five thousand of the stuff."

He seemed to be perspiring faintly. "The stuff?"

I finished the cashews and dusted the salt from my fingers. "Thirty-five thousand. All of it counterfeit."

I went back out to my car, tipped the kid for checking the tires, and drove away. I took the car three blocks to the top of the hill on Main Street and parked. I turned in my seat and watched Turk's Service Station.

I thought I could put together a story that fitted now. Turk had fixed the tire and taken it to the

Liston House parking lot. He needed the key to open the trunk of Rogers' car. He had gone up to Rogers' room and knocked. There had been no answer and Turk had tried the doorknob. He had found Rogers dead.

What would Turk do next? I thought that his first reaction would be to rush downstairs to the desk and tell Bert Dryer. Both of them had returned to the room. After their initial shock, perhaps they had pried around a little. And they had found the money.

It was more than they had ever seen in their lives and they hadn't been able to turn their backs on it. They had decided that Rogers and everything that belonged to him had to disappear.

But then I had come to Eaton City and begun asking about Sam Rogers. Bert had phoned Turk and told him about me. Had Turk decided that he would be much safer with Bert out of the way? Or just richer? Had he forced Bert to reveal where he had hidden his share of the money and then killed him?

I thought that's the way things had gone.

Now Turk had thirty-five thousand dollars and he had committed a murder to get it. He was going to hang on to it.

But not if he thought the money was counterfeit. Then it was just paper, but it was paper that could send him to the chair. He would have to get rid of it and the sooner the better.

Where had Turk hidden the thirty-five thousand? In his service station? I thought not. Besides the kid working there, customers would be wandering in and out. There was too much of a chance that someone might accidentally run across it.

In his home? That was a good bet. I thought he'd want to keep it near him.

Below me the pick-up pulled out of the station and I could make out Turk at the wheel. I made a U-turn and followed, keeping two blocks behind and making sure that there were always at least two cars between him and me.

He turned off Main Street after three-quarters of a mile. This was residential and I dropped farther behind. The houses began to thin out fast and it became almost country.

He turned up the driveway beside a modest house set back on four or five acres of land. When I passed, he had parked and was striding toward a garage.

I drove on to where I could park and still keep an eye on the place.

I felt sure that he was after the money—or what he now thought

was just worthless pieces of paper.

Would he burn it? There was a danger of that, but I'd noticed that most of the people around here had oil burners to heat their homes and very few of them will take rubbish. If he went from the garage to the house, I would have to move in fast.

When he came out of the garage he was carrying a package about the size of a shoe box. He got back into the pick-up and when he reached the road he turned in my direction.

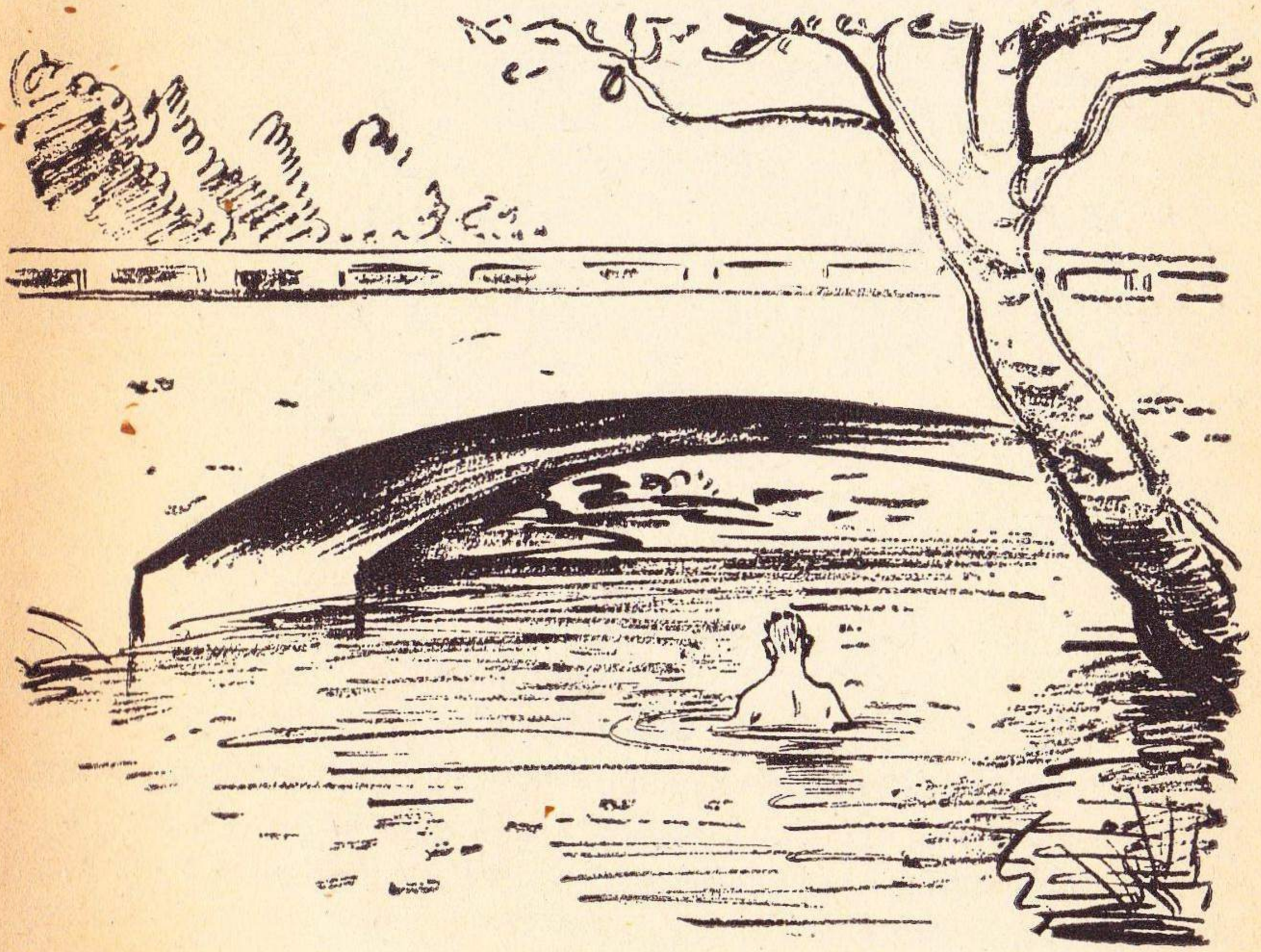
After he passed, I started the car. I kept a half a mile behind him, trailing behind other cars on the open highway, but still keeping him in sight.

Eventually he pulled up on the bridge over a small river.

When I passed him, I had one hand covering my face while I lit a cigarette. But he wasn't looking at the traffic. He had the hood of the pick-up open and was peering at the motor.

I went over the next hill and parked on the shoulder of the road. I walked back to a point where I could just see the bridge and Turk's truck.

The hood was still up and Turk appeared to be working on something under it. But every once in



a while he paused and glanced up.

I thought I knew what he was waiting for. He wanted the road clear of all traffic. That time came about seven or eight minutes later.

He quickly reached into the cab, brought out the package, and gave it a heave into the river. Then he jumped into the truck and headed back to Eaton City.

I ran to my car and drove to the bridge. The river was only about sixty feet wide and it was moving sluggishly. If the package had floated, it couldn't have gone far, but I thought it more likely that Turk had weighted it.

Under the bridge I stripped to my shorts. The river was shallow—the water never getting higher than my chest. I waded from bank to bank a half a dozen times before I finally stepped on the package.

I dried myself with a couple of handkerchiefs and back in the car I opened the box. The thirty-five thousand dollars was there and still dry in two cash boxes. One of them, I felt sure, had once belonged to Bert Dryer.

I drove north through a couple of small towns until I found a bus station with lockers. I rented one, put the money inside, and then drove back to Eaton City.

Would the police eventually get to Turk? I rather thought so. They are quite efficient.

And he would tell them why he had killed Bert and where he had gotten rid of the money. They would drag the river, but eventually have to stop with the idea that the current was enough to drag the box somewhere out of reach.

Thirty-five thousand dollars. Five for me and thirty for Irene? I smiled.

I would tell Irene that I never did get near the money.

It would be a sad thing for her, but I thought that we would get together again anyway. Irene, and me, and maybe Pete Cable.

That punchboard racket looked good to me.

And now that you have finished reading Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, how did you like it? I should find it gratifying to receive your reaction to the stories in it. Write to me at 2441 Beach Court, Palm Beach Shores, Riviera Beach, Florida.

(continued from other side)

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