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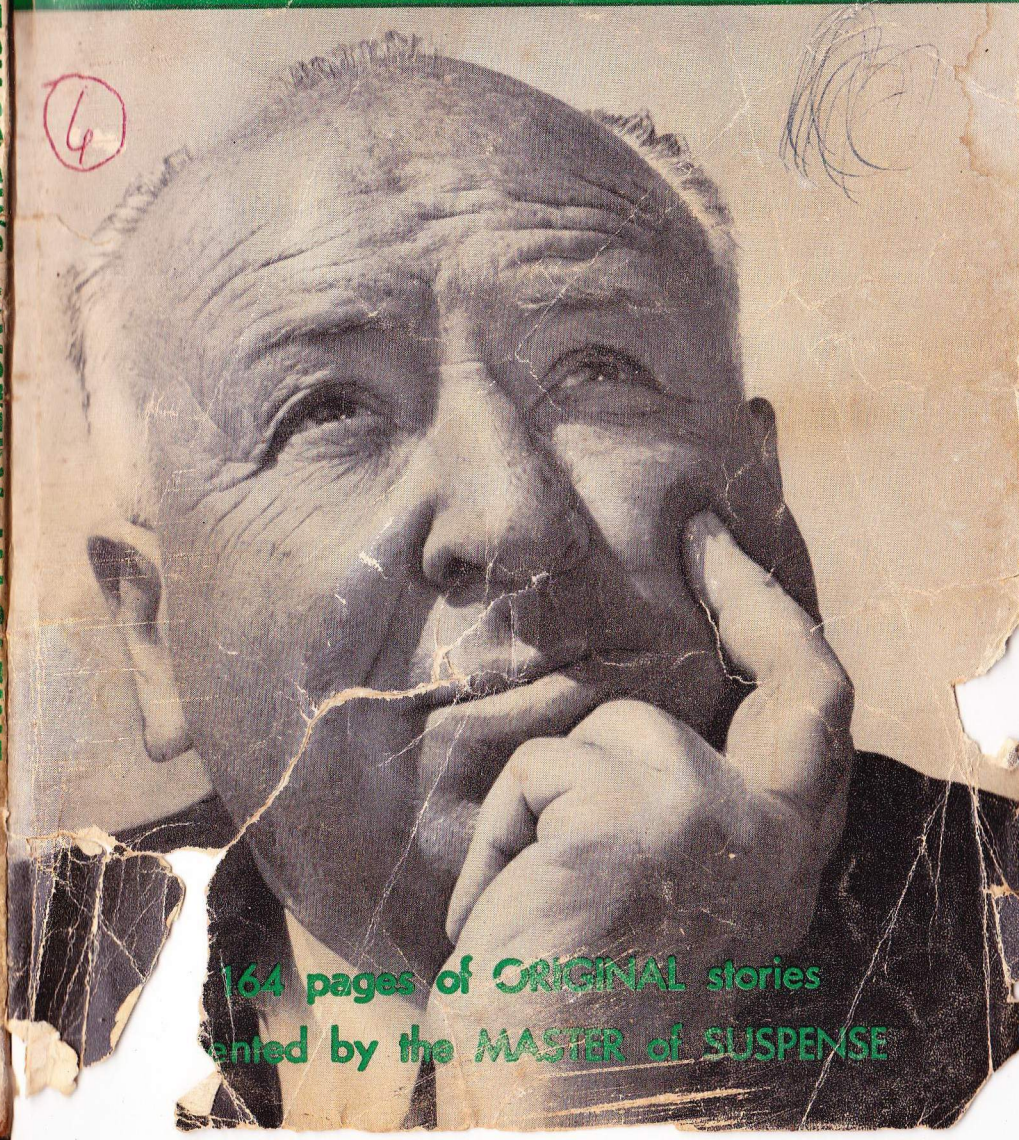
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



164 pages of ORIGINAL stories
ented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE MARCH 196-

Dear Friends:

As St. Valentine's Day bows its lace-paper embroidered head, and March wings its windy way toward the vernal equinox, I feel called upon to add a few cogent remarks about this great Christian martyr of the Third Century. In all innocence he really put the modern male on the spot. Comparing Valentine's Day recipients' remarks the other night I learned some wives, when receiving expensive gifts from expansive husbands, accept them graciously while others are incited to determine the motive for this largesse.

Back in the Third Century husbands seldom gave their wives tokens of appreciation, from what I've read. We've learned by way of Shakespeare that some of these chaps were far ahead, in mayhem and murder, than are the dilettantes of our time. Still in this issue of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine it is obvious some of these early wielders of wickedness may have been reincarnated. Even the ladies of an earlier day such as Lucretia, and Xanthippe, would pale at some present-day plots. For instance, anyone with an appetite for terror might try THE INTARSIA BOX by August Derleth as an aperitif.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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NOVELETTE

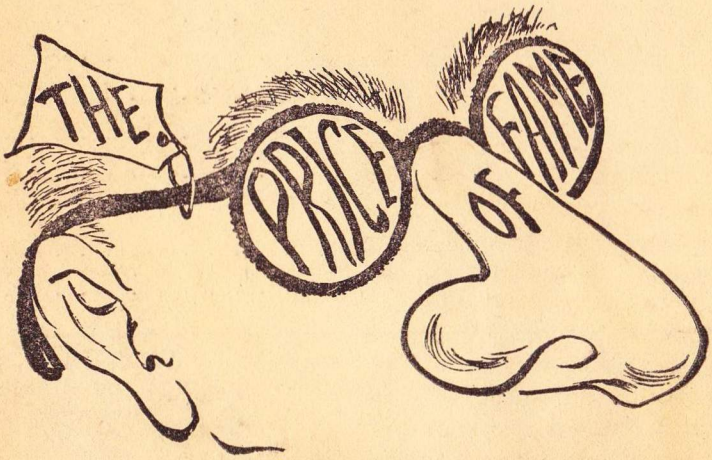
SHORT STORIES

One needn't be an exhibitionist to desire that his deeds be known and appreciated, but a reputation in many respects is like a mirror; it reveals much but may conceal even more.

HARRY CANNON always cased his jobs carefully. For ten days he had studied the layout of Gilbert's Liquor Store. He knew what time the place opened in the morning and when it closed at night. He knew the busiest hours of the day, and that the period just before the nine P.M. closing was the deadest. He knew what hours the two clerks worked and that the second-trick clerk left at eight P.M., leaving proprietor Arthur Gilbert alone for the last hour. One night he had even followed Arthur home to Long Island, so that he knew where the man lived.

But best of all he knew that Arthur Gilbert went to the bank only on Friday morning. Which meant that Thursday night, somewhere in the place, an entire week's receipts were hidden.

Cannon pulled up in front of the liquor store at exactly 8:55 P.M. Through the glass front window



he could see the plump, balding proprietor checking out the cash register. There were no customers in the place.

From the seat alongside of him Cannon lifted a false rubber nose attached to some black frames without lenses. When he fitted the frames over his ears, his appearance totally changed. His thin face seemed broader, and the contraption gave him a bulbous-nosed, owlish look in place of his usual

pinched, scowling expression. It also added ten years to his bare twenty-eight.

It was both an effective disguise and a safer one than a mask, for from a distance it didn't look like a disguise. There was always the danger of a mask being spotted from some nearby window or passing car. As he was, casual passers-by, unless they got too close, would

merely take him for a rather ugly man.

Slipping from the righthand door of the car, Cannon shot a quick glance in both directions, straightened his lanky form and strode briskly into the liquor store. The plump proprietor glanced up from his register with a customer-welcoming smile which disappeared the moment it began to form. His expression turned wary and he slowly raised his hands to shoulder height even before Cannon drew the thirty-eight automatic from his pocket. The instant reaction made Cannon feel a bleak sort of pride in his growing reputation.

"I guess you know who I am," he said between his teeth, stepping behind the counter and aiming the gun at the proprietor's belt buckle.

"Yes," the plump man said without fright, but still wearing a wary expression. "I won't give you any trouble. The money's right there in the drawer."

Contemptuously Cannon motioned him through a door immediately behind the counter, followed as the man backed into the storeroom, his hands still at shoulder height. After a quick glance around the room to make sure no one else was there, Cannon pushed the door partially shut to block the view from the street but still allow him a view of the main part of the store.

"Turn around," he ordered.

The man presented his back. "You won't have to shoot me," he said quietly. "I'm not going to try anything."

"You think I shoot people for nothing?" Cannon inquired sourly.

When there was no reply, Cannon said in a sharp voice, "Well, do you?"

"I know you have shot people," the plump man said carefully. There was no fear in his voice, but it was extremely cautious. "I was merely pointing out that you have no cause to shoot me. I intend to cooperate fully."

"Well, now. Then you can start by putting your hands down."

Slowly, carefully, the man lowered his hands to his sides.

"Get on your stomach," Cannon directed.

Without haste, but without delay either, the man dropped to hands and knees, then stretched full-length on the floor.

"Stay there until I tell you different," Cannon directed.

Glancing through the partially open door of the storeroom, he saw that no one was passing on the street. Opening the door wide, he thrust the gun into his belt and stepped out to the cash register.

The counter blocked the view of the prone man by anyone who might pass the front window, or even come into the store, but Cannon could still see him from the register. He kept flicking glances that way as he scooped bills from the open drawer and stuffed them into his suit-coat pockets. He ignored the change.

When the register was empty of bills, Cannon stepped back into the storeroom and partially closed the door again.

In a cold voice he said, "I guess you've read about me in the papers, haven't you, mister?"

"Yes," the man admitted.

"Tell me what you've read."

After a momentary hesitation, the man said, "They call you the Nose Bandit."

"I mean everything you've read."

"Well, you've held up a lot of places. I believe you've killed three people."

"You'd better believe it. What else?"

"The police advise not to resist you in any way."

"That's right. Why?"

The prone man said quietly, "I have no desire to make you angry."

"The only way you'll make me angry is not to do exactly as I say. Why do the cops advise people not to resist?"

With a sort of resigned caution, the man on the floor said, "They say you're a psychopathic killer. That you'll kill on the slightest provocation."

"Now you're coming along," Cannon said with approval. "Do you believe that?"

"I only know what I've read. If you want me to believe it, I will. If you don't, I won't."

"I want you to believe it," Cannon said coldly. "That psycho stuff is window dressing because the fuzz is too dumb to catch me, but you'd better believe I'll kill you if you give me any lip. You know why we're having this little conversation?"

"I have no idea."

"Because I figure it will save me a lot of time in the long run. You wouldn't refuse to tell me anything I wanted to know, would you, Mr. Gilbert?"

"I doubt that it would be safe," the proprietor said quietly.

"You *are* Arthur Gilbert, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I cased this job real thoroughly, Arthur. You keep a money box with the real cash in it. That chicken-feed in the register was just today's receipts. You bank once a week, on Friday, and this is Thursday night, so that money box ought to be real full. I figure I'll get to it faster if you tell me where it is

than if I have to hunt for it while you lie here dead on the floor. But it's up to you. I'm going to ask you once. If I don't get a fast answer, I'm going to blow your brains out. Understand?"

"Perfectly. It's behind the cognac on the bottom shelf over there in the corner."

"Point," Cannon instructed.

Raising one hand from the floor, Gilbert pointed.

Cannon had to remove two rows of cognac bottles before he found the square metal box behind them. It wasn't locked, so he was spared the irritation of having to make Arthur Gilbert produce the key. There was nearly five hundred dollars in bills in it, plus a stack of checks. He pocketed the bills only.

Walking over to the storeroom door, he glanced out, then drew back again when he saw a young couple slowly walking past the plate-glass front window. He waited a few moments, looked again and saw that the street in front was now clear of pedestrians. Pulling the door wide open, he momentarily turned back to the man on the floor.

"You stay in that position for five minutes, Arthur," he instructed. "If I see your head above the counter, I'll blow it off. Understand?"

"I understand," Gilbert said.

Without hurry Cannon walked from the store, climbed into the car in front of the store and drove away. A quarter block away he removed the fake glasses and false nose, folded them and put them into his inside breast pocket. Six blocks farther he abandoned the car in an alley across the street from a subway entrance, first carefully wiping the steering wheel and shift lever with a handkerchief. Ten minutes later he was on a subway to Brooklyn.

Within a half hour of the time he had left the liquor store, Cannon was ascending to the street from the Fulton Street station. He found his car parked where he had left it, a dozen yards from the subway entrance. He parked in front of his rooming house exactly at ten P.M. Tiptoeing past his landlady's room, he went up the stairs without her hearing him. He always left for a job surreptitiously and returned as quietly. You never knew when a landlady's testimony that you had been in your room all evening might come in handy.

In his room he counted the take. It came to five hundred and sixty-two dollars. It wasn't exactly in a class with the Brinks robbery, he thought, but with his simple needs it would carry him for weeks.

Part of the enjoyment Harry

Cannon derived from his chosen profession was the newspaper writeups he got. There was a scrapbook in a suitcase at the back of his closet containing news clippings of every job he had pulled There were twenty-two news accounts in all, the coverage on each progressively more detailed. The first, dated a little more than two years earlier, was a back-page, one-paragraph item describing a Bronx drugstore stickup by a man wearing a dime-store false nose and lensless frames. The latest was a full-column front-page spread headlined: NOSE BANDIT STRIKES AGAIN.

Cannon spent many quiet evenings in his room reading over his scrapbook. He particularly enjoyed comparing the sensational treatment his more recent exploits received with the routine coverage of his early jobs. Three kills had made him about the hottest news copy in town.

On Friday morning he was up early to buy all the New York papers. Back in his room again, he went through them one by one with growing puzzlement.

There wasn't a single mention of last night's robbery.

After some thought, it occurred to him that it was possible Arthur Gilbert had died of a heart attack after he had left the store, his body had been found and no one knew there had been a robbery. The man hadn't appeared particularly frightened, but that may have been mere surface control. Beneath it, he may have been scared to death. Then too, he had read that fat people were more subject to heart attacks than others.

He searched all the papers again, this time for obituaries. There was no mention of Arthur Gilbert.

At noon he went out to buy the noon editions, again for the late afternoon editions, and later for the evening papers. There was still no mention of the robbery and no obituary item on Arthur Gilbert.

By then he was so puzzled, he would have been tempted to drive over to Manhattan and drive past the liquor store to see if Gilbert was still in evidence, except for one thing; he couldn't have gotten there before nine-thirty P.M., and he knew the store would be closed. It would have to wait until tomorrow.

Saturday morning he bought all the papers again. When there was still no report of the robbery, he searched through each paper item by item to see if there was mention of Arthur Gilbert's death, for he could conceive of no other reason that it hadn't been reported. He didn't find an obituary on the liquor store proprietor, but he did

find something of interest in the personal column.

The item read: "If N.B., who visited my liquor store at closing time Thursday night will phone Circle 1-62006, he will learn something of great financial advantage."

"N.B." could stand for nose bandit, Cannon reflected. "A.G." could be Arthur Gilbert. Checking the other papers, he found the same ad running in all of them.

In the hallway outside his room there was a pay telephone, and on a small table next to it was a stack of telephone directories. He checked the Manhattan liquor store, and there it was: Circle 1-62006. He returned to his room to think the matter over.

It was evening before he came to the decision to phone the number. By then his curiosity was so aroused that he couldn't resist. But, in the event that it was some kind of police trap, he took the subway to Grand Central Station and phoned from one of the booths there. He made the call at 8:45 P.M.

When a pleasant voice said, "Gilbert's Liquor Store," Cannon said tersely, "I saw your ad."

There was a swift indrawing of breath, then Arthur Gilbert said with a peculiar mixture of relief and eagerness, "There's no one else here, so we can talk."

"Then start talking."

Gilbert said, "You noticed there was nothing in the papers about our—ah—meeting, I suppose."

"Uh-huh."

"I didn't report it. As a demonstration of good faith in case you saw the ad, I have a business proposition for you."

"Yeah? What kind?"

"A job for you. No risk, and the take is twenty thousand. We split fifty-fifty. Interested?"

Cannon was silent for a moment. Then he said, "This is a new one. A victim wanting to go partners with the guy who knocked him over."

In a reasonable tone the liquor dealer said, "You're the only person in your—ah—profession I've ever had contact with. If I had known how to contact someone with your talents, I would have done it long ago, because this plum has been waiting to be plucked for some time. I risked forgetting the amount you took the other night in the hope that I could get in contact with you. It was a real risk too, because it's going to take some fancy bookkeeping to cover the shortage."

There was another silence on Cannon's part. Then he said, "Why didn't you mention this job the other night?"

Gilbert said dryly, "You have a

reputation for being rather trigger quick. I thought of it, but I'm a cautious man. I thought it probable that if I tried to shift the subject of conversation, you'd put a bullet in my back before you understood what I was getting at."

"I might have," Cannon admitted. "I like people to listen and not interrupt when I've got a gun on them."

"I was still thinking of it five minutes after you left, and regretting that there was no way to get in touch with you. Then, just as I was reaching for the phone to call the police, I thought of placing a personal ad."

Cannon said abruptly, "We've talked enough for now, in case you've got cops tracing this call. I'll phone you Monday."

He hung up.

Back in his room Cannon considered the conversation from all angles. If the police were using Arthur Gilbert to set a trap, it seemed a rather far-out scheme. Cannon had never heard of a case where a victim was employed in an attempt to gain the confidence of a stickup artist.

The more he thought about it, the more he was inclined to believe that Arthur Gilbert actually was prepared to finger some job. Trying to put himself in the liquor dealer's place, he was unable to find any illogic in the man's actions. Convinced that all men were as basically dishonest as himself, it didn't seem in the least odd to Cannon that a seemingly law-abiding merchant would make himself accessory to armed robbery providing he had to take no personal risk. Cannon sincerely believed that fear of consequences was the only thing which prevented many ostensibly honest men from employing his own method of making a living.

Perhaps Arthur Gilbert had often daydreamed of how easy it would be to knock over the twenty grand he was now prepared to finger. He wouldn't have the guts to do it himself, of course, or, as he had pointed out over the phone, the underworld contacts to pass on his information to anyone who could use it. The thought of all that easy money would merely lie in the back of his mind, awaiting an accidental encounter with a real pro to give it concrete substance.

It was worth checking out in any event, Cannon decided. Providing he could make contact with Arthur Cannon without risk.

Turning his thoughts to this problem, it didn't take him long to work out a plan for making safe contact. If it *was* a police trap, by now Gilbert would have reported to the police that the Nose Ban-

dit had promised to phone again Monday. The fuzz would expect no further attempt at contact before then, and they certainly wouldn't expect it in any way other than a phone call at the store.

The only defect he could see in his plan to make contact was that it involved letting Arthur Gilbert see his face without diguise, something no other victim had ever done. But there was a solution to that. Once their business was finished, he could make another call at the liquor store some night and dispose of Gilbert.

He tabled the matter until Monday morning.

Though Cannon knew what commuter train Arthur Gilbert took home in the evening, because he had once followed him home and had sat two seats behind him on the train, he didn't know which train he took in the morning. It couldn't be a very early one, though, as the man didn't arrive at the liquor store until noon.

To be on the safe side, Cannon was parked at the station on Long Island at nine-thirty A.M.

When Cannon had followed the liquor dealer home, Gilbert had climbed into a parked station wagon when he got off the train. Lacking a car to follow him the rest of the way, Cannon had to content himself with checking the phone book. As only one Arthur Gilbert was listed on Long Island, he knew the man's address, but on the chance that Gilbert's home was under police surveillance, he thought it safer to wait at the train station rather than attempting to trail him clear from his home.

It seemed that Gilbert caught the ten A.M. train, for it was nearly a half hour before Cannon spotted his station wagon pulling into the parking area. The man was alone, and, since no other car followed him into the area, he didn't seem to be under surveillance.

Cannon reached the gate a step behind the liquor dealer. He was on his heels as the plump man entered a car. When Gilbert took a rear seat next to the window, Cannon sat next to him. The liquor store proprietor gave him a casual glance, then opened a morning paper.

As the train started to move, Cannon studied the other nearby passengers. At this time of day there were as many women as men, most of them having the appearance of housewives off on shopping trips. The men all appeared to be businessmen, and none so much as glanced at Gilbert. By the time the conductor had come by to collect Cannon's fare and punch Gilbert's commuter ticket, Cannon was satisfied that

no police officer had the liquor dealer under observation.

In a quiet voice Cannon said, "Let's resume our conversation."

Gilbert gave him a startled look. Carefully he folded his newspaper and laid it on his lap. He studied his seat-mate with fascinated eyes.

"Don't look a hole in me," Cannon said.

The liquor dealer emitted held breath. "You gave me a jolt, Mr. —ah—I don't suppose you want to mention your name. It's going to take me a moment to get used to you. I'm not a very courageous man, and frankly you scare me silly."

"You didn't act very scared the other night," Cannon said suspiciously. "And you don't look scared now. In fact, you look pleased."

"Oh, I am," Gilbert assured him. "But nevertheless you make me uneasy. I just conceal my emotions rather well."

This seemed logical to Cannon. Since he had begun to gain news headlines, most of his victims trembled with terror the moment he appeared. Gilbert's calmness had bothered him a little, and he was glad to know it was all front. He liked to be feared.

He asked, "What is this job?"

"Robbing my home."

Cannon stared at him. "Come again?"

"First I had better explain my circumstances," Gilbert said. "My wife has all the money in our family."

"Yeah?"

The liquor dealer gave his head a wry nod. "When you marry for

money, Mr.—I keep forgetting you have no name—you earn every cent of it. That little liquor store I run was financed by my wife, a sort of a bone she tossed me to give me something to do. Once a month her brother comes down to audit the books. If there's a nickel short, she knows it. That's what I meant when I told you I was taking a real risk in covering a shortage of over five hundred dollars. The total receipts are turned over to Emily and I get doled out an allowance. The house is in her name, the boat, the station wagon and the other car. Everything."

Cannon frowned. "How come you put up with that? No guts?"

Gilbert flushed slightly. "It isn't quite as bad as I make it seem. I have the use of everything she owns. Plus membership in an exclusive country club. Plus charge accounts in a dozen stores, so I can buy all the clothes I want. But cash I don't have. You'll never find me with more than fifty dollars in my wallet. Just once I'd like some real money of my own to spend without supervision. I'd like to spread my wings a bit before I'm too old to enjoy spending."

Cannon said without cynicism, "You've got some doll lined up, huh?"

Gilbert smiled a trifle sheepishly. "I'd rather not discuss my precise need for money. At any rate, my wife keeps a substantial sum in the house at all times, seldom less than twenty thousand dollars. It's in a wall safe in her bedroom."

"I'm no safe cracker," Cannon said dubiously.

"You don't have to be. I'll give you the combination."

Cannon's eyes narrowed. "If you know the combination, why don't you lift it yourself?"

"Because she'd know I took it. No one but the two of us know it. She'd throw me out of the house."

"With twenty grand, you could afford to be kicked out."

Gilbert smiled bitterly. "You don't know my wife. She would have me prosecuted and thrown in jail. And even if I got away with it, it wouldn't be worth it. I'm her sole heir and she's worth three-quarters of a million dollars. She's also not well. I prefer to stay in her good graces."

Cannon nodded. "Okay. What's the setup?"

"My wife is a semi-invalid and spends most of her time in her room. She had a slight stroke a couple of years ago and is paralyzed from the waist down. She has a practical nurse to take care of her when I'm not there, but Miss Prentice goes home as soon as I get in from work. Late at night the two of us are usually alone in the

house. We seldom have a guest."

"I see. You want me to walk in some night and stick you up?"

"Not when I'm there," Gilbert said dryly. "It's going to be a little more complicated than a simple stickup. We'll set a specific time and I'll arrange to be over next door at her brother's. She doesn't object to my leaving her alone for short periods, as long as she knows where I am. She has a bedside phone, so she can always reach me, you see."

Cannon gave him a bleak grin. "All right. Set a time."

Gilbert pursed his lips. "How about tonight? I get home about eleven P.M. and the practical nurse leaves as soon a I get there. Don—that's Emily's brother—never goes to bed until the late show is over, so there will be nothing odd about my dropping in on him at midnight. I do it often. Emily watches it too, as a matter of fact. You'll probably find her in her wheelchair in front of the portable in her room when you walk in. I'll leave by the side door. If you take a station by the garage, you'll see me leave and can use the same door to enter the house. I'll leave it off the latch."

"How do I get to her room?"

"The side door is on the east side of the house. Walk straight ahead down a hall to the stairs. At the top of the stairs turn right. Emily's bedroom is the second door on the right and the safe is behind the picture on the north wall. A word of caution, though. Don't let her hear you until the instant you open her door. That shouldn't be difficult, because there is wall-to-wall carpeting throughout the house. But walk softly anyway. She keeps a gun in her bedside stand, and I don't want any shooting. In spite of her strictness about money, I'm really rather fond of the old girl. I want your promise that you won't harm her."

Cannon said, "I never harm anybody who behaves."

When Gilbert looked a little dubious, Cannon said, "If you're thinking about those three, I had reasons. That smart punk in the filling station tried to jump me. The woman in that drugstore started to scream her head off. And the old man in the delicatessen wouldn't tell me where he kept his cash box. I don't use my gun unless it's necessary."

Cannon's reasons for killing didn't seem to reassure Gilbert much. He continued to look dubious. He said, "Well, it can't possibly be necessary in this case. She can't jump you because she can't move from her chair without assistance. And she can't scream because she speaks only in a bare whisper. Her stroke

partially paralyzed her vocal chords. I want your assurance that you won't harm her or the whole deal is off."

"I told you I don't gun people for nothing," Cannon said irritably. "That psycho killer stuff is just to make news. What's the safe combination?"

Gilbert gave his head a slow shake. "You don't get that until the last minute. You might get the idea to walk in before I got home and clean the safe without cutting me in. I wouldn't want you to try it with Miss Prentice there. *She* might try jumping you or screaming. And I don't want anyone killed. You meet me when I walk out the side door and I'll give you the combination."

Cannon shrugged.

"Now you can't simply walk to the safe and open it," Gilbert said. "Emily would wonder how you knew the combination. You'll have to fake being a professional safecracker. Put your ear to the safe as you turn the knob and so on. Will you do that?"

"I'll put on an act," Cannon agreed.

"You won't have to worry about Emily giving an alarm even after you leave," Gilbert said. "If you cut the phone cord in her room, she'll be quite helpless. Her's is the only extension on the second floor, and she can't get downstairs in her wheelchair. She can't even scream. She'll simply have to wait until I return. I'll stay over at Don's until one A.M. in order to give you plenty of time for a getaway. All you have to do is lift the ten thousand dollars from the safe and walk out."

"Ten thousand?" Cannon said with a frown. "I thought it was twenty grand."

Gilbert smiled slightly. "You'll have to forgive me for my lack of trust, but how do I know you'd arrange to get my split to me? I haven't the slightest idea who you are or how to get in contact with you. I'll remove my half before you arrive. Emily always wheels her chair to the stairhead with Miss Prentice when she leaves, so I'll have an easy opportunity."

Cannon's last lingering doubts about the liquor dealer's good faith evaporated. Though his manner hadn't indicated any distrust of the arrangements, ever since the conversation started Cannon had been searching for some hint that the whole thing might be an elaborate police trap. The realization that Gilbert didn't trust him any more than he trusted the liquor dealer settled his suspicions once and for all.

There was one factor Gilbert apparently hadn't considered though,

Cannon thought with a grim inner smile. What was to prevent him from cold-cocking the liquor dealer as he came from the side door, relieving him of his ten thousand, then going inside for the rest?

A moment later he was startled to learn that Gilbert *had* considered this factor. The plump man said casually, "Incidentally, in case you have thoughts of getting the entire twenty thousand, the excuse I plan to use for going over to Don's house is to show him my new shotgun. It's a double-barrelled ten-guage. I'll have it in my hands when I walk out of the house. Loaded. As I mentioned before, I'm not a very courageous man, but I really wouldn't have much fear of going up against a pistol with a shotgun. It would be a pretty one-sided duel."

In spite of himself Cannon began to feel grudging respect for the careful planning Arthur Gilbert had done.

After a moment Gilbert added, "On the other hand, you don't have to fear my double-crossing you by blasting with the shotgun when I walk out. The only way I can stay clear of suspicion is for you to rob the safe and get away clean."

Cannon nodded. "I guess we understand each other. We'll pull it off tonight."

It would have been pointless for Cannon to ride the train all the way back to Long Island to pick up his car, drive it back to Brooklyn, then have to drive to Long Island again that night. He simply left the car there all day and caught the evening train which left an hour before the one Arthur Gilbert took. This gave him an hour to case the layout before Gilbert arrived home.

The home was a broad, two-story brick building set well back from the street with a good fifty feet of lawn between it and the houses on either side. Driving past it slowly, Cannon noted only two rooms were lit. One, on the lower floor, was probably the front room. The other was a front corner room upstairs. He guessed this to be Emily Gilbert's room.

Though he had abandoned all suspicion of a police trap, he searched the shadows beneath trees as he passed anyway. There was no sign of a stakeout. A several-years-old car was parked in front of the house, but he saw it was empty as he passed. He assumed it probably belonged to the practical nurse.

Cannon circled the block, parked a half block away and cut through several back yards to reach the double garage behind Gilbert's home. The garage doors were open and he could see a large sedan

parked in the stall which wasn't vacant.

There was a half moon, but a huge elm near the garage cast the east side of the building in deep shadow. Cannon leaned against the side of the garage and waited. From this point he had a perfect view of the side door fifty feet away.

A few minutes before eleven headlights swung into the driveway. Cannon faded behind the garage until the station wagon drove into it, then moved back to his former position.

A car door slammed and footsteps sounded on the concrete floor. Then Arthur Gilbert's plump form rounded the corner and the man peered toward him in the darkness.

"That you?" Gilbert inquired cautiously.

Cannon said, "Uh-huh."

The liquor dealer made a relieved noise. "All set?"

"Uh-huh," Cannon repeated.

"Just wait here until I come out," Gilbert instructed. "I'll come to you. I'll try to make it by eleven-thirty."

"Okay," Cannon said laconically.

Turning, the plump man walked away and entered the house by the side door. Cannon leaned his back against the garage and waited.

Harry Cannon was a patient man, which was one of the reasons he was so successful in his field. He was capable of standing for hours without boredom, studying the comings and goings of customers, when casing a potential job. The wait the next half hour didn't bother him in the least. He didn't even feel the need of a cigarette.

A few minutes after Gilbert went indoors, a woman in white uniform came from the side door and walked down the driveway to the street. A moment later he heard the car parked in front drive away.

It was just eleven-thirty when the side door opened again. The plump figure of Arthur Gilbert appeared and moonlight glinted from the twin barrels of the shotgun under his arm. Cannon straightened as the man approached. When Gilbert got within a few feet of him, the barrels raised to center on Cannon's stomach.

"What's that for?" Cannon asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Just precaution," Gilbert said quietly. "I'm going to give you the combination now, and I'll feel safer having you covered once you have that. I plan to keep the ten thousand I have in my pocket."

"You think of all the angles, don't you?" Cannon said coldly.

"What's the correct combination?"

"R-3, L-27, R-4, L-2. Better repeat it to yourself a few times."

Cannon soundlessly began moving his lips. After a time he said aloud, "R-3, L-27, R-4, L-2." He gave Gilbert a questioning look.

"You have it," Gilbert said with approval. "Emily is in her chair watching television. Do you have your disguise?"

Reaching into his inside breast pocket, Cannon drew out the false nose and fitted it into place. The shotgun continued to bear on him.

With a frown Cannon said, "Well, get started next door."

The liquor dealer's teeth showed in the darkness. "I don't think I want to turn my back on you, friend. I'll go next door after you're inside."

"You're a trusting soul," Cannon growled.

He circled the man and the shotgun moved with him. He was conscious of it still aimed at his back when he reached the side door. Trying the door, he found it unlocked, pushed it open, then glanced back toward the garage. Gilbert stepped from shadow into moonlight, the shotgun now aimed downward. Lifting one hand in a salute, the man moved off across the lawn toward the house next door.

Cannon entered the house and quietly shut the door behind him.

There was only a dim light on in the hall, which bisected the house from one side to the other. At its far end he could see the stairs. His feet moved soundlessly on the thick carpeting as he went the length of the hall and climbed the stairs to the upper floor. There was a night light on in the upper hall too. Without sound he moved to the second door on the right and placed his ear against it. Inside he could hear a television set going.

Drawing his gun, he flicked off the safety, placed his hand on the knob, turned it and slammed the door wide open.

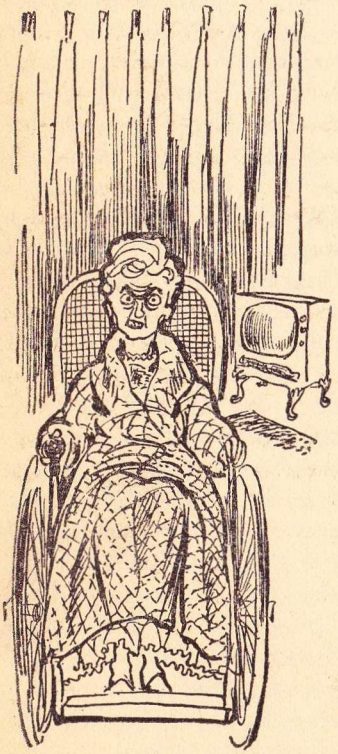
Directly facing him was a middle-aged, gray-haired woman seated in a wheelchair. She wore a robe over a nightgown and her eyes were burning with rage. Her lips were moving soundlessly in what seemed to be mute curses. Both hands rested on the arms of the chair and the right one held a revolver, its butt firmly set against the wood of the chair arm. The muzzle pointed straight at the doorway.

Cannon reacted faster than he had ever reacted in his life. His finger was squeezing the trigger before the knob of the door crashed back against the wall.

The bullet caught the woman squarely in the heart. Her mouth

popped open and her right arm jolted from the chair to hang downward, still gripping the gun. She made a gurgling noise in her throat and her head slowly slumped to her chest.

With one stride Cannon was across the room and had jerked her head up by the hair. One look was enough. She had died instantly.



Flicking on his safety, he shoved the gun into his belt and moved to the picture on the north wall. Jerking it from its hook, he flung it aside. Behind it, just as Gilbert had said, was a small wall safe.

Mouthing the numbers aloud, he rapidly spun the dial. Within a matter of seconds the safe was open. His eyes lighted with satisfaction at the thick stack of currency inside. He didn't bother to count it, ramming it into various pockets as rapidly as he could. It took both coat pockets and both side pockets of his trousers to hold it all.

Within a minute and a half of the time he had entered the room, he strode out again and ran toward the stairs.

He came to an abrupt halt as he rounded the corner and reached the top of the stairs. On the landing below him stood Arthur Gilbert with the shotgun aimed upward. He was smiling quite calmly.

Cannon's last thought was the indignant realization that Arthur Gilbert had lied to him. The liquor dealer had said he wasn't a courageous man. In that final moment Cannon could tell by the expression on his face that he was as cold-blooded and emotionless as

Cannon himself, no doubt about it.

He made a frantic grab for his belt, got the gun halfway out just as both barrels of the shotgun blasted. He felt a searing flash of pain which seemed to encompass his whole body, then he felt nothing.

Stepping over the dead man, Arthur Gilbert moved to the open door of his wife's bedroom. Viewing the scene inside with satisfaction, he leaned his shotgun outside the door and went inside.

He had some difficulty prying her stiff fingers away from the gun, nearly as much as he had had earlier when he forced them around it. When it was free, he dropped the gun into the drawer of the bedside stand and closed the drawer.

Then he left the room and went downstairs.

The side door burst open just as he reached the bottom of the stairs. A tall, lean man of about fifty rushed in, came to an abrupt halt and stared at Gilbert. Moving toward him like a sleepwalker, Gilbert allowed his face to assume an expression of dazed shock.

"For God's sake, what was all the shooting?" the lean man inquired.

Gilbert said dully, "The Nose Bandit, Don. Miss Prentice must have left the door unlatched when she left. I was in the basement cleaning my new shotgun when I heard the shot. I loaded it and rushed upstairs just in time to meet him coming down. He's dead. I let him have both barrels."

"What about Emily?" his brother-in-law asked.

"That was the first shot," Gilbert said, his face squeezing into an expression of grief. "Her bedroom safe is wide open and she's dead. He killed her."

"Oh, no!" the lean man said in a horrified voice. "Poor Emily!"

The lowly hangover is an affliction reflecting real misery. Fortunately, however, there is a limit to human suffering, a point beyond which one might as well be dead.

Two Women BETWEEN

TONY COURTNER had already had too much to drink. In the inner recesses of his mind he was aware of this fact. But he mixed himself another batch of martinis anyway, maybe just to spite Alison. Maybe she was the reason he drank; maybe she wasn't. He'd sort of lost track.

"Tony, please."

That was about all she could say to him these days, "Tony, please." She sat over in the far corner of the sofa, wanting to keep an eye on him, wanting to count his drinks, but definitely not wanting to be too near him, not wanting him to touch her. Her brown eyes watched him. Her hair, the same color, was still slightly mussed from the tussle they'd had when she'd tried to stop him from taking the bottle of gin from the cabinet. She was a tiny woman and hadn't been any match for him.

"Tony, let's have dinner. The

roast will be terribly overdone."

"Then take it out of the oven," he told her curtly. "Want to have a couple of drinks before dinner."

"A couple! You've had six."

So that was how many he'd had. Six. There wasn't more than an inch of gin left in the bottom of the bottle. "I need another bottle," he told her.

"There isn't any more."

"Look, I bought a whole case."

by C. B. GILFORD

"Yes, Tony, about three weeks ago, but it's all gone. You drank it."

"Well, I distinctly told you I wanted a supply of liquor kept in the house. You bring in everything else. You're never lacking for anything, I notice. Always plenty of yogurt and carrot juice and that other stuff in the refrigerator. Well, gin is my health food, do you understand? Do you understand, Alison? Need I repeat myself?"

"Tony, why are you screaming? You always scream when you're drunk."

"I am not drunk!"

He turned away from her savagely, and concentrated all of his attention on stirring his skimpy batch of martinis. He wasn't drunk, and he didn't appreciate her claiming that he was. He'd had a few, but he hadn't lost control.

He was standing with his back to her, but he heard her cross the room going toward the kitchen. Then there were other noises from that direction. She'd be checking the dinner, trying to keep it warm without burning it. Finally she was behind him again, speaking to him from the kitchen door.

"I turned off the stove," she said.

He didn't look at her, only shrugged his shoulders. "So?"

"It's foolish for me to try to cook. You're not interested in food. You live on alcohol."

He snickered. "It tastes a lot better than your cooking," he told her.

"Let's face it, Tony. You're an alcoholic."

He whirled on her. He started to speak, had trouble with his tongue. She stood there in the doorway, contemptuous, accusing. He hated her self-righteousness, her assump-

tion of superiority. Finally he managed to come out with the words. "Now there's an understanding wife for you. A guy has a couple of drinks before dinner, and all of a sudden he's an alcoholic."

But she stood her ground. "Not all of a sudden, Tony. This has been going on for months. You sneak out of the office in the middle of the day to have a drink. You come home every night smelling of it. And then you spend the whole evening drinking. It's got to stop, Tony."

"Look who's giving orders," he sneered.

She shook her head. "I'm just making it a condition, Tony. You can take your choice. Either you stop, or I'm leaving you."

In the first minute he just didn't believe it. This was a trick, a pose. She was trying to scare him. Then quickly his incredulity became anger. He took a step toward her, a red haze beginning to color his vision.

"Look," he said thickly, "you took me for better or worse. Remember? I've given you five years of my life, Alison. I've worked hard, made a little money, and you've had it all. I work hard, you understand? For you, nobody but you. But I've got to unwind a little after a tough day. That's something that goes with the bargain. You made a bargain. And you're not walking out."

And to prove his point, mainly that he was still the boss, he tipped up his martini glass and drained every drop out of it. The taste was strong, burning, the amount of liquid choked him, and the room heaved before his eyes, like the deck of a ship.

Alison understood his gesture. "I've had it, Tony," she shouted. "I'm leaving!"

He hurled the empty glass in the direction of her face. He wasn't quite sure whether she ducked successfully or his aim was poor. But he was aware that the glass hadn't hit her. Enraged, desperate to do her harm, to stop her from going, he lunged toward her, his hands reaching for her shoulders . . . or possibly her throat.

Everything grew hazy and uncertain then. His clawing fingers grasped something. But he couldn't seem to keep his footing. His eyes played tricks on him. His fogged brain groped for reality in the same way that his hands groped for Alison. And then he ceased to remember.

He awoke, as it were, in a bar. He had gotten there somehow under his own power. Sound came to his consciousness first. Raucous, tinny music from a jukebox, and

under it a steady babble of voices, punctuated by harsh laughter. Later, it seemed, his eyes began to focus, and he saw the girl.

"You poor guy," she said to him.

Why did she think he was a poor guy? He blinked, stared at her, trying to identify, to recall. But he was sure he had never seen her before. She was a blonde, the real bright yellow kind, with her hair frizzy all around her head. Her face was almost perfectly round, possibly wouldn't even have been pretty without the thick red on her mouth and the heavy mascara. Her bare shoulders weren't exactly fat, but they were kind of extra soft and full looking, and she was bosomy, as her tight black dress showed.

"Why should a wife make a fuss just 'cause her husband takes a drink or two? Some of these babes got their nerve, if you ask me."

So he'd been talking to this woman. Maybe he'd been here a long time, in this strange bar that he'd never been in before. And he'd met this woman and had been spilling his soul to her.

But where was Alison? He searched his memory, but that whole function of his brain was operating uncertainly. He could remember only vague shadows of things—his drinking, the argument, Alison's threat, the throwing of the glass, and his attempt to take hold of Alison, to keep her from leaving. What then?

He shook his head, but the effort failed to dislodge any cobwebs. He had a suspicion though, of what must have happened. He'd lunged at Alison and missed, slipped, fallen, konked out. When he'd awakened, he'd recalled dimly there was no more gin in the house, so he'd headed for a bar. In his drunken confusion he'd found this dump.

"I am not drunk," he said belligerently.

" 'Course you're not drunk," the blonde assured him.

"I don't get drunk. Never. My wife says I'm an alcoholic, but I'm not. Never been drunk in my life."

To comfort him further, the blonde put a hand on his. It was a pudgy hand, not a bony hand like Alison's. This was the sort of hand he liked. It was warm, and the pressure of it meant sympathy, understanding.

The blonde nodded toward the bar, and a waitress sauntered up. "What are you drinking, honey?" the blonde asked him.

"Double martini," he said. He patted the friendly, pudgy hand. "What'll you have?" he asked her.

"Scotch."

The waitress went away and he looked across at his companion. Her eyes were blue, wide, and had

a strange innocence about them.

"What's your name?"

"Marva. What's yours?"

"Tony. Tony Courtner."

"You're okay, Tony."

They drank together, and talked, but mostly about Alison. "I make good money," he said, "and I bring her practically every cent of it. I work hard. I don't go out with women. What does she expect? When a guy works hard, the tensions build up. He's got to get rid of them some way. So I take a drink now and then. Helps a lot. Relaxes me. But Alison doesn't like it."

"She doesn't appreciate you, Tony."

"It's nothing more than that, you understand. Just a little drink to calm my nerves." And then somehow, he found himself telling about the argument, the fight. And the ending of it, unremembered.

"Where's your wife now?" Marva wondered.

"Gone, I guess."

"Gone where?"

"Who knows? Who cares?"

He had another double martini, maybe two. He lost count. Things were getting hazy again. He babbled on about Alison. He'd tried to grab her to stop her from leaving. Matter of pride. No, it wasn't that. He hated her. He'd wanted to kill her. Yeah, that was it. One of those real quick things that comes over a guy when he's mad. Wanted to kill her. But his foot had slipped or something. Of course, he really wouldn't have killed her. Maybe just hit her. He wasn't a murderer. Just a guy who had a right to be mad. Couldn't remember though, whether he had actually hit her.

"That wife of yours, Tony, she didn't know what a good deal she had. She deserved to be slapped around."

The haze before his eyes was getting thicker, more impenetrable. But the world was all right, because he had a friend. Marva was a good friend.

"Let's take you home, honey," she said.

He didn't think he'd driven his car. He put his arm around Marva, and she steadied him nicely. Out on the sidewalk she hailed a cab and helped him into it. It surprised him a little when she climbed in beside him, but he put his head on her soft bare shoulder, and the warmth of her felt good. He gave the driver his address, then slept during the ride home.

He received another mild surprise when Marva paid the driver, sent the cab off, walked with him up the path, helped him find the key and unlock the door. When she came inside with him though,

he shook his head in mild protest.

"Hey, Alison wouldn't want you in here."

"Your wife is gone," she said.

"Yeah . . . yeah, that's right."

He didn't go into the kitchen, but on his way to the bedroom, he just angled past the kitchen doorway, the place where he'd last seen Alison. What he saw there now was only the pieces of the martini glass he'd thrown. Meticulous housekeeper though she was, Alison hadn't stayed long enough to clean up the mess.

Did he awaken and move around during the rest of the night? Or did he sleep heavily, and merely imagine movement and wakefulness during a parade of nightmares? He asked himself these questions at the time, while he was dreaming—if he was dreaming—and also later. If these experiences were dreams, Alison invaded them, like a restless ghost, accusing him, haunting him.

Had the glass he'd thrown actually hit her? In one dream, at least, it had, for her face rose before him, cut and bleeding, dreadful to look at—and he had to do something, anything, to get rid of the awful vision. So he dug a hole and buried Alison's body in it. Then for a while he seemed to feel better.

When he awoke, really awoke for certain, sunshine was streaming in the windows. It was already too late to bother going to work, and he had a horrible headache. But his mind was much clearer. He began to piece his world together, and the picture wasn't very pleasant. There'd been that awful, stupid argument with Alison. . . .

A noise from the kitchen interrupted his thoughts—a domestic kind of noise, made by a frying pan or something. He rushed out of the bedroom and toward the noise, shouting gratefully, "Alison . . . oh, Alison . . ."

There was a woman in the kitchen making noise with the frying pan all right, but it wasn't Alison. Instead it was a big blonde woman, vulgar in a tight black dress, her round, puffy face heavily adorned with lipstick and mascara.

"Who are you?" he blurted.

"I'm Marva. Remember?"

Yes, slowly, he did remember now. But the memory only confused him further. "Where's Alison?" he demanded.

"Not here."

"Was she here at all . . . ever?"

The big blonde shook her head.

That was a relief to him, in a way, that Alison hadn't seen him with this woman. "Well look . . . have you been here . . . all night?"

"Sure. I slept in the guest room."

"Well, fine." He hesitated, but finally had to be frank. "Thanks for bringing me home. I guess I was pretty bad off. But I'm okay now. So I won't need you any more." He reached in his pocket, found a couple of bills, and thrust them at her. "Here's for your trouble. I mean, I guess you paid for the drinks and the cab."

She accepted the money and put it down the front of her dress, but she made no move to leave. He stared at her. Didn't she understand?

"You'd better go now. I've got to get dressed and go to the office."

"I'll fix your breakfast."

"Thanks, but I really don't feel like eating."

Marva shrugged her bare, plump shoulders, and set the frying pan aside. He noticed that the kitchen was a bit messy. Alison had always kept everything so neat. This woman must have been cooking for herself.

"Okay," she said, going past him toward the living room. "There's a nice roast in the freezer. What time do you get home for dinner?"

A little twinge of annoyance, hardly alarm, passed through him, and he forgot about his headache. He followed her into the living room, and discovered that she was already curled up on the sofa, paging through Alison's magazines.

"Hey!" That was all he could think of to say.

She looked up at him, her blue eyes innocent and questioning. "Hey, what?"

"What do you think you're doing? You can't stay here."

"Why not? Don't you like me, Tony?"

He chewed his under lip and tried to remain calm and patient. "Well, sure I like you. And I'm very grateful for your taking care of me last night. But you can't just sit there like that. What if Alison walks in and finds you here? She wouldn't understand . . ."

His protest dwindled off into an uneasy silence. He didn't like the look on Marva's face. There was something there underneath the wide-eyed innocence. He didn't know what it was, only that it frightened him.

She returned his stare for a long time before she asked the question. "Don't you remember?"

"Sure, I remember," he answered, but without confidence. "Lots of things. Alison walked out on me. I got pretty drunk, met you in a bar, and you brought me home." He hesitated again. "What else is there to remember?"

"You were blind, staggering drunk, Tony."

"Okay, so I was. So what?"

"I guess you really don't remem-

ber. Or maybe you don't want to."

"Remember what, for Pete's sake?"

"What happened to Alison."

A cold, terrifying chill seeped into him. A voice from a great distance, not sounding like his own voice at all, asked fearfully, "What happened to Alison?"

"You killed her."

The room swam giddily before his eyes. The big bosomy blonde became the center of a whirlpool revolving ever more swiftly, threatening to suck him in. He groped for a chair, finally found one, and waited till the worst of the physical sensation had passed.

After a while he asked weakly, "How do you know I killed her?"

"How do I know? I saw her body. She'd been strangled."

"By me?"

"Who else? You told me the whole story in the bar, about this big argument you had with her. Then we came home, and there she is on the kitchen floor. What else is it supposed to be if you didn't kill her?"

He shook his head in desperate denial. "But I don't remember doing it."

"Honey, you don't remember a lot of things. About how you got from here to where you met me last night, for instance."

He had to admit that much. He'd been drunk, but not the kind of drunk where you collapse and fall asleep somewhere. He'd been active, done things, like finding that strange bar, and . . . yes, it was possible . . . strangling Alison. He'd been enraged and drunk, a combination that could have meant murder.

Suddenly he stood up. "You said the body was on the kitchen floor. I've been in the kitchen. There isn't any body there."

She looked away from him, and went back to paging through the magazine. "Not now," she said.

He crossed to where she sat, and stood over her. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"It's gone, that's all."

"Gone where?"

"I took care of it, honey. Don't you understand? You don't have a thing to worry about." She flipped pages, then stopped to gaze at an advertisement featuring mink coats. "There's not a thing to worry about, honey. Go eat a bite of breakfast, take a shave, and get yourself down to the office."

The transition was accomplished more smoothly than he had ever imagined such a thing could happen. One day Alison had been his wife, and they had lived together in this semi-secluded little ranch house. The next day Alison was

gone, and her place taken by another "wife," a new "Mrs. Courtner", and nobody seemed particularly to care.

There were reasons for this phenomenon, of course. The Courtners were fairly new in the neighborhood. Alison had no close friends locally. She hadn't wanted to get involved socially, she'd once said, because Tony had gone to drinking so heavily.

A whole week passed. Marva came and went frequently. But nobody questioned her. Perhaps some telephones buzzed with the gossip, about the blonde Mr. Courtner seemed to have taken up with, but nobody confronted Mr. Courtner with his breach of social etiquette. And nobody thought of mentioning anything to the police.

Many of the frequent comings and goings of the new Mrs. Courtner were to the big department stores where Alison had had charge accounts. Marva, proving to be a very versatile girl, managed a rather good forgery of Alison's signature as it appeared on the charge plates. Delivery trucks arrived every day at the Courtner house. Marva blossomed forth in gay-colored gowns, usually of the cocktail and evening type, expensive shoes and purses, atrocious hats. She also acquired the best lingerie and hosiery, a collection of rather gaudy costume jewelry, a fur stole.

Tony Courtner, though he saw his bank account dwindling to nothing, did not complain aloud. Although Marva brought in a supply of Scotch for herself, he stopped drinking completely, and instead he brooded. He brooded about the missing corpse, and wondered where it might be. Nowhere on the premises, he was certain of that. In fact, he looked around surreptitiously. No freshly turned dirt was visible in the yard. How could Marva, on the spur of the moment, dispose of an object as bulky as a body? When had they come home

that night? Midnight or thereabouts? She had five or six hours of darkness to work in. His car had been in the garage, available for transportation. She could have taken Alison's body almost anywhere. Marva was a big woman, strong, and Alison had been so small. It was all possible, terrifyingly possible.

He did what he could to check out the other alternatives. Alison had a sister in Oregon. But he didn't dare to communicate with that sister to ask if Alison had gone there; if she hadn't, the sister would undoubtedly become suspicious and alert the police. Besides, it seemed unlikely that Alison had gone anywhere voluntarily. None of her clothing was missing from the closets except what she had been wearing.

Helpless, frustrated, all he could do was watch this parasite, Marva, parade her new finery. Only with the furs did he dare to inquire the price.

Marva answered him with her usual innocent smile. Then she added, "But it's worth it, isn't it, honey? Look what I did for you."

Sometimes when the pressure mounted, and his tension headache seemed ready to burst his skull, he asked her the old question. "Marva, what did you do with Alison's body?"

"Don't worry, I took care of it," she always answered.

But the woman was slowly—or not so slowly—driving him insane. She was a sinister presence, an ever-visible reminder of his crime, a foul thing occupying his house, worse than the corpse itself.

"Marva," he told her finally, "I've got to know."

"What, honey?"

"Exactly what you did with Alison."

"Why are you worrying?"

He had never said this before, never dared to be frank with her, but his despair drove him on. "I've got plenty of reason to worry. You disposed of the body, hid it somewhere, or something. Maybe you buried it. But you could dig it up any time."

"Why should I dig it up?"

"That's what you'd do if I didn't play along. If I stopped you using my credit. If I kicked you out of here."

"Is that what you're going to do, honey? Kick me out?"

He hesitated at the brink, then drew back. "I didn't say that. But it's about time we laid our cards on the table. What do you have in mind? How long do you intend to stay?"

She puckered her lips and frowned. It was an obscene sight, that childish, innocent, pensive

look on that fat, made-up face. Then she smiled, and became even uglier.

"I like it here," she said.

"But we can't go on like this," he pleaded. "I'm not made of money. I'm going broke fast . . ."

"But I like it here, I said," she interrupted him softly. "Don't you understand, honey? I like the setup. Look at me, would you? Just a bar girl. That's all I've ever been. And all of a sudden I'm in a nice, cozy house. A real house, not some crumby room up over a secondhand store. A real house, clean, everything clean. And you, Tony, you're nice too. A real nice guy, just like your house. Oh sure, you killed your wife, but you had good reasons. So I still think you're a nice guy. Now I got me a house, and I got me a husband too."

"Husband?"

"Sure. You'll get lonesome. You haven't forgotten Alison yet, but I got plenty of time. I can wait."

He retreated from her, horrified. "You're crazy," he whispered hoarsely.

But she wasn't crazy. She knew exactly what she was doing, knew her power over him. She sat there smiling at him—a puffy, fat, pale buddha, garishly painted with lipstick and mascara. And now she wanted to become his wife! Oh, Alison . . . Alison . . .

Desperate to shut her out of his sight, out of his mind, he stumbled to the kitchen. Marva had stowed a case of Scotch there for her own use, and he found it. He hated Scotch, but now he was grateful for anything that would bring forgetfulness.

He drank, grimacing at the taste of the stuff. He hated himself, but even more he hated her, that parasite who had fastened herself to him, draining his will, his life's blood. He went on drinking, seeking oblivion.

He came awake slowly, agonizingly, gradually aware of the daylight, aware that he was somehow, distastefully, unluckily, alive. The thing that awakened him, he began to discover, was the soft, melodious sound of the door chimes.

He was alone in the living room, sprawled in one of the easy chairs, a horrible, horrible ache beating inside his skull. The bell chimed again, reverberating painfully in his head, sounding like a hammer hitting an anvil. Please, please, he begged, stop that ringing. But it didn't stop. It went on persistently. Cursing, he lunged out of the chair, made for the door, and flung it open.

"Alison!"

Incredibly, it was she. Small, fragile, so dear to his gaze, a ques-

tioning little frown wrinkling her forehead, her brown eyes searching his face, then the rest of him.

"Tony, you've been drinking again."

Ruefully he remembered how he must look, unshaven, his eyes red and bleary, his clothes slept in and mussed. But it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered now. Only that she'd come home.

He swept her into his arms, kissed her, then whispered into her ear, "Yes, I've been drinking . . . but this is the first time . . . because you were gone . . . but it won't happen again . . . ever again . . . I promise . . . oh, Alison, I want you so much . . . I'll never do anything again to make you go . . ."

Somehow, between kissing her and reassuring her, he dragged her in and shut the door. Then he sat her down, knelt before her, kissed her hands, and stared into her face. "Alison, I've missed you. You don't know how much. It's you I need, not the booze. Nothing else. Just you."

Slowly, it seemed, despite the looks of him, and probably the smell of him, she softened. Her frown smoothed away, the look in her eyes became tender. She began to believe him.

"Where have you been?" he asked after a while.

"It doesn't matter. I'd rather not say."

"All right," he said, agreeable to anything. "But I was worried about you. You left so suddenly, you didn't take any of your clothes."

"I know," she said with a funny little smile. "I was so angry that I just walked out. Then I didn't want to come back after my things, or even ask you to send them. Tony, you don't know how angry I was."

"Yes, I do," he said, "and you had a right to be."

"But I shouldn't have left, Tony. That was wrong. I should have stayed, and tried to help you. We should have tried to work it out together. That's what I want to do now. May I stay?"

"May you stay? Oh, darling!" He seized her hands and kissed them again.

And then he remembered, suddenly, shatteringly. Marva!

What could he do? How could he explain? Could Alison possibly believe that he'd imagined that he'd killed her, and that he'd allowed Marva to remain in the house only because she was blackmailing him? Or would Alison think that the instant she'd gone he'd taken up with another woman? Even been living with her!

Terrified, he tried to think. Ali-

son would simply have to believe him. Their reconciliation would have to be based on truth, not on a lie. He'd have to make a clean breast of everything . . . and to begin with he'd have to get rid of that horror in the guest room right now.

He lurched to his feet and headed toward the room. At least Marva was in there, not in his own bedroom. He opened the door and started to say, "You can get out now, you can't blackmail me any more . . ."

And then he saw her. She was tumbled on the bed, a gross heap of repulsive flesh. But her face wasn't pale any more. It was dark rather, and swollen, disfigured. And around her throat was knotted one of those expensive nylon stockings that had been bought on Alison's charge account.

The haze was engulfing him again, blurring the real world into the unreal. Alison was at his shoulder, staring at the grisly object on the bed.

"I can explain everything," he began.

"You killed her?" Alison's voice sounded harsh, like the voice of a stranger.

"I must have."

"You were drunk?"

"Of course. How else could I have done it?"

"It was the same way, wasn't it, like when you threw the glass at me?"

"No, no . . . you don't understand. This woman is nothing . . . scum . . . she didn't deserve to live. She was blackmailing me . . . telling me I'd killed you . . . but we can get rid of this body . . . you can help me . . . nobody will care . . . nobody will ever miss her . . . Alison, where are you going?"

"Tony, you're a murderer!"

"You're going to tell the police, I suppose."

The room was growing murkier. Darkness was descending, in the middle of the day. Through the gathering dusk he walked toward Alison, trying to make the decision as he went. Either way, he had lost her.

A deck of cards is representative of an uncontestable hierarchy where rewards and punishments are dispensed immediately. When used as an aid for solution, we may expect efficiency, unimpeded by sentiment.

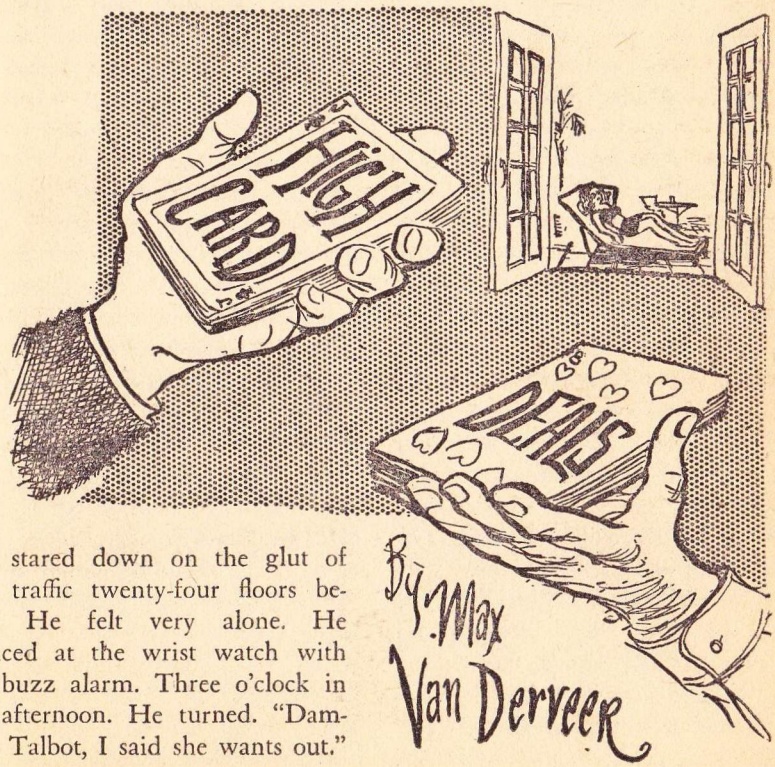
ARNOLD MCDOWELL, professional blackmailer, paced the thick carpeting in the grandiose penthouse suite nervously. Suddenly he stopped at a sparkling window and stared down on the glut of city traffic twenty-four floors below. He felt very alone. He glanced at the wrist watch with the buzz alarm. Three o'clock in the afternoon. He turned. "Dammit, Talbot, I said she wants out."

"So?"

"It could ruin us."

"How? There are other women."

"Not like Gretchen."



Seated on the edge of the heavy couch, his knees wide spread, Talbot flipped the cards from the fresh deck effortlessly. In all of his thirty-eight years he had failed miserably in one endeavor. He had failed to beat solitaire. He continued to turn the cards and place them with an esoteric rhythm as he said, "Does the next one have to be like Gretchen?"

"Gretchen is good. She knows all the tricks. We'd have to teach. . . ."

"Why does she want out?"

"Will you forget those cards and concentrate on what I'm telling you?"

Talbot's fingers became still as he looked up at the tall, lean and slightly stooped McDowell. At fifty-three, McDowell was immaculate and intelligent, the kind of man who fueled himself with twenty demitasses of coffee daily. He knew where he was going, and he knew how he was going to get there. But it was the latter that bothered Talbot, that inner drive that sometimes carried McDowell to the brink of panic. Talbot had no time for panic.

He said calmly, "I'm listening, Arnold. I've been listening for eleven years. That's how long we've been associates, isn't it?" He returned to the card game. "You still haven't told me why she wants out. Tell me her reason."

"She wants to go to California."

"And do what?"

"Nothing. That's just it. She wants to go out there and just . . ." McDowell's face became wrinkled in consternation. ". . . and just sit," he finished lamely.

"She's in love with you, you know."

"That hasn't anything to do with this!"

"It could have, Arnold. Definitely. Maybe she's tired of playing with her doctor friends. Maybe she's decided she wants to concentrate on you."

"All of a sudden you're an expert on women?"

"Not on women, Arnold. Gretchen. I'm an expert on Gretchen Kane."

"You've never shown interest in a woman in your entire life!"

"Which doesn't necessarily mean I do not understand Gretchen."

McDowell turned from Talbot in exasperation. Talbot sometimes irritated him. This was one of those times. Sitting there playing that card game while their entire operation was tumbling down. Sure, maybe Talbot could accept the collapse without batting an eye. After all, blackmail wasn't basically his meat. Give him a killing. That's what Talbot liked. Hand him an envelope stuffed with crisp

bills, point to the victim and turn away. Talbot was glacially efficient. It was why the tough boys liked him. It was why Talbot—certified public accountant, tax expert, with a palatial office in the Adams Building—sometimes made long trips out of the city.

McDowell went to the open French doors and stood concentrating on Gretchen Kane. She was stretched out on a lounge chair on the balcony, soaking up the sun. Dark glasses bridged her nose. He couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed behind those glasses. Thirty-six, indolent, she was a handsome brunette who had sense enough to remain a brunette, with a soft line of cheek and throat, good strong legs, and a fascinating appetite for double gibsons and korma-curry. A hyacinth colored sunsuit hugged the lines of her body with a provocative plunge of neckline. Her skin was tanned a honey-colored brown.

McDowell said softly, "Reconsider, Gretch?"

"No, darling." She didn't stir.

He walked into the sunshine, stood looming over her. "This has been a good thing for all of us. You have lived well. The suites, the clothes, the. . . ."

"We've run our line, Arnold. I can feel it. There's going to be a killing. Talbot is . . ."

"Talbot is necessary."

"Is he?"

"He's our ace in the hole. Our threat."

"I don't want anything to do with murder."

"There isn't going to be a murder."

"With Talbot there is. Sooner or later there's going to be someone who will not bend under the pressure, someone who will go to the police—and then there will be Talbot. And it's going to happen soon, maybe the next time out. I can feel it."

"You're not psychic."

"Right now, darling, I feel very psychic. And I want to go to California. I want out."

"One more, Gretch. Doctor Lynne."

"No."

"He's strictly a pigeon. No sweat. He's sixty-four. He has a wife, an exclusive practice—and, most important, he already has a reputation. He likes young women. You can wrap him around your little finger. One trip to his office and you will have him up here. Then the tape recordings, the bite and the payoff. It can be big. He has that kind of money."

"Payoff?" She laughed hollowly. "This time, darling, the payoff is murder. I feel it inside. This time Talbot will . . ."

"With someone else perhaps," McDowell conceded begrudgingly, "but not with Lynne. He's a cinch."

"No. I want out. That's final."

McDowell turned from the balcony in quick anger. "Talbot," he said in an ominously soft voice when he was out of Gretchen's hearing range, "I have a job for you."

"She's your woman," Talbot said without looking up from the cards.

"She has suddenly become very dangerous to us. She could talk."

Talbot remained silent.

"I want her killed," McDowell said.

Talbot flipped a card, placed it. "So kill her."

"That's your line."

"Not in this particular case, Arnold."

"Why not?"

"Do you plan to continue the operation?"

"Certainly. It's very lucrative. You know that."

"And we will continue to be partners?"

"Naturally."

"Then you kill her, Arnold. I don't want it hanging over my head. Someday it could ruin our partnership. You have an uncanny knack of holding a grudge."

"Dammit, you're falling down on your end of our deal! Cheat!"

The two men stared at each other for a long time. And then Talbot finally sighed deeply. "All right, Arnold. Let's play a game."

"What!"

"Fifty-fifty chance. You interested?"

"Chance on what?"

"Which one of us kills your woman."

"Oh, no!"

"I'm conceding. I shouldn't, but I like this set up. It pays off, so I'm conceding to a degree. I'll take a chance. I don't want to kill Gretchen for you because I think it will backfire someday. Still—I'll cut the cards with you."

"You'll what?"

Talbot gathered the deck of cards, shuffled them expertly and put them on the low coffee table. He looked out toward Gretchen Kane on the balcony, and then suddenly he was looking up at McDowell hard. "We cut," he said. "High card deals. High card kills her."

McDowell was ashen when he cut a Jack of Clubs. Talbot reshuffled the deck and cut an Eight of Hearts.

McDowell looked trapped in the grip of terrible indecision. "I . . . I don't know whether I have . . . the stomach."

"It's really quite simple," Talbot

said with a vague shrug. "Push her from the balcony. Very little pain. It's twenty-four floors."

"Now?"

"Certainly not now. You have to set it up."

"B-but . . ."

Talbot appeared to think deeply as McDowell stumbled for the words. "All right," Talbot said finally, "I'll set it up for you."

McDowell's mouth worked, but no words came out.

"We'll make it tomorrow night," Talbot said as he began placing the cards for a new game of solitaire. "We'll use my office, the night watchman in the building, a mannequin and a tape. And . . ." Talbot hesitated, then placed a card carefully. "Yes, an outfit from my kit. One of the disguises for you. Nothing elaborate, just a little something that will keep others in this building from recognizing you."

"I . . . I don't understand any of this!" McDowell exploded.

"Patience, Arnold," Talbot said with equanimity. "Think of the physical makeup of my office, the entry room and the frosted glass door between it and my private sanctuary. The fire escape outside my sixth floor window. It's perfect."

Talbot placed three consecutive cards face up and grinned. "I'll inform Mr. Jamison, the night watchman, that I have a very important client coming in tomorrow night on a tax matter, a client who is demanding discretion and secrecy. We are to meet in my office. And to absolutely insure that we have complete privacy I will need someone sitting in the entry room to block the charwoman, a late straggler, or anyone who might return to the building for night work. That someone will be Mr. Jamison."

"But . . ." McDowell began.

He cut it off when Talbot raised a hand. Talbot placed another card. His grin spread. He was winning. "I'll seat the mannequin in front of my desk. I will be behind the desk playing the tape of our voices, a tape we'll make tonight. Jamison will be in the entry room. By placing a lamp strategically, he will be able to see our silhouettes through the frosted glass. He will also hear our voices. There now. You have your alibi and your witness. How could you possibly be in my office and three and a half miles across town at the same time?"

"I . . . I can't," McDowell said hesitantly. He sounded totally befuddled.

"We'll also select the disguise tonight," Talbot said thoughtfully. "I think a red wig, a mustache.

dark-rimmed glasses and something to fatten you around the middle will do it. You might also limp." He paused again. "No. The limp is out. You'll forget it in your excitement. And we don't want someone remembering a man who limped coming up to this suite and a man who did not limp leaving."

He turned five cards without placing them on the table and his grin began to fade. "You will come up here at nine o'clock sharp," he said almost absently. "You will let yourself inside, knock Gretchen unconscious immediately to keep her from screaming, toss her from the balcony, leave without running, take a bus to my building and come up the fire escape to my office. I will have the window open for you. We will then remove and hide the disguise along with the mannequin and tape, and confront Jamison in the entry. It will be imperative that he sees us coming out of my office. We might even converse with him for a few seconds so that he will be absolutely sure to remember you when the police want to quiz you about your whereabouts at the time your love fell—or jumped—to her death."

McDowell stood rooted in open-mouthed fascination. "Fan-tastic!"

"But good," Talbot said flatly.

"My ears are burning."

McDowell jerked convulsively at the sound of Gretchen's voice. Talbot, without moving, watched her come in from the balcony. She approached them with great animation and a tiny smile working at the corners of her red lips. She swept off the dark glasses. "Why is it people sometimes know when others are talking about them?"

Talbot shrugged and scowled down on the cards spread before him. He had been defeated again. He gathered and stacked the cards

swiftly. "Arnold tells me you are planning to retire."

"In California," she said. "In the sun."

"Have fun."

"I expect to."

The city shimmered in neon and the light of a full moon on the night of the murder. Talbot sat in his office in the Adams building and stared out on the kaleidoscope of artificial color. The hour hand

of his wrist watch crawled from nine to ten o'clock. He waited patiently, only half listening to the voices that came from the tape recording on his desk. He turned, smiled faintly on the mannequin seated opposite him and took a fresh deck of cards from a drawer.

He was in his third game of solitaire when he heard the noise on the fire escape below his window. He gathered the cards, stacked them neatly, put them in the drawer and watched the legs slide through the open window.

Gretchen Kane swept off the red wig and dark-rimmed glasses and removed the layers of towels from inside her clothing. Then she stood before Talbot, tall and beautiful and desirable. She was smiling happily.

"He's dead?" Talbot asked.

"Smooth as silk, darling," she purred. She handed him a small automatic. "Just one shot, dead center."

Talbot laughed softly.

She came to him and fitted her body against his. Her palms were warm against his ears and her lips were full and damp against his mouth. "Have I ever told you that I love you?" she asked.

"Many times," he chuckled. "Why do you think Arnold had to die?"

"Darling, you have a marvelous mind."

Talbot put her off gently, quieted the tape recording and carried the full-breasted mannequin into a closet. He locked the door and smiled on her again.

"To California?" she asked.

"In about a month," he said. "We can't afford to make the police suspicious."

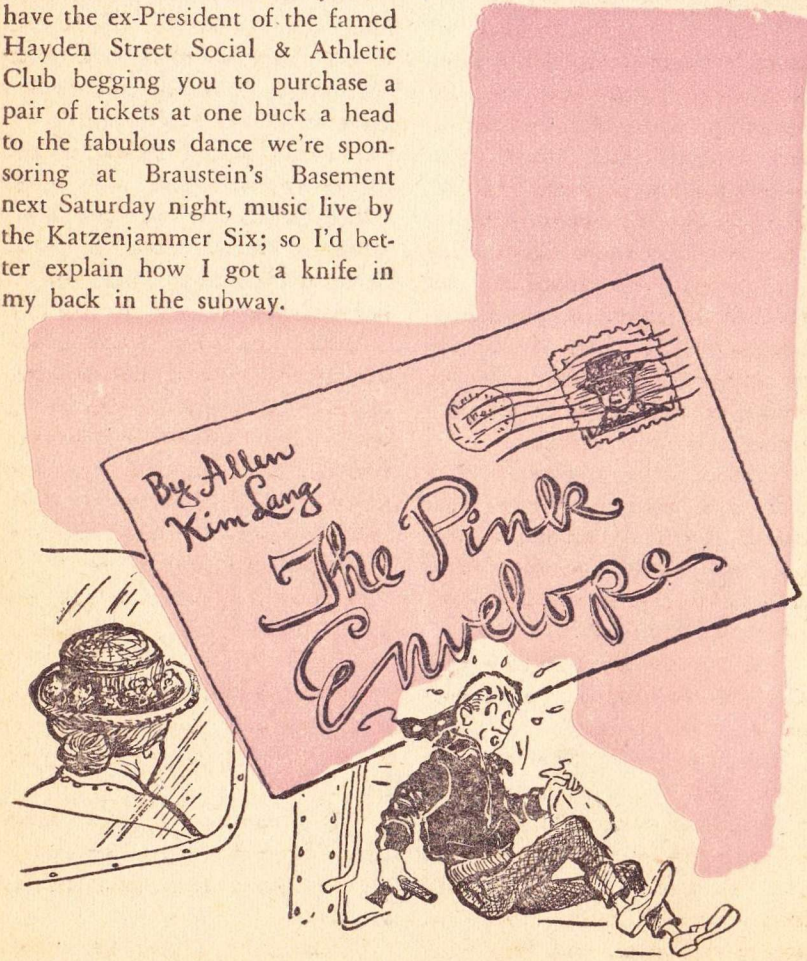
He kissed her briefly and opened the frosted door. Jamison, the night watchman, gave them a crooked grin and unfolded from a chair. Talbot pressed a twenty dollar bill into Jamison's palm. "Business completed," he said.

Jamison grinned down on the bill. "Well, thank you, Mr. Talbot! I sure won't forget this night!"

"Please don't," Gretchen Kane said significantly.

Controversy surrounds the determination of just which of life's lessons is the most difficult to learn. As our hero can firmly attest, much depends upon the teacher.

No doubt it scandalizes you to have the ex-President of the famed Hayden Street Social & Athletic Club begging you to purchase a pair of tickets at one buck a head to the fabulous dance we're sponsoring at Braustein's Basement next Saturday night, music live by the Katzenjammer Six; so I'd better explain how I got a knife in my back in the subway.



As President of the Hayden Street Social & Athletic Club, I'd called my battle-staff together to discuss our most pressing problems, which was fiscal. "A little loot in our kitty," as Brother Squint phrased it, "would give the Club a new leash on life."

"I say we ought to hold a dance," Thing said. "How does the Junior League keep in beer money and postage? They hold society dances, that's how." He pushed his box of cigars over for me to open it and take the first one out. I shook a green Corona out of its torpedo, unwrapped the redwood from around it, punched a hole in its tail with a kitchen match, and lit up. I'd as soon not smoke cigars, but as President I had to hold with tradition.

"Dances," Mouse groaned. His voice had lately changed from squeak to gravel, but it was still fine for snide remarks. "You know what'll happen, if we sponsor a stupid dance?"

"Lend us the fruits of your wisdom, Brother Mouse," I invited, granting him the floor.

"OK," he said. "We get the Acme Print Shop to run us off five hundred tickets. That's twenty bucks. We tell the Katzenjammers we want 'em to bugle and boom for six hours. They get twenty-five apiece and free beer, which comes to a hundred and a half, plus. We rent a hall. Fifty. Buy ice for beer and soft drinks, on which we won't make a nickel, since there's freeloaders besides the band, and you can't watch everybody. Twenty bucks. So far, we got two hundred and fifty dollars clear, figuring that we sell all the tickets, which we'll have to lean on people to buy. But what happens when the music starts?"

"What happens?" Squint asked.

"There's one of our guys starts cutting it up with a doll from Lewiston High," Mouse said, "and her date thinks our man is moving too close, and he smashes a bottle. The juve squad comes roaring up to cool our rumble, and we get fined twenty-five a head. This dance of Brother Thing's, I figure, will cost the Hayden Street S&A about eight hundred dollars. Prez, I say we can't afford that sort of jive."

"Always knocking," Thing observed. "Mouse, you get under my nerves."

"We're discussing finances," I said, "and we know the Mouse is a Bernard Baruch from 'way back."

"OK, financial wizard," Thing said. "If we don't raise the dough we need on a dance, how do we get it?"

"Well . . ." Squint pondered.

"We could maybe learn by heart the wanted posters in the Post Office and turn crooks in for rewards."

"That suggestion is not, Squint, the high level of thought I've come to expect from the personnel at this table," I said. "I would guess there are not more than fifty men in this city with prices on their heads; and as wanted criminals they will hardly be roaming the streets as living temptation to our membership. Try again."

"How's come you're always stomping on my ideas, Prez, when you never hatch one out yourself?" Squint demanded.

"Hear, hear!" Thing shouted.

Mouse wished to speak, but he had accidentally inhaled smoke from his cigar, and was coughing like a flooded outboard.

I banged my gavel. "The function of the Chairman," I said, "is to assure the right of each and every member of this battle-staff to speak according to parliamentary procedure, and not to show off his personal brains."

"Who told you so?" Squint asked. "I bet it was Heavy Hanna Henniker, scourge of English-12B."

"Firstly, it is not fitting to refer to a splendid teacher's slight overweight," I said. "Secondly, we are here, gentlemen, to guide the destinies of our famed club, and not to take violent issue with each other."

"I still say the Prez should come up with a gimmick of his own," Squint said. "This thing of him knocking my schemes without he's got any is a bone I got to pitch with him."

"You want an idea," I said. "OK, I'll toss one out. For what is the Hayden Street Social & Athletic Club best known?"

Brother Thing, who is six feet tall and weighs a hundred pounds dressed for blizzards, said, "Handsome men."

"Parliamentary procedure!" Squint shouts out.

"We're the biggest S&A Club this side of the Sanitary Canal," the Mouse suggested.

"It's a good thing school starts next month," I said, "because it is evident to the meanest intellect that the grey matter involved at this table during the past few minutes is in dire need of formal training." I pushed the box of cigars, minus the four we were burning, toward the center of the table. "Brother Thing, where did you get these weeds?"

"I thieved them, Prez, as well you know," Thing said. "I got a couple of the Club's juniors to stage a diversion in front of Steve's Smoke Shop, and sceped in be-

hind the counter while Big Steve was making peace with his broom handle."

"Squint, where did this table come from?" I asked.

"It was on the stage of the school auditorium when you said we needed it," he said. "I got eight of the membership and moved it downstairs and out the street door during lunch period."

"And my gavel?" I asked.

"You swiped that from the Junior Chamber of Commerce," Mouse told me, "right after they gave you that fifteen dollar check for the best extemporaneous speech on the topic, *What I Believe.*"

"As Miss Henniker might say, Q.E.D.," I said. "We are thieves, are we not?"

"Clever ones," the Mouse boasted.

"Never busted once," Squint pointed out.

"And never made a dime off it," Thing said, always eager to stone the bluebirds.

"That's all over now," I said. "The most skilled boosters this side of the Sanitary Canal . . ."

". . . either side," Squint said.

". . . will refresh their treasury at public expense," I said. "We will pull off a job that will go down in history with the Brinks Robbery."

"Prez, do you recollect where the guys that pulled that caper are hanging out their laundry nowadays?" Thing asked. "For a hint, I'll tell you they're wearing numbers on their backs."

"They were not smart as we will be," I predicted.

"Smart ain't everything," Squint said.

"I can picture us holding our first battle-staff meeting after your big project in the Recreation Room at the State Reformatory for Boys," Thing said.

"If you gentlemen have got thin blood, nothing more need be discussed," I said. "We can send the juniors and the girls' auxiliaries out to swipe empty pop bottles, which we will sell for the two-cent deposits; and never mind that we are the laughing stock of the city's younger set."

"I move that the Prez be required to give us the details of his epoch-making heist," the Mouse said. "We can give it our considered thought, that way, before we vote it down."

"I second the movement," Brother Squint said. "Tell us what's on your mind, Prez."

"It is simple," I said. "We will rob a train."

"Maybe I do have thin blood, after all," Mouse remarked. "I'd as soon keep it bottled up inside me, though, and not spill it over any

railroad tracks now, or any time."

"I hope you propose to give our business to the Pennsylvania or the B&O, and not one of the short-haul outfits," Thing said. "Shall I pick us out a railroad from the Dunn & Bradstreet?"

"Some people could not notice a brilliant notion if it bit them in the thigh," I said.

"This one's got teeth," Squint admitted. "I think maybe the Club needs more practice swiping small stuff before we hold any train robberies, Prez."

"As my old English teacher back in freshman year, Miss Hanna Henniker, used to say," I quoted, "nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"Is she going to be in on this caper?" Squint asked.

I ignored him. "Listen to my plan," I said, and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper on which to draw diagrams and list the equipment we'd need to make my dream a rich reality.

I had hoped to keep the secret plans of the train robbery among the senior members of the Hayden Street Social & Athletic Club; but hardly anyone outside the Girls' Auxiliary knew how to sew well enough to make masks that didn't droop, and the juniors were the only ones who could use the bandsaw at the YMCA to turn out our artillery. As Miss Henniker once said, talking about poetic imagery, when you toss a pebble into a pool, the ripples go out to the furthest verge. Twenty of the juniors, whose fare is cheap, rode trains every day, for instance, counting people in each car and timing the ride between each stop with watches our track team had lifted from the coach's locker at school.

The choice of the railroad to rob, I admit, was a lightning stroke of genius. We were going to hold up the subway.

There have been said things about Dwight D. Eisenhower in my hearing that suggest disrespect. Now, though, after I have myself borne the burden of command, of building an organization into a tight-knit machine, of maintaining security from the enemy (i.e., our parents and the fuzz) till H- Hour of D-Day, I feel the closest kinship with that man.

But, "There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," as Miss Henniker used to say when mentioning her dream to retire and write lyric poetry in rural Mexico. It was my task to x-ray out the flaws in our project before committing my forces; to impress my troops with the need for post-caper silence (I shuddered to think of one of the

younger kids compromising the entire membership, for instance, by maybe writing his first essay after school began on, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation"). Moreover, I had to plan so as to avoid bloodshed, which must be a consideration in any major crime, such as ours would be.

My lieutenants and I synchronized our watches and took off at noon on D-Day to take up our positions along the Quigly Avenue Line. We were to board the train we'd picked from stops in the east and the central parts of the city, so as not to alert the Subway employees by a sudden rush of riders they did not recognize.

In each man's pocket was a silk mask and a wooden pistol, the former lovingly stitched by the girls of the Auxiliary, the latter blackened and polished to a high gloss with lubricating graphite from a lock greaser. We had each made the trip on the Quigly Avenue Line many times, and knew the route better than the track crews.

At the Quigly Avenue Station, our underground contingent was disposing itself for its part in the operation. Boys had gathered outside the entrance, above ground, and had clustered beside the newsstand downstairs by the turnstiles. Several lurked on the platform, as though waiting for our train, having spent the last few pennies of the club's treasury on their fares. In charge of this last group, whose function it would be to tangle up the legs of any pursuers, was the Mouse. He had explained to me that he had troubles getting train sick.

Rattling along in the three-car train, my still-naked face hidden behind a copy of the evening paper, I felt queasy myself, like an infantryman in a landing craft off foreign shores. Each car in the train was occupied by three or more of my best men. We had practiced every step of the robbery so many times we could do it in our sleep. I had nothing to worry about. I kept repeating that in my mind.

The wooden gun in my hip pocket felt big as a water-cooled machine gun, but it didn't have enough weight to have real authority. I felt like in one of these dreams where you're standing on a table in the school cafeteria, set to make a speech, and discover all at once you're only wearing undershorts. Insecure. I felt sure some joker would laugh as I stuck my phony pistol in his belly, and that he'd bust my wrist taking the gun away from me.

Fortunately, my troops were unaware of their leader's pusillanimous (that's one of Miss Henni-

ker's favorite words) thoughts.

The train slowed through the tunnel that led out to the Quigly Avenue Station. My cue. I worked the wooden gat and my silk mask out of my pockets, crinkling the newspaper as if I wanted to call attention. I looked at my watch. I glanced up to make sure that the red "EMERGENCY ONLY" lever was within reach of my right hand.

As they say in the military, the balloon was up, the minute our train started out of the station. We wanted the first two cars nosed into the far tunnel, and the rear door of my car the only exit to the Quigly Avenue Station. Our G-2 had established that the next train was due here in four minutes, which would give us time to collect our booty and cut out to the streets and alleys upstairs before the trainmen knew they'd been played for patsies.

I strapped on my mask and reached up, still huddled behind my newspaper, to the Emergency lever. The lights of the platform slid past. "Geronimo!" I whispered, and grabbed hold.

The train squealed to a stop just where we'd put it in our battle-staff blueprints. I dropped the paper and jumped to my feet, the wooden gun pointed at the left side of the car. Brother Thing, working this car with me, covered my side. "Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt," Thing yelled. Very good.

"This is a stickup," I added.

"Hallowe'en," a woman across the aisle remarked, "is the end of October. Isn't it early for trick-or-treat?"

"Just for cracking wise, you're first," Squint said through his mask. Squint was bagman for this car, and had his shopping bag at the ready. "Let's have that purse, Lady," he said.

"I should say not," she snapped.

"What's going on here?" the conductor demanded, sliding through the door from the car ahead. "Who bought that sudden stop for fifty bucks, or don't you know there's a fine for fooling with the emergency?"

"Cool it," I said, walking up close enough to the conductor so that he can see my gun clearly, but not so close that he will recognize that it's made out of the ends of orange-crates.

Squint snatched the stubborn woman's purse from off her lap and was rifling through it while she swatted at his head with a folded newspaper. Squint wasn't flustered. He eased the bills out of her wallet into his shopping bag, then dropped the billfold on the deck near the woman's feet. We had this idea, that anyone would

be so anxious to get back his wallet, even empty, that they'd ignore us for a few seconds while they picked it up. "Divide and conquer," as Miss Henniker has said.

People were yelling around in the two cars ahead of us. We had a good man (Axe) guarding the motorman, the toughest position besides mine, since he'd have to be the last man out to the platform; but I wondered from the noise whether the folks up front had caught on that our guns didn't have any guts to them.

I shouldn't have bothered to worry. Planning is everything. Iron-mouth, bagman for Car 1, came rushing out the sliding doors with his shopping bag swinging behind him. His two gunmen were right with him. "Clean sweep in One," Brother Iron-mouth reported, and triggered the conductor's switch to open the doors. They slicked open, and the first three members of our gang scattered across the platform. The juniors, waiting outside to run interference for the train team, weren't busy yet. No one outside our three cars had realized that they were witnessing one of the boldest daylight robberies of all time.

Crisco, bagman for Car 2, reported through with his two gunsels and scampered toward the escalator and daylight. Our turn was next, with luck on our side.

Squint was finishing the looting of our car. "Take off the watch, Mister," he said. Standing behind Squint, Thing shook his wooden pistol. The man stripped the watch into the shopping bag. They walked back, then, to give their attention to a plump lady who was clutching a beaded purse. "Everybody contributes, Madame," Squint said, bowing and opening the shopping bag by her knees. Glaring, the woman dumped her change-purse into the bag and let half a dozen bills follow the silver into our treasury.

Then I recognized our latest victim. "Let's clear," I said.

"I left nothing here," Squint agreed, and peeled out the door.

Thing and I backed away. Two men were left in the train besides us, Axe, guarding the motorman, and King Kong, who covered Axe. They eased towards us, walking backwards as soft-footed as tiger tamers in the cage. "Let's orbit, Prez," King Kong said, looking like a '30's movie menace, all jowls and stubbled beard.

"I'm with you," I said. I had to be the last man out of the train, of course, or I'd lose face.

What I lost was worse. "Let's see what Jesse James looks like without his didy," said the woman who'd given us the rough time at

the first. She reached up and, as I turned to dive out to the platform after King Kong, tugged loose my mask.

And as I jumped to freedom, the mask dangling off one ear like I was Ben Casey on his way to the coffee shop after a rugged craniotomy, the fat lady near the front of the car stared me in the eyes.

She was Miss Hanna Henniker, my old freshman English teacher.

I trotted up to Squint and tossed my mask, wadded around my wooden gun, on top of the goodies in his shopping bag.

"Piece of cake," Brother Squint said, grinning. He'd got that from a Limey movie I guess.

"Yeah," I said. We double timed up the escalator and scooted across Quigly Avenue. A siren sounded off past the intersection. We'd timed it perfect.

"The best laid plans of mice and men," as Miss Henniker often pointed out, can lay an egg. Who would guess that she'd be aboard the one train in the city at the one time I was robbing it, and a wise broad pulled off my mask?

I should have grown whiskers for the job, I thought, running down the alley behind Steve's Smoke Shop. I should have worn one of those masks that fit over your whole head, and come off hard as rubber gloves. It was bitter. Of all the membership of the Hayden Street Social & Athletic Club, only the President had shown his face to his public.

The juniors and the gunmen cut out to establish alibis at movies, home, or swimming-pools. My battle-staff and the bagmen rendezvoused at the clubhouse, where we'd planned to critique our operation and count the take.

Iron-mouth, Crisco and Squint dumped out their shopping bags on the meeting table. "Careful with them watches," Mouse said.

"If they ain't shockproof, we don't want 'em," Squint explained.

What a mess of loot!

Fourteen hundred dollars, it came to, with a lot of silver. We had twenty-three watches, a camera, and a package Crisco'd picked up on a hunch that held four packs of cards and a red plastic canasta tray.

"On the nose, one thousand four hundred and eighty-three dollars and twenty-four cents," Treasurer Mouse announced.

"Don't that beat shuffling around in a stupid dance in Braustein's Basement?" Thing asked, safe now on the winning side.

"I may have been recognized by one of the passengers," I said. I picked up the camera to examine it.

My brothers were silent quite a

while. Nobody felt like talking.

Then Mouse spoke. "We know you're no fink, Prez," he said.

"We'll bring cigarettes," Squint said.

"She may not report me," I told them. "We'd better hold onto the money and other junk for a while, just to be on the safe side. Push comes to shove, we can always chicken out with restitution."

"Who was it that made you, Prez?" Thing asked.

"Remember the fat woman in the flowered dress?" I asked. "The one with the purse knitted out of beads?" Thing nodded. "Well, that was Miss Henniker, my old English teacher."

"If I'd knew that," Squint said, "I'd of asked her for her autograph. Way you talk, she's pretty famous."

"Great," Mouse said. "We're home free and gone as geese with a bundle like young Fort Knox, except our Prez had to stop and smile at his freshman teach."

"That fresh dame pulled my mask off," I explained.

"Don't fight about it," Crisco advised. "If the Prez got made, we'd better split."

"We'll play it safe," Mouse said. He rubber-banded the bills into a stack the size of a pregnant brickbat and tossed it into one of our shopping bags, together with the camera and the watches and the canasta set. "I'll stash our winnings somewhere safe till the heat cools on Prez," he said.

"Maybe Miss Henniker has forgotten my name," I said. "Maybe she didn't recognize me."

"I lay my share of this loot on no sucker bets," Mouse said. He hefted the bag and toted it upstairs into the evening.

"How do we know Brother Mouse is safe with all that temptation?" Thing whispered to Squint.

"He's treasurer, ain't he?" Squint asked. He rubbed his nose. "All the same, now you bring it up, maybe we'd better get Mouse bonded before our next job."

That was Friday evening. I didn't sleep that night for waiting for the phone to ring, inviting me down to the show-up room at the Precinct House, or fuzz fists beating at my old man's door. Saturday I spent sinking into doorways every time a factory whistle blew, and freezing when I heard the bells play on a Merry Mobile ice cream truck. I came out of my clutch pretty well by Sunday; and on Monday morning I shoved down the hatch enough calories for a team of tag wrestlers. "The condemned man," as Miss Henniker used to say when she passed out paper for a test, "ate a hearty meal."

Because there was this letter in

the mailbox with my name on it a few hours later, in a pink envelope with PERSONAL printed big below the address. I got the letter out of the box before my mother saw it (she could be the Hayden Street operative of the Central Intelligence Agency), and went up to the roof to get the news.

"Dear Norman," the letter began.

Who called me Norman, except teachers? Only the draft board. I hoped this was the Army calling me.

The letter went on. "I was shocked to recognize as one of the hooligans holding up the Quigly Avenue subway train last Friday evening a boy for whom I'd predicted better things." I could hear her voice, reading this to me. Hefty Henniker, without a doubt. "My duty as a citizen is obviously to impart my knowledge to the authorities," she went on. I moaned, and read further. "However, rather than interrupt what I am certain will be a splendid career, Norman, I will be satisfied if you and your companions mail to me (*Registered,* please) all the money and other goods stolen in your little adventure. I will see that proper disposition is made of your 'loot', and promise that your name will not enter the picture if you do the Right Thing. Should I fail to receive this parcel by Wednesday morning, Norman, I will (more in sorrow than in anger) telephone the police and tell them the identity of the 'Brains' behind the train robbery. Yours very sincerely," and she finished with her name, (Miss) Hanna Henniker, and her address.

I convened the battle staff to arrange our surrender. "Who's President of this lash-up?" I asked, opening the meeting.

"You are," Brother Thing said.

"Maybe we need a fresh election," Mouse said, clutching his shopping bag to his lap.

"If you were a cop, and picked me up, who would you finger for my partners in crime?" I asked. "Be reasonable. Hips Henniker hasn't only got me nailed to the wall, she's got the whole Hayden Street Social & Athletic Club under her heel."

"You mean you'd fink?" Squint asked me.

"I wouldn't have to," I said. "You'd be in cells right down the hall to mine in fifteen minutes, even if I didn't give the johns anything but name, rank, and serial number."

"How would they prove that we were anywheres near the subway when the heist came off?" Thing demanded.

"Fingerprints," I said. "We must have left some prints on the wallets

and that other stuff we handled."

"Now the Presidential mind is perking," Mouse said. "Five days late, true; but it's perking." He set the shopping bag on the meeting table. "We'll all watch you, Prez, while you wrap it up; then we'll walk you down to the Post Office to mail it," he said.

"Thank you for your unquestioning trust, Brother Mouse," I said. "For the benefit of the other brethren, I suggest we audit the take before we ship it back to its original owners."

Believe me, a grand and a half plus enough gadgets to stock a hockshop isn't the easiest package to watch a civil servant stamp and toss into the Registered Mail sack.

As the mail went out, I walked home alone, figuring in my head that my crime of the century, which lacked only my talent for keeping a rag over my snout, had cost me twenty bucks personal money.

We had two more meetings that week. One was to bounce me out as Prez (Brother Thing got the gavel and First Cigar); the other was to plan for that stupid dance. I was delegated to get the tickets printed, which I hope you'll buy two or more of, one dollar contribution each, now you know the whole story behind our money raising projects.

Almost the whole story.

The rest I haven't told the membership of the Hayden Street Social & Athletic Club, even. Maybe I never will.

It was this letter, pink envelope, "PERSONAL" and all, with a foreign stamp, that I got this morning. The postmark said San Juan Del Monte, Morelos, Mexico.

Inside was this snapshot of Miss Henniker, standing in the sunshine and smiling. "Dear Norman," began the note she'd written on the back of her photo. "My lyric poetry will, I believe, flourish splendidly in these salubrious climes. Give my thanks to your companions, and 'Put not thy trust in Woman.' " She signed it, Sincerely.

So come on, buddy, take a couple tickets. That Katzenjammer Six is no New York Philharmonic, but I guarantee they're loud.

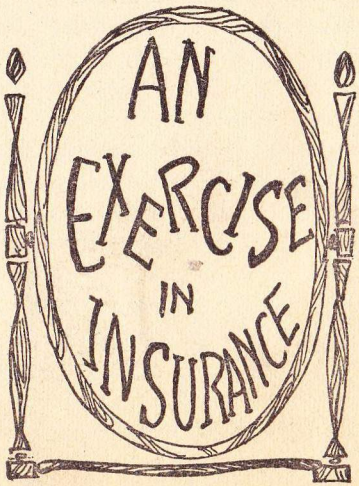
Dostoyevsky proclaims that "true security is to be found in social solidarity", but there are occasions—and here we learn of one of them—when more primitive measures must suffice.

WHEN three masked men walked into the bank with sawed-off shotguns that afternoon and calmly began to clean out the tellers' cash drawers, I wasn't even nervous. I was sure they weren't going to get away with it. I was perfectly certain that five straight-shooting policemen, strategically placed, would be waiting for the robbers outside the bank door when they emerged.

That's the way it would have happened, too, if it hadn't been for Miss Coe, Robbsville's leading milliner.

As proprietress and sole employee of a hat shop, just around the corner from the bank and felicitously called *Miss Coe's Chapeux,* Miss Coe fabricated fetching hats for many of the town's discriminating ladies. She was an excellent designer, whose products exhibited a fashionable flair, faintly French, that more than justified her use of the French word in her shop name.

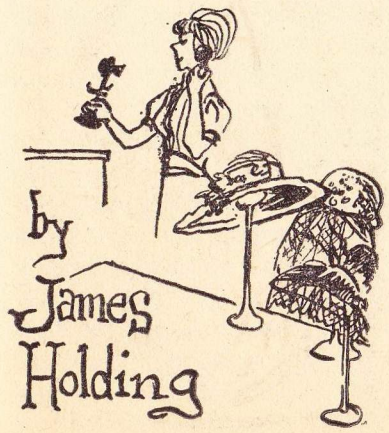
Miss Coe was middle-aged, sweet, pretty, methodical and utterly reliable. Indeed, her dependability was often the subject of admiring comment from local ladies who had become somewhat disillusioned by the unreliability of other tradesmen. "You can always count on Miss Coe," they frequently told each other. "If she says she'll have the hat ready on Tuesday at eleven, she'll have it ready. She'll be putting in the last stitch as you come in the door." I had even heard remarks of this kind at my own dinner table, since my wife was one of Miss Coe's steady customers.



But perhaps you are wondering what Miss Coe, a milliner—reliable and methodical as she undoubtedly was—could possibly have to do with the robbery of our bank?

Well, you may remember that some years ago, several of the companies that insured banks against robbery agreed to reduce the premium rates on such insurance if the insured bank was willing to conform to a certain security arrangement.

This meant, simply, that to win the lower insurance rate, a bank must maintain a robbery alarm system somewhere *outside* the bank itself; that in the event of a robbery, a warning bell or buzzer must sound elsewhere so that police could be instantly alerted without interference, and arrive on the scene in time to prevent the robbery and even, hopefully, to capture the bandits in the act.



In those days of rather primitive electrical wiring, the insurance companies did not insist that, to meet this security requirement, the outside alarm be necessarily installed in the police station itself. Any other location where the ringing of the alarm would unfailingly initiate instant action would serve as well.

The potential savings on insurance premiums made possible in this way were quite substantial. Our bank accordingly decided to take advantage of them. As Cashier, I was entrusted with the job of selecting a suitable outside alarm site, preferably somewhere near the bank, since the installation charges would thus be minimal.

After some thought, and with the memory of my wife's recent words to a bridge partner, "You'll find Miss Coe utterly dependable," fresh in my mind, I went around to see the milliner on my lunch hour one day.

After introducing myself I explained to her that the bank intended to install an alarm buzzer somewhere in the neighborhood. I explained the alarm's purpose. Then I went on diplomatically, "Miss Coe, I have never heard you referred to among the ladies of my

acquaintance without some warm testimonial to your complete reliability, to your calm, methodical turn of mind."

"How nice," she murmured, pleased. "I do try to be precise and methodical about things, it's true. I find life less complicated that way."

"Yes. And that's exactly why I am going to ask you to permit us to install our alarm buzzer in your shop."

"Here?"

"Right here. You are always in your shop during banking hours, are you not?"

"Of course. I carry my lunch, so I'm not even away at lunch time."

"Good. With your penchant for doing exactly what is needed at exactly the right time, I am certain that our alarm buzzer, although placing a new responsibility on your shoulders in the unlikely event of a bank robbery, will in no way discommode or harm you. And I might add that the bank will naturally expect to pay you a small stipend for your cooperation."

She flushed with pleasure. "What would I have to do?" she asked.

"If the alarm buzzer should ever ring, you merely go at once to your telephone there, Miss Coe. . . ," I indicated her telephone on a counter at the back of the shop, ". . . and place an emergency call to the police, giving them a prearranged signal. That is all. Your responsibility then ceases. You see, it's very simple."

"I'm sure I could do that, if that's all there is to it," Miss Coe said, glancing at her wall clock a little guiltily, as though she feared she were three stitches late on a hat promised a customer one minute from then. "And I won't say that a bit of extra income won't be more than welcome."

By the end of the week the buzzer was installed in her shop. The system was thoroughly tested, and it worked perfectly. On our first "dry run", the squad of police arrived at the bank just four minutes from the time they received their telephone call from Miss Coe. The insurance people, satisfied with their inspection of the system and my recommendation of Miss Coe, granted us the lower insurance rate forthwith.

Since a daily test of the wiring circuit, to assure its constant readiness, was specified in our insurance agreement, I arranged with Miss Coe that at exactly three o'clock each day, I would press the button under my desk at the bank and ring the buzzer in her shop. That was as far as the daily test needed to go; it was expected that

Miss Coe's telephone would always be operative but if, in the event it were out of order or in use when the buzzer should ring, Miss Coe could merely nip into the shop next door and telephone the police from there.

For two years it seemed that Miss Coe would never be called upon to display her reliability in behalf of the bank's depositors. We had no bank robbery, nor even an attempted one. I tested the alarm buzzer each day at three; Miss Coe continued to make fetching hats for Robbsville's ladies undisturbed; and each month I mailed her a small check for her participation in the bank's alarm system.

You can readily see now, I am sure, why I had no qualms whatever when our bank robbery finally did occur. This was the event for which the police, Miss Coe and I had so carefully prepared. This was the actual happening that our rehearsals had merely simulated. I knew that our outside robbery alarm was in perfect working order. I knew that Miss Coe was in her shop, ready to act, as dependable and unfailing as the stars in the heavens.

So, far from being startled or apprehensive, I really felt a certain pleasurable excitement when I looked up from my desk just before closing time that afternoon, and saw the three masked bandits presenting their weapons to our staff and terrified patrons. In common with the other occupants of the banking room, I slowly raised my hands over my head at the robbers' command. Simultaneously and unnoticed, however, I also pressed my knee against the alarm button under my desk.

I could picture clearly the exact sequence of events that would be set in train by that movement of my knee. Miss Coe's buzzer would sound. She would perhaps sit immobile for a shocked second at her work table. She would drop the hat she was working on, and cross speedily to her telephone. She would place her emergency call to the police with splendid calm. And then she would wait confidently for the news from me that our bank robbers had been circumvented or captured.

Unfortunately, as I found out later, Miss Coe did none of these things.

What she did do, when the alarm buzzer sounded in her shop, was merely to glance at the clock on her wall, rise impatiently from her sewing stool and cross the room, and there, (bless her methodical heart!) push the minute hand of the wall clock ahead ten minutes so that it pointed to exactly three o'clock.

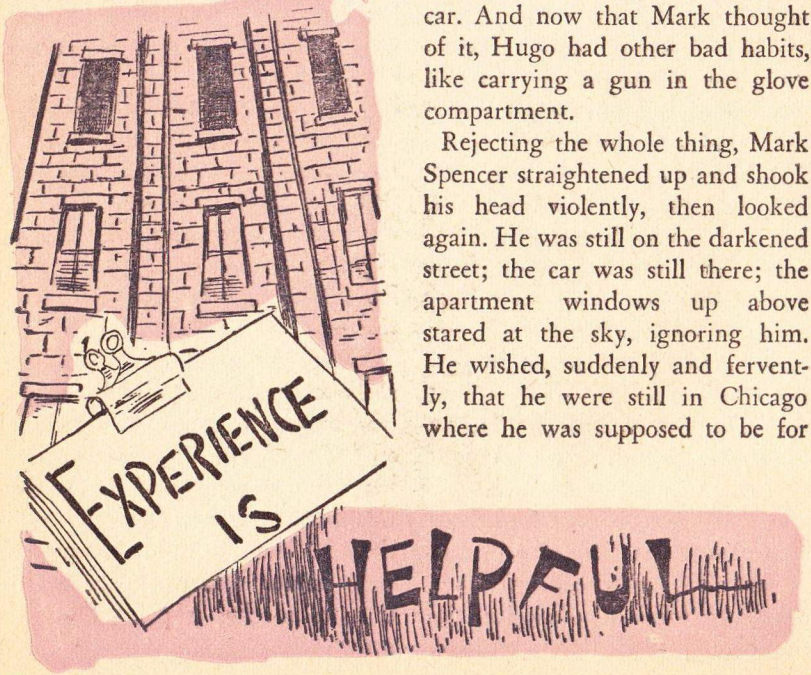
In this day of far-flung corporations, distinct advantages are open to the traveling man. It follows, "Nothing is ever gained without something first being ventured."

WHEN Mark Spencer paid off the cab and saw his boss' car parked at the curb, it was as though he had known unconsciously all along, from the day he had been promoted out of the shop to the newly created job of Special Field Engineer, two years ago.

The boss' car parked in front of *his* apartment building. Mark looked up at the windows of the third floor apartment where he lived. They were dark.

He went slowly to the driver's side of the sleek car and stooped down, peering through the window. It was Hugo Rice's car, all right. And the keys dangled from the ignition. That was a bad habit Hugo had, leaving his keys in the car. And now that Mark thought of it, Hugo had other bad habits, like carrying a gun in the glove compartment.

Rejecting the whole thing, Mark Spencer straightened up and shook his head violently, then looked again. He was still on the darkened street; the car was still there; the apartment windows up above stared at the sky, ignoring him. He wished, suddenly and fervently, that he were still in Chicago where he was supposed to be for



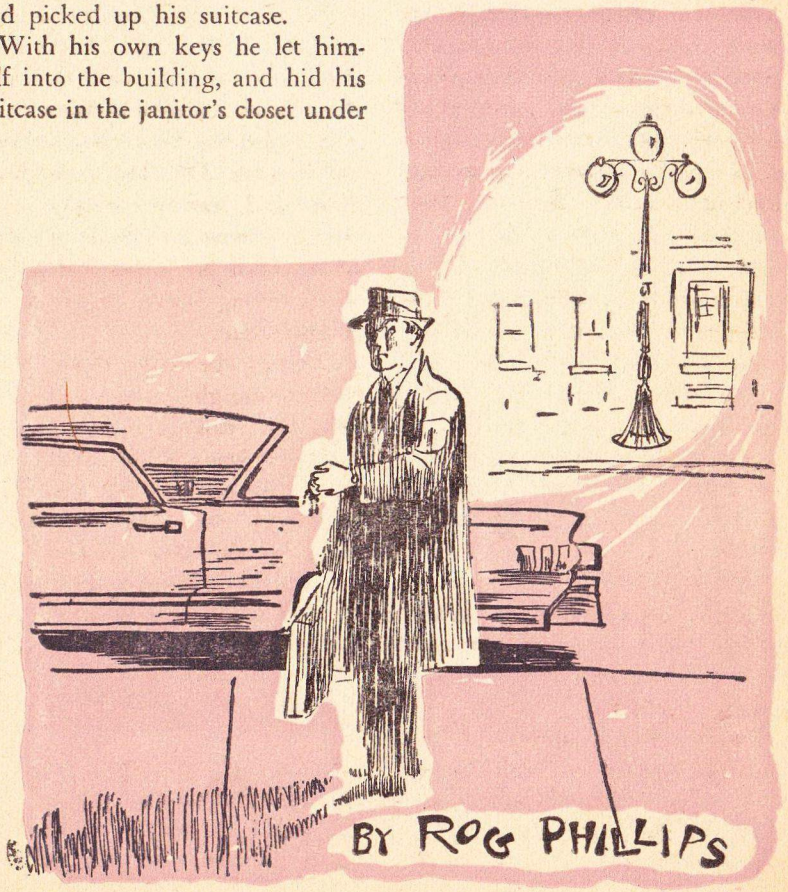
another day. Then he wouldn't know . . .

It occurred to him that he still didn't know for sure. There could be lots of explanations. He set his suitcase down and carefully opened the car door and took the keys, closing the door with gentle pressure that brought only a faint click. He put the keys in his pocket and picked up his suitcase.

With his own keys he let himself into the building, and hid his suitcase in the janitor's closet under the stairs before ascending the thickly padded stairs to the third floor. His apartment was 3C. He pressed his ear to the door panel, then slipped the key into the lock, turning it gently until the door gave inward.

A moment later he was inside.

The bedroom door was open a few inches. There was no light,



but there didn't need to be; there were sounds. Mark Spencer took a step forward, his fingers stretching into claws. Then, slowly, he stepped back and out into the hall, closing the door.

There had been one other time, about six months ago, when Mark had come home a day early. That time he had called Claire from the airport before catching a taxi. He thought of that time now. Claire had seemed slightly breathless over the phone that time, but nothing had seemed wrong to his unsuspicious mind when he arrived home.

But Hugo hadn't seemed particularly glad to see him back the next morning at work. Mark could understand why, now. Hugo had been routed out of bed the night before and had probably had to check in at some hotel for the rest of the night—because Hugo undoubtedly told his own wife, Mildred, that he was going "out of town".

Mildred. How was she going to take this? A rather plain woman in her forties, but with a quiet pride at being Mrs. Hugo Price. It would kill her.

Mark stopped on the second floor landing and half turned, looking back up the infinitely lonely stair well. What was this going to do to him?

It would cost him his job, of course, besides kicking Claire out of the apartment and suing her for divorce. He would have to get a job as a machinist again, somewhere. Jobs of Special Field Engineer didn't grow on trees.

He was a good field engineer. He had found he had a special talent for working the bugs out of highly complex instruments and machines in the field. But Hugo, after being exposed for what he was, could hardly be expected to give him a high recommendation.

Mark Spencer continued down the stairs, one slow step at a time. Out on the sidewalk he stopped, a slow smile growing on his face.

He took Hugo's key ring out of his pocket. Car keys, the key to the office, the key to the back door of the plant, and two keys Mark didn't recognize.

He went to Hugo's car and slid in behind the wheel. Before he started the motor he reached into the glove compartment and made sure the gun was there. As an afterthought he took it out and made sure the clip was loaded.

Then he started the motor and drove off into the night.

Killing Mildred was not as difficult as Mark had anticipated. She had not even stirred in her sleep when he went into her bedroom

quietly and turned on the light.

By now Mark was thinking in terms of later police investigation. Or even earlier police investigation. He touched nothing except with his handkerchief. He kept in mind the fact that he was doing Mildred a kindness. How many women with unfaithful husbands died in their sleep without ever having found out what was going on? Mildred was really very lucky.

Mark left the bedroom light on and the front door unlocked. He paused in the shadows on the porch and waited to make sure he would not meet anyone on the way back to Hugo's car, parked at the curb.

He detoured to the factory and let himself in with Hugo's key. He put the gun in the center drawer of Hugo's desk after rubbing it clean of fingerprints again, including the clip. That second unfamiliar key on Hugo's key ring was for that desk drawer, Mark discovered. He locked the drawer.

Before he left the plant he went to his own office and called the police, disguising his voice and making it sound sleepy.

"Hello? Police station?" he said, his voice devoid of energy. "I think I heard a shot next door at the Rice's place. Maybe Hugo shot Mildred, they don't get along too well. They live at nineteen thirty-six Crest Drive. Got that? Nineteen thirty-six Crest Drive." He hung up while the desk sergeant was asking for his name and phone number.

He drove straight to his apartment house and parked Hugo's car in the same spot it had been parked before, and left the keys dangling from the ignition.

He walked two blocks to the neighborhood gas station, now closed for the night. He used the outside phone booth and dialed his apartment number and let it ring. He could visualize Claire and Hugo in bed, Claire debating whether to answer, and Hugo pointing out that if it was Mark coming back a day early, she'd better answer.

On the seventh ring she answered, her voice sleepy and questioning.

"Darling!" Mark said excitedly. "I'm at the airport. I finished the job a day early. I couldn't wait to get home. I'll catch a taxi and be there in twenty minutes."

"Oh . . . " Claire was silent a moment. "I'm so glad, darling. I'll have some coffee on when you get home. Bye . . ."

Mark waited in the phone booth twenty minutes, smoking his first cigarette since leaving the airport —how long ago? In another life!

He walked the two blocks back

to the apartment building. Hugo's car was gone. Mark retrieved his suitcase from the janitor's closet under the stairway and took the stairs two at a time, working himself into an appearance of his normal enthusiasm and happiness.

Claire met him at the door with her usual tight little hug and quick kiss, and secret smile.

Only now, Mark too had a secret smile.

It was surprising, Mark discovered, how easy it was to look at Claire and smile, now that he knew what she was and he no longer loved her. The coffee was delicious. He discovered he was hungry. Claire fixed him a tuna salad sandwich on white toast. It reminded him that she had once told him she had worked as a waitress for a year while attending business school. The sandwich had a definite professional touch.

After finishing the sandwich Mark stretched and yawned. "Am I tired!" he exaggerated. He stood up, fished in his pants pocket for a quarter, and dropped it on the table beside his plate.

"What's that for?" Claire said.

"What?" Mark said. "Oh." He looked down at the quarter, then smiled at Claire. "Habit. I'm away from home so often. But why shouldn't wives get tips?" He yawned widely and turned away from the table, leaving the quarter there.

"Thank you, sir," Claire said as he pushed open the door to the livingroom. Her voice was just a shade too high and too thin.

"Which reminds me," Mark said, pausing and turning around. "I saw some nice looking bedroom sets in a show window in Chicago this morning. You know, people ought to get new furniture once in a while. I don't have to go back to the office tomorrow. I think I'll sleep through the morning."

"All right, Mark," Claire said. "I'll be right with you as soon as I do the dishes."

"Take your time," Mark said. "I'm tired. Been a long day. Going to sleep."

He let the kitchen door swing shut and went to the bedroom. The bed was neatly made. Claire must have really worked during that twenty minutes; making the bed, tidying up, doing the dishes, making sure that Hugo hadn't left any cigar butts she hadn't found, and spraying the air. He could smell the faint odor of lilacs from the spray deodorizer.

Mark went to bed. When Claire came in later he pretended to be asleep. He lay on his stomach with his face half buried in the pillow and his cradled arms.

After a few moments the lights went out. Mark steeled himself not to flinch if Claire touched him. She slid into bed without touching him and lay on her side of the bed without moving.

The darkness and silence built up into a loneliness in which he lay, dry eyed. Finally he went to sleep. When he awoke it was morning and he could hear the vacuum cleaner going in the livingroom. He looked at the clock and it was eleven-thirty. He flopped over and sat up, reaching for a cigarette, while last night came back to him.

Last night kicked him in the stomach as it came back, bit by vivid bit. He dragged deeply on the cigarette, letting the fresh smoke bite into his lungs as a counterirritant. Finally he was able to view things with the detachment he had captured last night.

Grinding out his cigarette, he got up and began the automatic routine of showering, brushing his teeth, shaving, combing his hair, and dressing. It was nice not to think for a full ten minutes.

He took a deep breath before opening the bedroom door. Claire was at the front door looking at someone outside in the hall. She turned her head. Her face had aged ten years.

"Mark," she said, "it's the police. They want to talk to us."

"Well, have them come in!" Mark said, "And get me some coffee." He hurried to the door and took over while Claire escaped to the kitchen.

The two men wore ordinary business suits. "I'm Lt. Jones and he's Lt. Stevens," the taller of the two men said, holding up his identification.

"Come on in," Mark said. "I'm Mark Spencer. What's happened? A burglary in the building? Do you want some coffee? Claire, bring two more cups."

Claire was already backing through the kitchen door with a tray. She hurried over and put it down on the coffee table.

"No coffee, please—well, since you've brought extra cups. It does smell good," Lt. Jones said.

"I need my coffee," Mark said in the silence after the two men had sat down on the davenport and Claire was pouring. "I just got up. Slept late. Uh, what apartment was robbed?"

"No burglary," Lt. Jones said. "Say, this coffee is good! We just want to ask a few routine questions. You and your wife home last night?"

"She was," Mark said. "I wasn't. I got back from Chicago, and called her from the airport to let

her know I was home, then caught a taxi straight home from the airport. We were here together for the rest of the night."

"Is that right?" Lt. Jones said, turning to Claire.

"Why, of course," she said, "but what's this all about?"

"What time did your plane arrive, Mr. Spencer?" Jones asked.

"Ten, ten-thirty, I don't know," Mark said. "It was flight eight-oh-seven."

"Remember what kind of a cab you caught?" Jones asked.

Mark identified the company.

"You give him this address?" Jones continued.

"Well, sure!" Mark said.

"Good." Jones flicked a friendly smile on and off. "We can check you out. Oh yes, one more thing. Did you have any visitors last night, either of you?"

Mark looked boldly at Claire. "Did you have any visitors last night, Claire?" he asked with just the right tone. She shook her head, swallowing loudly. Mark smiled at Lt. Jones and his partner. "No visitors at all," he said.

"Good," Jones said. He and Lt. Stevens flashed each other a smile of self-satisfaction. "We'll be going now." He emptied his cup and put it down. "Very good coffee, Mrs. Spencer," he said, standing up.

"What's it all about?" Mark said, managing to put the sound of genuine curiosity into his voice as he followed them to the door.

"Just a routine check on everyone who might even be remotely connected with a case," Jones said in the doorway. "Nothing to be alarmed about."

"But what is it?" Mark said.

"Murder," Lt. Jones said. "You know the man. He works for the same company you do. Hugo Rice."

"He was murdered?" Claire's voice sounded in Mark's ears, raw and jagged.

"No, no," Lt. Jones said. "He was arrested this morning for killing his wife." He closed the door.

"Hugo?" Mark said in carefully controlled tones of amazement, staring at the closed door, ". . . murdered Mildred?" He waited a measured moment, then turned to face Claire.

Claire was putting the cups and saucers onto the tray.

"You never know, do you," she said carelessly, but there were teeth marks on her knuckles. "Murderers are just something you read about in the papers. Then one day you know one."

She picked up the tray and went into the kitchen. Mark started to follow her, then changed his mind and sat down on the davenport. What had Claire meant, *Then one*

day you know one? Did she mean him or Hugo? Hugo had obviously tried to get the cops to believe he had been here last night at the time of the murder. The police hadn't believed him, but had checked it out. Claire had certainly been so upset last night with getting Hugo out of the apartment and straightening things that she actually didn't know what time he had called her and what time he arrived home. The flight stewardess and the cab driver would alibi him perfectly right to the apartment house. It was all beautiful, beautiful—like a machine in top working order!

Mark lit a cigarette and stretched his legs, letting them come to rest, crossed, on a small stack of magazines on the coffee table. He breathed deeply and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

"Claire!" he called, "how about some more coffee?"

"Coming right up, darling!" Claire answered. Her voice sounded cheerful. When she came in with the coffee pot and a clean cup and saucer she even looked cheerful. "You sit right there," she said after she poured his coffee. "I'll have your breakfast ready in a minute and serve it in here."

He stared in unbelief at her back as she returned to the kitchen. She was certainly doing a remarkably good job of concealing her grief!

Too good a job. An uneasy thought came to Mark. Now that Mildred was dead, if Hugo got off he would be free to marry Claire. Maybe the thought had occurred to Claire, too. Momentary panic churned up acid in his stomach. He forced it out of his mind. He had *nothing to fear!* And he knew it, so his good spirits returned.

Claire brought his breakfast, set it out neatly on the coffee table, then sat on the floor with her elbows on the coffee table and watched him eat. She smiled quickly when he looked at her.

Suddenly it annoyed him.

He sneered at Claire and fished in his pocket, bringing out a half dollar and dropping it on the table.

"Thank you, sir!" Claire said, getting to her feet and putting the half dollar in her housecoat pocket.

His sneer grew more open. He fought down the contempt he felt for Claire. He knew it showed in his eyes. He closed them. He doubled his fists, waiting for her to start shouting at him. Instead. . . .

"I know how you must feel, Mark," he heard her say. "You admired Mr. Rice and could think no wrong of him. But it came as no surprise to me. He is a selfish, egotistical man. Don't grieve for him, grieve for his wife."

Mark opened his eyes and stared unbelievingly at Claire. She must be a superb actress—no, no one could be that good. She was stupid. A moron. He had never realized it before. His contempt was lost on her. It went over her head, just as the insult of the tips did.

"I'm going out," he said.

"All right, Mark," Claire said.

She started picking up the dishes, putting them on the tray again. *A pathetic, moronic waitress!* Mark got his suit coat, and slammed the door on his way out of the apartment. What did it take to make her understand he knew?

He walked several blocks fiercely, frustrated. What did it take to put across to Claire that she could stay in his house as a housekeeper for her room and board, as a waitress who served him for tips, as a prostitute who got paid when and if he decided to sample her wares? Probably if he left a twenty dollar bill on the nightstand on her side of the bed she would be stupid enough to think it a special gift to go out and buy a dress with!

Was he going to have to come right out and tell her in black and white the new state of affairs?

Suddenly he stopped walking, his face lighting up with delight. There *was* someone who didn't have to have things spelled out for him.

Hugo Rice! *He* was the someone!

Mark flagged down a cruising cab. On the way to the police department he leaned back and half closed his eyes, smiling with great contentment. He would play the stupid but faithful friend bit while Hugo ranted. Hugo knew who had killed Mildred, and why. Hugo knew he was in a frame he couldn't escape.

At the police station Mark asked for Lt. Jones, and then told Jones he wanted to visit with Hugo, see if there was anything he could do for his "friend and boss".

"I don't see why not," Lt. Jones said in a kindly tone. "It's funny how friends desert a person when he's arrested. You're the only one who's come to visit him."

Mark was taken to a room with bare walls, a table and four chairs. The door closed, and he was alone for almost ten minutes. He spent the time looking for hidden microphones, not finding any, but convinced they were there. No matter what Hugo said, he would have to be careful not to make any incriminating remarks himself.

A smile kept tugging at the corner of Mark's lips. He was going to enjoy this thoroughly.

Finally the door opened and Hugo strode in, a scowl of anger on his face, his eyes smoldering.

Lt. Jones looked at Mark sig-

nificantly. "The officer will be just outside the door," he said.

"Stay and get an earful, Lieutenant," Hugo snarled. "I'm going to make this ingrate admit he killed my wife."

"Are you sure you want to go on with this visit, Mr. Spencer?" Jones said. "I wouldn't advise it."

"Yes," Mark said, "but maybe you'd better stay here. What's happened to you, Hugo?"

Jones closed the door and took a chair off to one side, crossing his legs and lighting a cigarette.

"What's happened to me?" Hugo asked. "You killed Mildred and framed me for it. You used my gun and put it in my desk at the plant. And I could prove it if this moron detective here would do what I tell him."

"What's that?" Mark said.

"Go to your apartment and fingerprint it," Hugo said. "My fingerprints are all over the place. Fresh fingerprints. I was there last night when you swiped my car, went and killed Mildred, put my gun in my desk at the office, parked the car where it had been, then called to tell your wife you had just arrived at the airport, to get me out of there while the police found my wife's body on your anonymous phone call."

A cold chill crept up Mark's spine. Hugo had put his finger on the one clue that would uncover the truth.

"You're not being yourself, Hugo," he said, his voice unsteady.

"Don't be upset, Mr. Spencer," Jones said. "I see this happen all the time. A guy is caught and knows it, and he goes nuts, lashing out in every direction for an escape."

"Well, why don't you fingerprint Spencer's apartment and find out?" Hugo demanded.

"I wouldn't waste my time," Lt. Jones said.

"Why don't you?" Mark said. "It might set poor Hugo's mind at rest."

"And have your wife landing on me for dusting up her walls and woodwork?" Jones said. Besides, you have no idea of the work involved, the thousands of fingerprints we'll find—all belonging to you and your wife. No thanks. Especially not since you invited me to."

"I'll get you some way if it's the last thing I ever do, you stupid moron," Hugo said to Mark. "To think that I lifted you out of the shop and gave you the job of Special Field Engineer. Why do you suppose I did it? Because you had some special talent? Hell no! I did it because at the plant picnic I made a pass at your wife and she responded. I gave you that job so I

could get you out of town for three or four days whenever I wanted to see her."

"Poor Hugo," Mark said, shaking his head in mock pity. "How you've changed." He turned to Lt. Jones and asked with mock seriousness, "Can he get off with a plea of insanity? I would say he's insane. Now he is, at least."

"I'm surprised you don't hit him," Jones said.

Mark looked into Hugo's eyes and smiled slightly.

"He's *sick*, Lieutenant," Mark said.

The veins in Hugo's temples stood out and pulsed visibly.

"They don't hang *sick* people, do they?" Mark added.

"In this state it's the gas chamber," Jones said. "He's going there."

"I wish I could do something to help him," Mark said.

"CONFESS, DAMN YOU!" Hugo shouted. "AFTER ALL I'VE DONE FOR YOU . . . !"

Mark looked at Lt. Jones and spread his arms in a shrug. Jones went to the door and opened it. The uniformed officer led Hugo away.

"I'm really upset," Mark said.

"Don't be," Jones said. "This is a fairly common thing with people who have been fairly law abiding and then become murderers and get caught. And don't go suspecting your wife. If what he said was true he would die before he would implicate her. Not only to protect her, but because it's the most damaging kind of alibi he could dream up. I admit I did check you out, Spencer, and you did come in on that plane and go directly to your apartment in a cab as you said. But I didn't check you out because I thought you might be guilty. I did it so the D.A. could prevent the defense lawyer from forcing you or your wife to appear in court. No use subjecting either of you to unpleasantness."

"Thank you," Mark said. He and the Lieutenant shook hands. Then he was leaving the building, bubbling with happiness inside, a small smile on his lips.

Outside, he hesitated. He had most of the afternoon ahead of him. He didn't want to go home. Should he check in at the plant? He would have to go home and get his briefcase out of his suitcase so he could turn in his time and expenses on that job in Chicago. He decided against it.

He walked slowly, stopping at store windows and studying the products on display. Some were interesting, some weren't.

He came to a furniture store. A bedroom display reminded him. He went inside and inspected the

twin bed displays. He settled on a bedroom set, a really nice one. Yes, they would be happy to take his old bedroom set in trade and would be fair to him, but he must remember that used mattresses were worth nothing, by the time they were renovated all they could sell for would be the cost of renovation. No, delivery couldn't possibly be made today. Not for three days. The order would have to go to the warehouse, the crated set have to be brought out to the loading platform, the truck had many other deliveries, it took three days.

Yes, his credit was good, they would take a ten dollar deposit, notify him of the allowance they gave him on the old set, and he could pay the balance in thirty days with no carrying charge, that would be fine.

Mark paid the ten dollars and left the store disappointed. He would be forced to sleep in the same bed with Claire for two more nights. Well, she could keep on her side of the bed. If he wanted her, he would let her know. And pay her. Maybe she would think the twenty bucks was a present to buy a new dress with, but to him it would be for services rendered. Let her go on deluding herself if she wished.

He did more window shopping. He came to a restaurant and decided to have some coffee, maybe a sandwich.

He sat at the counter. The waitress cleared the dishes off and wiped the counter with a damp cloth, leaving wet streaks that slowly dried, off color. Her hair was bleached to straw color with an exaggerated upsweep that was partly unhinged. Her nail polish was flaking off.

She was generous with the coffee. Some of it had splashed into the saucer. There was a nick in the cup so that he had to turn it around and not use the handle, to avoid the nick. He decided against a sandwich.

The waitress' panty girdle, outlined by her tight white uniform skirt, was bunched at the waist. The coffee tasted bad. Stale.

Suddenly lonely, Mark left a quarter on the counter and walked out.

He stood on the sidewalk, depressed. He glanced at his watch. It was only three o'clock—a couple of minutes after. A taxi was coming down the street. On impulse he stepped out into the street and stopped it. He gave the driver the address of the plant, and settled back.

Maybe they would have something waiting for him so he could get out of town again for a couple of days until the twin beds were

delivered. Yeah! Maybe they would! He was glad he had decided to go to the plant.

Gertrude, the receptionist, welcomed him with a bright smile that quickly clouded. "Have you heard the news, Mark?" she said.

"I've heard," Mark said, going past her to his own private cubicle. He looked eagerly at his in-basket. It was empty.

He sat down at the desk, and the phone rang. He scooped up the receiver and said, "Spencer. . . ."

"Mark?" It was Gertrude. "I forgot to tell you. Mr. McHale wanted to see you as soon as you came in. He's in his office now. He could see you."

"Oh?" Mark said. "See if it's okay. I'll go right in."

It hadn't occurred to Mark. With Hugo out of the picture there was a vacancy in the Upper Echelons! It would have to be filled immediately, of course.

He took the small mirror out of the top desk drawer and inspected himself, straightening his tie and picking a fleck off his shoulder.

The phone rang again. It was Gertrude. "He'll see you immediately," she said.

McHale was the president. He sat behind an acre of gleaming mahogany desk, yet seemed to dominate it like a mountain top. A freshly lit, expensive cigar was in his mouth, sending blue smoke streamers out over the room. He took the cigar out of his mouth and pointed with it to a chair.

"Sit down, Spencer," the president said.

"Yes, sir," Mark said. He dipped into the chair, and sat with bright expectancy.

"Too bad about Hugo," McHale said, scowling, putting his cigar back in his mouth and puffing swiftly to bring it to life.

"Yes, it is," Mark said. "He's a fine man. He—he's probably innocent—wouldn't you say?"

"He's through." McHale said it with finality. "He's been a problem all along. We held an emergency Board Meeting at noon. Hugo's *out*." The president of the company scowled, looking past Mark to distant, important horizons of his highly skilled executive mind. Mark experienced a sense of awe. It would be wonderful working for this man . . .

"Now about you . . ." the president said.

"Yes?" Mark said eagerly.

"I never could understand why Hugo took you out of the shop," McHale said. "He knows our company policy. I have to be fair, though. I got out your record. I've been studying it." He opened the center drawer of his desk and took

out a file folder, thick with papers. He put it on the desk top, closed the center drawer, then waved vaguely at the folder with his cigar.

"Do you know what this record shows?" he said.

"No, sir," Mark said, suppressing his eagerness.

"It shows that company policy is right," McHale said. "You are a good machinist. But in the field? You make repairs. You don't make suggestions for improvements. You don't have a college mind. Oh, Hugo's been covering for you; but the fact remains that it takes a college man in the field, not a repairman. You don't have the technical know-how to suggest changes in design."

Mark was silent, ice forming in his blood.

"I just don't know why Hugo promoted you out of the shop," McHale said. "But I have to be fair to you. You can't keep your present job. In fact, we don't need a special field engineer, we have resident engineers all over the country to handle breakdown problems and suggest changes in design. But you're a good company man. I don't see how I can just send you back to a lathe. It's a problem. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make a job for you as swing shift efficiency expert—until a lead man job opens up. It will be quite a salary cut, but no one needs to know about that but the payroll department. They have to know, of course. Or, if you'd rather look for another job, I'll see that you get the highest recommendation. Go for the top. If you can handle the job I won't hinder you with another company."

Stunned, Mark remained like a statue. Once, his face muscles cramped visibly. Slowly his eyes went dead.

McHale looked at the ceiling, puffing furiously on his cigar, and waited. "Maybe you'd like to think it over," he said abruptly. "Take a couple of weeks vacation and think about it. You have it coming. If you don't, I'll clear it. At your present salary, too!"

"No!" Mark said, his voice harsh. He took a deep breath. "That is, I'll take the vacation at my present salary. Why not?" His grin was twisted, apologetic. "But I'll take the job. It *is* a promotion—from what I *was,* isn't it . . ."

"That's the spirit," McHale said, obviously relieved. "And you can be sure I'll keep my eye on you." He came around his desk and shook hands with Mark. "A man with your field experience should make a good shop foreman, once he gets a few years of management experience in his background."

He pushed Mark toward the

door, shaking his hand enthusiastically, puffing blue smoke from his rich cigar.

Mark smiled brightly at Gertrude on his way back to his cubicle. With his door closed, he sat down at his desk. He looked at his name, shadowed in reverse on the frosted glass of his closed door. And a slow flush built up on his face.

Claire had bought him this cubicle with his name on the door. The whole, simple truth had come home to Mark at last. *Her relief which she couldn't conceal when she learned Hugo had been arrested and she would no longer have to keep paying.*

"You admired Mr. Rice and could think no wrong of him," Claire had said, *"but it came as no surprise to me. He is a selfish egotistical man. Don't grieve for him, grieve for his wife."*

And Mr. McHale, frowning, "I JUST DON'T KNOW why Hugo promoted you out of the shop . . ."

And Hugo's hate curved lips, saying, "Why do you suppose I lifted you out of the shop? Because you had some very special talent?"

Suddenly Mark's lips began to tremble. Tears streamed from his eyes. Then his head was cradled in his arms on the desk while he sobbed openly, shaking with the torment that possessed him, the grief he could never share, the thing he could never let Claire know he knew.

He became quiet. Finally he lifted his head. He took out a cigarette and lit it, staring unseeingly at the surface of his desk.

He fished in his side coat pocket and brought out a slip of paper. He unfolded it and flattened it on the desk. He studied it, then reached for the phone.

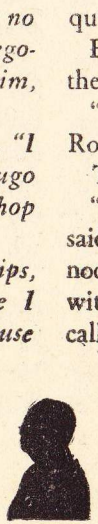
"Outside, Gertrude," he said in a quiet, subdued voice.

He read the phone number off the slip of paper as he dialed it.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Rosen," he said.

There was quite a wait.

"Mr. Rosen?" Mark Spencer said. "I was in earlier this afternoon and ordered a bedroom set with twin beds. Remember? I'm calling to cancel the order."



It may be true, as the bard would have us believe, that "truth is the trial of itself". But most human predicaments require a more practical solution.

TO SKIN A CAT

by ELIJAH ELLIS

THE JURY didn't leave the box. They huddled around the foreman, whispering among themselves. It wouldn't take them long to reach a verdict—since there was only one verdict they could possibly give.

I leaned back in my chair at the prosecution table, and looked up at the ancient ceiling fans that did

little to cool off the sweltering, jampacked courtroom. I lowered my gaze, glanced briefly across the aisle at the defense table.

The defendant himself was putting on a show of complete indifference, but I noticed that he kept clenching and unclenching his fists. He was a pretty-boy, with masses of black curls and a girl's full-lipped mouth. He was around twenty-five. He was also a murderer. I knew it. Everyone in the courtroom knew it. Jack Vendise had taken a shotgun away from old Bob Blaisedell and blown out the old man's brains. Nice fellow, Jack Vendise.

I turned in my chair until I could look back over the rail that divided the courtroom. Every seat was taken. Farmers in overalls and hickory shirts sat with women in print dresses and sunbonnets. Just beyond the rail, in the first row of seats, sat Betty Blaisedell, the murdered man's daughter.

Betty was sixteen. She had on a shapeless black dress and her eyes were red and puffy from crying, but she was enjoying the whole thing. She sat between her mother, who was also in black, and her uncle, Roy Blaisedell.

My gaze lingered on Roy. He was a big, beefy, sunburned man. He looked awkward and sweaty in an ill-fitting suit. He never took his eyes away from the defendant. Roy had loved his older brother, Bob.

I just hoped Roy wouldn't start anything here in court.

I looked on around the big, low-ceilinged room. Beyond the defense table, Sheriff Ed Carson sat with his back to the wall. Our eyes met, and Ed gave me a somber wink.

Then the foreman of the jury rose. "Yer honor, we've reached a verdict."

Judge Chalmers rapped for order. "Very well, Mr. Foreman. Defendant, rise and face your jury. Mr. Foreman, what is your verdict?"

The foreman grimaced, bit his lips, and burst out, "Yer honor, we find this defendant—*not guilty*."

And that was that. The only way it could be.

Judge Chalmers dismissed the jury, and the case. For a moment it was very quiet. Then the spectators began to leave amid a soft mumble of conversation. Roy Blaisedell came to the rail, his suntanned face split in a humorless grin. He said quietly, "I'll be seeing you, Vendise. Count on it."

Jack Vendise jumped up. "Drop dead, rube," he said, and started laughing. He shook his head wonderingly. "I beat it."

Blaisdell turned away and fol-

lowed the crowd out of the courtroom. Vendise yelled, "I beat it, man. I beat it!"

The big, grizzled, rawboned sheriff of Pokochobee County stalked over to join me. "Glad Roy didn't start any trouble," Ed Carson said.

"Yeah," I agreed.

I stepped across the aisle to congratulate the defense attorney, old P. J. Kimmons. He didn't look at all happy. He had taken the case because the court had appointed him to it. That didn't make him like it. Now he was putting papers into his briefcase, pointedly ignoring his erstwhile client.

We shook hands. P. J. smiled wryly.

Then Vendise shoved between us. "What you doing, shaking hands with this guy?" he demanded. He turned on me. "Tried to send me to the chair, you did. But you didn't make it, did you, Mr. County Attorney Gates?"

I stepped back. I had a strong urge to belt him one.

"Shut your filthy mouth," P. J. broke in, glaring at Vendise.

Before Vendise could reply, the old lawyer had grabbed up his briefcase and was on his way out of the courtroom.

"Get him," Vendise said. "Geez. What a bunch of rubes."

Ed Carson said, "Come along, son. Come along with me now."

"Huh? Where to? For what?"

"Over to the jail. You want to get your things, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Let's go. Quicker I'm away from this lousy burg, the better I'll like it."

I said, "The feeling's mutual, believe me."

Vendise swaggered out. At the door he turned and called back to me, "Better luck next time, Gates."

Then he left, followed by the sheriff.

I was alone in the muggy, hot courtroom. I lit a cigarette and went over to the windows. I looked down on the parched lawn that surrounded the ancient courthouse. I could hear a few birds singing dispiritedly among the trees on the lawn, all withering in the summer afternoon heat.

I thought about the case just concluded, wondered if there'd been anything I could have done that I didn't do. But I knew there wasn't. Knowing a man has committed murder, and proving it to the satisfaction of the law are two different things. I'd found that out, along with a lot of other unpleasant facts of life, during the four years I'd been Pokochobee County Attorney.

Take this case. Jack Vendise had drifted into town about a month ago, one of a traveling group of

salesmen. This particular bunch had stayed in Monroe only two days.

On the first evening, Jack Vendise had wandered into a drugstore in downtown Monroe. There he'd seen a flock of local high-school girls—among them, Betty Blaisedell. She had responded with giggles and fluttering eyelashes to Vendise's overtures. It wasn't every day that she got to meet a boy from a city far away from Pokochobee County.

But Betty was only interested in flirting in front of an audience. When she left the drugstore for home, she wasn't at all interested in Vendise following her, which he did. Then he hung around on the sidewalk in front of the house, until finally Bob Blaisedell had come out and told him to get away from there.

Vendise did, but not for long. He went to the nearest bar and had a couple of shots. Then he returned to the Blaisedell place.

Like most people in Monroe, the Blaisedell's didn't pull their window shades until bedtime. So it was no problem for Vendise to discover which room was Betty's.

At eleven o'clock Betty went to bed. An hour or so later she woke up to find a man standing beside her bed. She screamed, and kept on screaming. The man rushed across the room and out the open window.

Later, we found footprints in the flower bed under Betty's window. They were worthless for identification, but they did help to establish what had happened. The intruder had stood around there until Betty turned her light off and went to sleep. Then he had used a pocket knife or something similar to slit the window-screen, reach in and turn back the hook.

He pulled back the screen and slid inside. Betty awoke, saw him, and started yelling. As he hurried back out of the window, she saw him for a brief second silhouetted against the moonlight.

But she couldn't swear that it was Jack Vendise.

By that time old Bob Blaisedell was up and ran into Betty's room, his shotgun in his hands. Betty stammered out what she'd seen. Bob rushed out, leaving Betty with her mother. What happened then, only Jack Vendise could have told us for sure, though it wasn't hard to guess.

Moments later the two women heard a shot from the alley behind the house. They waited awhile, but when Bob didn't return, they stole out of the house to the alley. There they found Bob Blaisedell with the top of his head blown off. Beside the body lay the shotgun.

Within the hour, the night deputy had picked up Vendise in a downtown bar. Vendise had no alibi, but he needed none. He simply denied any knowledge whatsoever of the killing. Nothing could shake him.

Ed Carson threw him in jail, and I indicted him for second degree murder. Without a confession it was pointless, and Ed and I both knew it.

There was just no physical evidence. No fingerprints, no nothing. The girl's testimony was worthless. She was so obviously concerned with getting her picture in the papers as a *femme fatale* that the first appeal court would have reversed any decision made on her evidence. This being true, it was better that Jack Vendise be acquitted here, in Monroe, where the crime had taken place.

He'd spent his month in jail waiting for the trial and, as he kept yelling, he'd beaten the rap.

I sighed, stubbed out my cigarette on the window-sill and flicked the stub away. I wanted to see Vendise just once more.

Leaving the courtroom, I went down the two flights of marble stairs and along the corridor to the back door. The red-brick jail was separated from the courthouse by a parking lot. By the time I got to the jail, my shirt was plastered fast to my back with perspiration.

I found Carson, a deputy, and Vendise in the jail office. Vendise was signing a release form as I entered. He glanced up, laughed, "Here comes Mr. County Attorney."

"I'd like a word with you, Jack," I said.

Carson and his deputy left the office, Ed saying, "I figure it's about time for a coke break."

I looked at Vendise. "You know you can never be tried again for killing old man Blaisedell?"

He shrugged, grinning widely with his toothpaste smile. "You tell 'em, man. This cat has beat the rap."

"Uh huh. But just for my own satisfaction—and no witnesses to bug you—did it happen about the way I said in court?"

Vendise hesitated. "Yeah, more or less. This old jerk, he came running out in the alley, see, with his shotgun. Well, what am I supposed to do? I pretended to go along with him, see. He kind of lowered the gun, and I jumped him. I got the gun away from him, and I . . ."

His voice trailed off into silence. He glanced uneasily around the office.

"You don't have to worry," I said. "You can't be tried twice for the same crime."

"Yeah, yeah, but I don't like this place. Anyplace else—New York, or Boston, or any civilized place—there'd be reporters and photographers around, and there'd be a crowd of people to cheer for me. But this place is way out, you know? Like creepy."

"Uh huh. But then nobody asked you to come down here, did they?" I clamped my lips together on the temper rising inside me. "Let's get this over with," I added.

I went to the door and let out a call. Ed Carson came back, nursing a coke. I nodded to Ed. He plodded into the office and said, "Well, now. Jack, you got all your belongings there? Your billfold and all?"

Vendise said, "Well, my good buddies took off the morning after you rubes hauled me in on this bum rap. When they left town, they took my bag with them, so all the belongings I got is what I'm standing here in. This is it."

Carson shook his head sadly. "Too bad. Anyway, you do have your billfold and watch and so on. . . . How about money? Accordin' to my list, you came in with five dollars."

"Ah, I spent that a'ready. A pig couldn't eat the stuff you serve here. I sent out for food once in awhile."

I pretended to prick up my ears. "What's that? You don't have any money?"

"Not a dime," Vendise said. He shrugged. "Who cares?"

"Pokochobee County cares," I said sternly. I turned to the sheriff. "Here's a man with no baggage, no residential address in Monroe, and no money."

Carson nodded. "Yar. Afraid we'll have to charge you with vagrancy, son. No visible means of support. . . ."

"What're you trying to give

me?" Vendise yelled. His girlish face contorted with anger. "You lousy rubes!"

With a good deal of satisfaction I said, "What we're going to give you is thirty days in jail. Or—you can work it out on the county farm. Fifteen days there, and you get a dollar a day plus your meals. What's it going to be?"

You could almost see the wheels turning in Vendise's sleek head. Work farm, poor security, many chances for a smart man to escape, whenever he felt like it. . . .

"I tell you what it's going to be, Gates. Once I get back to civilization, I'm going to blow your stinking county off the map. You know? This whole lousy state! Just you wait, cat. Just you wait."

Ed Carson pursued his lips. "Well, you just do that. But for now, how about Mr. Gates' question? You want to lay out your time in jail, or work it out on the farm?"

"Ah, I'll go to your stinking farm. What a bunch of yokels!"

Carson and I exchanged a glance. Then Ed told his deputy to put Vendise in a cell, and to wait for the manager of the county farm to arrive for his prisoner in a couple of hours.

When the men had left the office, Vendise cursing at the top of his voice, the sheriff said, "I'll have the farm boss come in for that 'cat' about supper-time. . . . Funny, ain't it? the way these old corny sayings have a way of comin' true, time and again. Like the one that goes, 'There's more ways than one to skin a cat.' "

"Mmmm," I agreed. I grimaced. "I wonder how long that particular cat will last? Out there on the farm, in this heat, fourteen hours a day of hard work. . . ."

"Yeah. And Roy Blaisedell the farm boss."

"Bet you coffee money Vendise don't last a week, before he tries to take off, and Roy—well."

"Roy blows his head off—just like Vendise done to Roy's brother," Carson finished. "I tell you, I don't think it'll be more'n two days."

"It's a bet," I said.

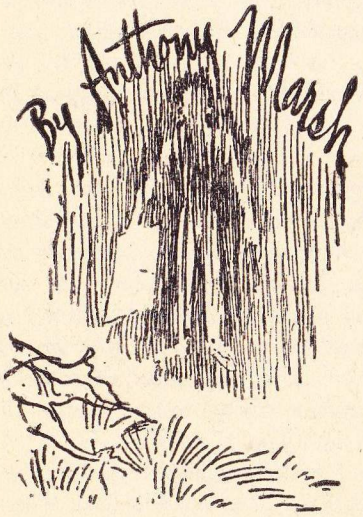
I lost.

As Whistler himself has reminded us, "Nature sings her exquisite song to the artist alone." Judging from our hero's vivid interpretations, this is indeed a blessing in disguise.

I've known George for some time now. I first met him when I was at college. I was doing art; a bit of clay modeling, sculpture, painting, and so forth. It was painting that interested me most, especially oils. You can really give your picture body with oils. Of course, my old man thought I was crazy. According to him, I should have gone to business

school or law school, and followed his holy footsteps into the stock exchange. In fact, I once heard him talking to my uncle about me.

"We'll have to give the boy his head," he told him. "Wait till he's worked this nonsense out of his system, then he'll come to his senses and settle down to do something useful."



Well I haven't worked it out of my system so far, and I'm not going to. I'm going to show them yet that I am a painter, if it's the last thing I do; and it looks as if it might be. In a way, I can't blame the old man for not appreciating my talent. After all, even my teachers didn't seem to catch on. I would be sitting there, painting my heart out on that canvas, when old Prof. Whitehouse—well he really wasn't old at all, he should have known better—would come over and look at it and I could see the sarcasm sort of smeared all over his face.

"That shows quite a lot of promise, Henry," he'd say, then he'd go on jabbering about form and color balance and draftsmanship and all that kind of rot, just kindergarten stuff. But I wasn't concerned about old Whitehouse because I knew I was way ahead of him, and I told him so once or twice. He just smiled superciliously, and walked off as if he didn't care. But I knew he did, because after a while he began to get back at me, though in an underhand kind of way so that nobody would notice it. He was a pretty mean devil, old Whitehouse, but he couldn't fool me.

I caught on to him before he could get far up the field. You see, when the class first started, the Prof. would go around giving everybody else a bad time, as well as me. Then the others started to kowtow to him and do what he wanted. They didn't have any guts. They were nothing but a bunch of cheap draftsmen following a lot of stupid rules. But I wouldn't stand for that sort of stuff, and just went on painting the way I wanted to paint. In fact, the pictures sort of came out by themselves, and some of them were

pretty dramatic, I can tell you. After a while, Whitehouse got off the other students' backs, but he never would let up on me.

In the end, because of the way the Prof. treated me, the other students began to turn against me too. I knew this from the way they started acting when we were up at Billy's Joint. We used to meet there, every night almost, and sit around drinking beer or coffee or coke, and talking about everything under the sun; art, music, philosophy, and so on. At that time I was all hepped up about those English philosophers Locke, Berkeley and Hume. They called themselves idealists because they said nothing really existed. All the things we see around us, like apples, tables, houses, even other people, are just ideas that exist in our own minds.

I thought they were pretty sharp. L., B. and H., I used to call them. I got the idea from my old man. He used to say M. L. P. and F. when he wanted to talk about that stockbroking crowd. You'd have thought the old boy was talking about a bunch of high priests, he got so solemn when he mentioned their names.

The other students wouldn't go for L., B. and H. and all the idealist stuff, and I can tell you we got into some real hot arguments about them. Once when I made a pass at one of the girls, she slapped my face and then told me I wasn't to get upset about it because she only existed in my mind. Well, I started to explain to her how ignorant she was about philosophy. Then the rest of the crowd began to give each other funny looks and they all clammed up. They just sat there like the dummies they were and wouldn't argue with me any more.

But what really hurt me was when they started getting up and leaving. Then, after a few nights, they wouldn't sit at the same table with me. It was all Prof. Whitehouse's fault, but I wasn't going to kow-tow to him like they had done, and I told them all where they could go. Just to show them how I felt, I used to sit at my own table drinking beer, while they prattled away in their corner like a lot of silly chickens.

I didn't mind being by myself because it gave me a chance to do some thinking. However, I wasn't alone for long, because it was soon after this that I began talking to George. He was different from the rest. He wasn't even a student at that time. He had been, but he was an independent type like me, and he'd told them to go whistle. It hadn't done him any harm either because he was selling his pictures like crazy. I would have liked to

quit like him and do what he was doing, but I don't dare. That was just what the old man was waiting for. If I quit art school, it would be one, two, three, and into business college, and after that into the dismal old stock exchange.

George looked like an artist too. He sported a wonderful Van Dyke, and though he could afford any clothes he liked, he always dressed in corduroys, and he wore them like a king. I had tried to grow a beard when I first started at art school, but it never looked like anything more than a few patches of tumbleweed sticking out of my jaw. That, combined with the bald area on top of my scalp, made it look as if someone had flattened my head out. My father was bald and so was my uncle. I don't remember my mother, but I bet she was bald too. Anyway, I had to hack off my beard and shave every day like some cheap stockbroker's clerk.

But the one place I really had to hand it to George was the way he dealt with women. The stories he told! It seems he only had to raise an eyebrow, and they came tumbling in his direction like apples down a chute. Of course I'd had a few little adventures of my own, but I had to work hard for them, whereas he seemed to have the girls lined up four deep outside his door. Mind you, George was a gentleman and never mentioned names, but I could guess who some of his conquests were. There were quite a few gorgeous dolls around who usually didn't have even a good night for me, let alone a good morning.

You might think from what I've said that George and I were close. Well, we were most of the time, but we had our quarrels. He'd boast about the prices he'd be getting for his paintings, or his successes with his girl friends, and then he'd ride me a bit. Sometimes I couldn't take it, particularly if the other students or Prof. Whitehouse had been giving me a bad time. Then I'd get mad and we'd begin to yell at each other, and people in the Joint would stare at our table and start grumbling.

One night we had a real set-to. I hadn't been feeling well. I hadn't slept for nights, and had been dozing all day. Quite frankly, I was glad when the other students gave me the cold shoulder, because I couldn't stand the sight of them any more. I wasn't too glad to see George either. He tore into me right away, first about some miniature he'd sold for fifty bucks, and then about some visiting film star who just wouldn't give him any peace. I told him what he could do with his miniature, and the

film star. He just laughed and called me a beardless youth. That did it. I started yelling at him like a madman, and tried to punch him on the nose.

The glasses went flying and the table tipped over. A couple of waiters came up and grabbed me by the arms.

"Don't grab me," I yelled. "Throw him out. He's the one that started it."

"Who?" said one of the waiters.

"Him, George Poldroon. That fellow over there."

"Over where?" asked the waiter.

I looked round, and, would you believe it, the dirty skunk had sneaked out. That was when old Whitehouse came up. He'd been having a gay time at the corner table with some of the girls. He nodded to the waiters with his face all screwed up, then I heard him tell them to hold me while he called the police. I tried to get at him, but they hung on to me like a couple of octopuses. By the time the police came, I didn't know what I was doing, and those boys didn't give me a chance to find out. I've just got a vague recollection of being booked, thrown into the tank, and beating on the bars for hours, shouting bloody murder.

When I came to, I was in a hospital; at least that's what I found out later. It was just a small room with soft walls, and I was lying on a mattress on the floor. There wasn't much light in the room, and at first I thought they had put George in there with me. But it turned out to be a hospital orderly. I got to be quite friendly with him later, but at that particular moment I hated him.

"How are you feeling, fellah?" he asked, when he saw me moving.

"What's that to you?" I grouched back at him.

"Maybe I can help you," he said, and he had a soft, pleasant sort of voice.

"Well, I've got the biggest headache you ever heard of." I answered.

"Just a moment, I'll get you something." He got up, unlocked the door, and backed out. I must have dozed off while he was gone, because the next thing I knew, he was shaking me by the shoulder, and offering me some pills, and some juice out of a cardboard cup. I found out later that I was what they call *under sedation* at the time. It felt more like a hangover to me because, not only was my head throbbing like a pile driver, but my tongue felt like desert sand, and I had the foulest taste in my mouth.

I don't know how long I stayed

in the little room; it must have been several days. When they reckoned I was fit to be let out, they put me in a big ward with the other patients. I tell you, you've never seen such a bunch of nuts. One fellow used to sing to himself all day, off key, and another one just walked up and down the whole time just like a caged lion, not saying a word to anyone. Some of the others had their own brand of screwy habits, but a lot of them seemed like quite ordinary people. Of course, that was how I saw them at the time, but I bet a lot of them had come in like me.

George never showed up the whole time I was in there. My old man and my uncle took it in turns to come down to visit me every week, and when they thought I was ready for it, they started giving me the palsy-walsy stuff and all the man-to-man talk about what I was going to do when they let me out—*discharged* was the word they used when they wanted to make me feel good. The old man didn't want me to go back to the art school, and quite frankly I wasn't too keen myself on getting mixed up again with old Whitehouse and his team of daubers. On the other hand, I was determined not to give up my art and get sidetracked into that dingy stockbrokers' office.

I think one of the doctors must have settled the argument for us because one day the old man came in a bit pale around the gills. The psychiatrist had been talking to him about mental illness being a family affair, and suggested that the old boy ought to be analyzed too. That was when he compromised and bought that estate for me near Bluestone Park. I was to go down there to convalesce, and, of course, I took my painting stuff along with me.

Land was pretty cheap in that part of the country, and the old man was able to pick up nearly twenty acres for next to nothing. He thought it would be a good investment as a sideline. It was mainly forest land, fir, pine and a lot of brush. Some of the trees had already been cut down by the previous owner, and were still lying around, but there were a lot left, so many that you could almost get lost in the place. In fact, I really did get lost once or twice, and I never actually explored the whole estate.

There was an old cottage down near the road that had been modernized a bit, and that's where I lived. Nellie used to come up from the village every day to clean house, cook my dinner, and see that my washing was done. She was sort of pretty in a way, blue

eyes, golden hair and all that sort of stuff. She had a nice little figure too, even though her legs were an inch or so too short for her body. But the average guy might not notice that; an artist sees it straight away.

When I first came there, I didn't see much of Nellie. I used to go out after breakfast every day with my canvases and easel, and paint pictures all day. There was no lack of subject matter; trees, creeks, funny shaped rocks and what you will. Of course I didn't just paint photographs of the scenery. I took a few of those prissy, straight pine trees and put a few good twists into their trunks. Then I'd paint the rocks a sort of violet or magenta color, with all sorts of enticing bug-eyed creatures looking over the top, and crawling out of the cracks. I dare say you wouldn't recognize some of the places I painted, but that's the way I saw things, and when you're an artist, that's the only thing that counts—the way you see things.

I usually took some sandwiches with me so that I wouldn't have to quit until it got dark. Nellie would just about have time to give me my dinner when I got back to the cottage, then she'd leave for home. That's the way things would have stayed if it hadn't been for George. I looked up from my painting one day, and there he was, Van Dyke, corduroys and all. I didn't bother to ask him how he knew where I was. George just had a knack about those things and could find me any time he wanted. So I made some inane remark like "Who let you in?"

He laughed. "Your girl friend," he said, then he winked at me.

"Oh, no," I told him. "She's not my girl friend. She just cleans house for me."

"Don't give me that innocent stuff," said George. "You've got a real beauty there, my boy."

"But her legs are too short for her body," I answered.

George was laughing himself sick. "I wasn't suggesting you should paint her," was all he could get out.

The next day George came again, and the next day, and the next day. Each day we spent more and more time talking about Nellie, and all the time I was getting more interested. Until then I hadn't even tried to make a pass at her. I realized that I just hadn't been interested in girls at all since I left the hospital. I suppose that was part of my illness, and now I was getting over it. After about a week or so, I found that I was terrifically interested, and sat there for a whole morning without

painting a stroke, just thinking about Nellie.

At noon I went back to the cottage pretending that I wanted to eat lunch at home that day. Nellie seemed kind of surprised to see me, but didn't make any comment except to ask me what I wanted to eat. She gave me my lunch, and the whole time I was eating she just went right on working, while I kept my eye on her. The more I watched her, the more I realized that George was right. That inch or two off her legs didn't really make any difference; the part she had left was pretty good to look at, especially when she started to climb up the stepladder to dust the bookshelves.

I crept up behind her, and made a grab at her. She jumped down and pushed me away, so I tried again. This time, she pushed me away a bit harder. She was quite strong really, and she started to scold me like a mother might start scolding one of her kids. I can tell you I didn't appreciate that at all. Nobody treats me like a kid and gets away with it. I decided then to go out again and paint, but I spent the whole afternoon brooding.

It was the same thing next morning, and by lunch time I made up my mind that something had to be done about it. I was going to show that little piece that it wasn't a mother I was looking for. When I got back into the house, I locked the door behind me and went straight up to her. She must have seen that I really meant business because she started fighting and screaming before I had hardly touched her. But I managed to get a sort of bear hug grip on her, and squeezed her arms to her sides and forced her into the bedroom. I pushed her down on the bed and put my knee on her chest, but she still fought so hard I had to let my fingers slip round her throat to hold her down.

I was pretty mad myself by this time. I reckoned she had put up a good enough show, and it was time to quit. "What have you got against me?" I wanted to know.

"Nothing," she gasped, "but I'm engaged to Billy Sands in the village."

That was about the worst thing she could have said. Surely she wasn't turning me down for one of those village yokels. Why, I bet this Billy Sands didn't even know which end to hold a paintbrush. I know I'm no movie idol to look at, but it isn't every day that a girl gets a chance at an artistic genius.

"You're lying," I said. "It's George you mean, not Billy Sands."

"I don't know any George," she shrieked. "Let me go, you're choking me."

"Not till you tell me the truth," I shouted. "You've been meeting George up here, while I've been out painting."

"I haven't met anybody up here. Nobody ever comes around at all. Let me go."

Now I knew she was lying. "I suppose you'll be telling me soon that George doesn't exist, like L. B. and H."

She muttered something I couldn't quite catch, and I grabbed her tighter and shook her like a dog shaking a rat. Then I noticed she was all blue and limp, so I let go of her and waited for her to come round. But she didn't come round, and then I knew she wasn't going to any more.

That was when I saw George standing there, leaning against the doorpost and grinning like a devil, with his arms folded across his chest. I wondered for a moment how he'd got in. It came to me in a flash. He'd been there all the time, and had seen the whole thing.

"You've done it this time, old man," he said.

"Looks like it," I answered. "What do you think I ought to do?"

He was very casual about the whole business. Made me think he must have previous experience in this sort of thing. "Why don't you take her out and bury her? There's a big, fallen trunk down by the creek. You could roll that over the grave, and they'd never find her."

I asked him to give me a hand, but he just laughed. "Not likely, old man. This is your pigeon. I've got my own problems to look after."

I really hadn't expected any help from that clown, so I carried the body out and put it on a cart that was used for bringing fire logs up to the cottage. It took me the whole afternoon to bury her, and then, with the aid of some ropes and poles, I managed to push the tree trunk over the grave. After that, I stamped the earth back into place, and covered over the tracks of the cartwheels. The ground didn't look to me quite the same as before, but then I'm an artist and notice these details. Only another artist would be likely to spot them.

I had to cook my own supper that night. When I'd eaten, I tidied up the place, read for a while, then went to bed. The sheriff got me up at two o'clock in the morning to ask me if I knew where Nellie was. She hadn't been home and her folks were worried.

"She's probably skylarking with Billy Sands," I told him.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Her boy friend."

"How do you know about him?"

"She told me," I said. "As a matter of fact, I seem to remember something about her having a date with him for tonight."

He apologized for troubling me and then went off. Soon after he'd gone, it began to rain like mad, and when I got up in the morning, I went outside to see what the earth looked like. It was washed so clean, even I couldn't see where I had made the cartwheel tracks. I got my own breakfast, then went down to the creek to paint. It was still half full of water and made a nice picture. "The Waters of Lethe" I was going to title it.

In the middle of the afternoon, the sheriff came back with another couple of men. I heard them wandering about the estate looking for me, and it took them half an hour to find out where I was.

"Any luck?" I shouted.

He came right up to me. "No, she seems to have disappeared entirely."

"That's a pity," I said. "She was a good worker. I'll have to get another girl to do the house cleaning."

He was looking at me hard. "This is the last place anybody knows she was."

"Well, the fellow who knows where she is doesn't seem to want to tell anybody, does he?"

"I reckon not," said the sheriff.

The other two men had been wandering about near the old tree trunk. One of them called him over, and was pointing to the ground. I heard him send the other fellow back to the car for some shovels, and I ambled over, rather carelessly, to see what they were looking at. Where the tree trunk had been lying, there was a long, narrow hollow. I suppose the ground under it had been soft, and the rain had washed away the loose earth leaving a sort of gully. In fact, it looked a little bit like a sunken grave.

I didn't stand around while they were digging, but after a while, it was obvious they weren't finding what they were looking for. Then they went into a sort of huddle, and I could see by the way they were stretching their arms out they were making rough measurements of the tree trunk, and comparing it to the space where they had been digging. They started trying to move the trunk, but it was heavy and it had got itself jammed between some old tree stumps.

The sun was just going down,

so I packed up my painting stuff, and left them working, while I went back to the cottage. It was quite dark when they came to get me, and they had Nellie's body wrapped up in an old blanket.

"It looks mighty bad for you, son," the sheriff said.

"I know," I answered, "but there's nothing I can do about it."

"You got any theories about it?" he asked.

"Yes. It must have been Billy Sands."

He shook his head. "Nope. We've been asking all over the village about him. There ain't no such person."

So I had been right after all. The little witch had invented him, just to cover up for George. "You don't really think I did it," I said.

"You're number one suspect."

"But I'm a sick man. I only got out of the hospital a short while ago. You don't think I could have done all that by myself."

"That makes half sense," he answered. "Who else could it have been?"

That was where I had my inspiration. "Well, I didn't want to make trouble for him, but it must have been George."

"George who?"

"George Poldroon."

The sheriff sniffed. "Who is this George Poldroon?"

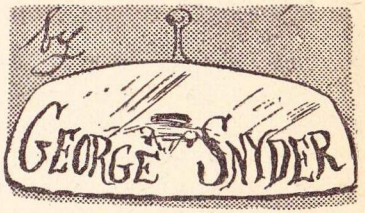
"He's a fellow who's been hanging around here for a week or two, chasing after Nellie."

"What's he like?"

I gave him a hundred per cent detailed description of George. They let me take my painting stuff with me to the jail, and I drew him several pictures of George, full face, profile and different angles. The sheriff had copies made and passed them around.

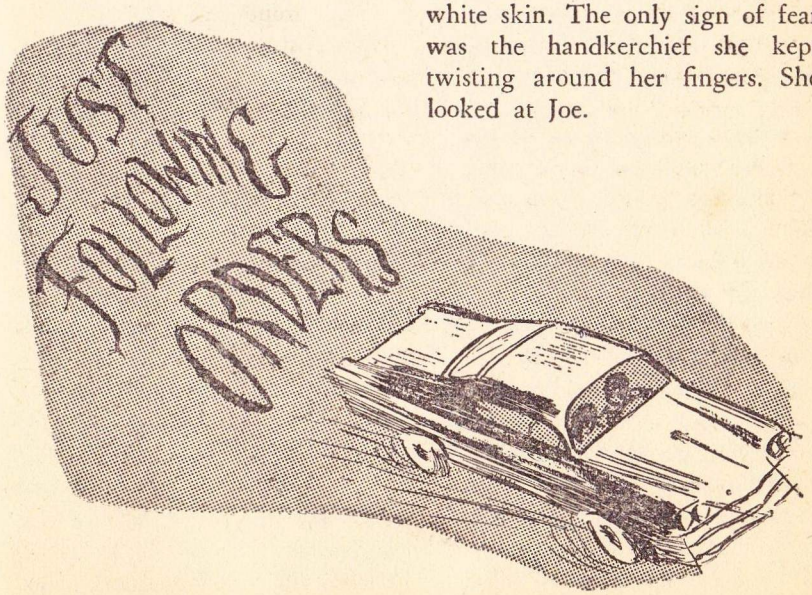
I don't mind being in jail. I could almost enjoy it if the old man and my uncle didn't keep coming down and crying on my shoulder. Yesterday they sent the attorney over to see me, Victor Krantz. I made him sit in front of me so that I could paint his portrait while he talked to me. It was funny, but the face came out like a woman's; it might almost have been Nellie.

One of the more obvious blessings of bureaucracy is the absence of personal responsibility for corporate action. To accept or reject an urgent request, therefore, rarely disturbs a dutiful middleman.



It was already growing dark when Joe Bents drove away from the lights of Los Angeles. He glanced at the girl next to him, while he tooled the car through traffic towards the freeway.

She sat stiffly, next to the door, her face expressionless. It was a nice face, fine-boned and pretty. The white party dress was torn across the shoulder, revealing ugly black and blue marks on the soft white skin. The only sign of fear was the handkerchief she kept twisting around her fingers. She looked at Joe.



"What kind of man are you?" she asked, her voice shaking.

Joe said nothing. He reached out and turned on the car radio. It would begin now. The call for decency first, then the begging, and finally, the offering. Women were such cowards when it came to dying.

"Is this how you get your kicks?" she asked.

Joe kept his eyes on the road. "Look lady," he said, "anything you got to say, you should have said to Lou. I don't want to hear it. I'm just following orders."

"Lou's orders?"

Joe was on the San Bernardino freeway, heading east. Traffic was thin and he let the car cruise at sixty. Lou had said to find an out-of-the-way place. "Make it look like an accident, but get the money first." That was all Joe knew about it. He looked at the rear view mirror. The headlights were still with him.

"How many women have you taken for rides?" she asked.

Joe kept his eyes on the road, saying nothing.

"Funny, you don't look like a killer."

He looked at her. "Kind of gabby, aren't you?"

"You have a name?" she asked.

What difference could it make? If it made her feel better to talk, let her. He had to get the money first anyhow.

"Joe," he said. "Joe Bents."

Her voice was less shaky. "Funny, you don't look like a killer."

"You said that."

She stopped twisting the handkerchief. She was relaxing. "How does it feel to be called a killer?"

Joe shrugged. "Doesn't bother me one way or the other. If it makes you feel better to say it . . ."

"Anything to make the victim comfortable, is that it?"

"Look, lady. It's nothing personal. I'm . . ."

"I know. You're just following orders. And stop calling me 'lady'! I have a name."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Constance White. My friends call me Connie. You, Mister Executioner can call me Constance."

The city limits were behind them, and the freeway was almost deserted. They were going past Monterey Park. Joe noticed the headlights had dropped back. He studied the girl next to him.

The nyloned legs coming out of the party dress were long and slim. The waist seemed so small, Joe knew he could completely surround it with his hands. The breasts weren't large, but high and proud. But the face—the face was outstanding. Long black hair, hanging to her shoulders, con-

trasted with bright red lipstick and green eyes. What a waste, Joe thought.

She knew he was openly admiring her. "If I went to bed with you, would that make any difference?"

"No," Joe said, "you're kind of shopworn."

"Thanks a lot, gentleman!"

"Forget it. I'm sorry."

She went back to twisting the handkerchief. "How much is Lou paying you?"

"You can't match it."

A district. His payment was going to be his own district. He'd worked his way up from messenger for a small bookie, to this. And now he was getting his own district. But it was only the beginning. He wanted all the districts; he wanted Lou's position.

No, this dark-haired beauty could hardly match it.

The freeway had run a straight line from Monterey Park to the outskirts of El Monte. Now it began a series of slow curves and slight up and down grades. Joe checked the mirror. The gap had closed, and the headlights were still with him.

Constance turned around in the seat, looking back. "Someone's following us," she said.

"I know."

"Is this part of it?"

Joe nodded. "My ride back to Los Angeles."

She sat down again, and stared at him. Then she buried her face in her hands, the small shoulders jerking with sobs. "Please," she cried, "please don't do it!"

Joe kept his eyes on the road. "Knock it off," he said.

She jerked her head up. "So strong! So brave! aren't you? All right, I admit it, strong, brave gentleman! I'm afraid to die! I want to live! I'm young, I'm not bad to look at! There's no reason for me to die!"

"Lou thinks so."

"You know why? You know why Lou thinks so?"

"I don't want . . ."

"Because his pride was hurt. Because I took what belonged to me and tried to get out of his gutter! That, executioner, is why I have to die! Two years with an animal like that was just too much for me!"

"Look, Connie. I don't look for reasons. I'm just doing a job."

She moved close to him, putting her hand on his arm. "You called me Connie. Why?" Her voice was soft.

"Slip of the tongue."

"I don't think so. I think you're human after all. Do I disgust you that much? Am I that revolting to you?"

She was fishing for compliments. Why not? "You're very easy to look at. Another time, another place—I might even have made a play for you."

She was close, pushing herself against him. "It doesn't have to be here and now, Joe. *You* could change it. You could make it another time and place!"

"What about Lou?"

"We could go to Mexico. Ever been to Mexico, Joe?"

"No." Maybe now she was getting to the money.

She snuggled even closer. "I'd be good to you, Joe. I'd be *so* good to you."

"Mexico, huh." He wanted her to think he was considering it. "But it takes money. Lou's boys would be looking for us, even in Mexico."

"I have money!"

Joe smiled. "I don't mean nickels and dimes, baby. I mean big money. Enough to keep us moving until Lou either gets it, or cools off. You got *that* kind of money?"

"Does a hundred thousand dollars sound like nickels and dimes?"

Joe let a whistle escape through his teeth. No wonder Lou wants this chick dead. "You got that kind of money?"

She nodded.

"Where?"

She slid away from him to the opposite door. "Very cute, killer! And it almost worked! That 'other time and place' almost had me convinced. Lou told you to get the money first, didn't he?"

"I don't get it."

"Oh, come off it, killer! Connie's been around. I lived with that crumb for two years. He wouldn't get rid of me without getting the money first. It's my life insurance, baby. As long as it's my secret, I keep breathing!"

Joe tried to control his anger. "I know you won't believe it, but I was seriously considering Mexico."

"I'll bet you were."

They were climbing Kellogg

Hill. Traffic was almost nonexistant as the car pulled out of the Los Angeles basin. The headlights were still with them, but there was something about the following car that puzzled Joe, something that seemed out of place.

At the top of Kellogg Hill, Joe could see the dormitory buildings of California Polytechnical College. He eased up on the accelerator as the car descended into the Pomona Valley.

The concrete ribbon of freeway passed over the outskirts of Pomona, and Joe read the turn-off signs as he passed them. He found the street he was looking for and turned the car down the ramp, off the freeway.

The girl had been silently sitting by the door, twisting the handkerchief and biting her lower lip. When Joe braked for the stop sign at the bottom of the ramp, she pulled the door handle and pushed her weight against it. The door flew open. She was almost out—her foot had touched the asphalt—when Joe reached out, catching her by the wrist, and yanked her back into the car. He slapped her twice across the face.

"Don't try that again!"

Red handprints appeared on her cheeks. She buried her face in the handkerchief and cried.

The following car was coming down the ramp as Joe turned left on the deserted road. He kept his car at fifty until the road began to climb in a series of curves, into the foothills. He turned to the girl. "Lou said you have a cabin up here, a Christmas present he gave you."

Her head jerked up from the handkerchief, and she stared at him. Her eyes were bloodshot with tears, and for the first time since they left Los Angeles, Joe saw that she was completely afraid. Her face turned pale and she began to shiver. She turned her head from side to side while small animal sounds came from her throat.

Joe knew where the money was! "The money's in the cabin, isn't it?"

She shook her head, her eyes wide with fear. The life insurance was gone.

The road was twisting and steep. Joe pulled a pencil-sketched map from his coat pocket and, with one hand, unfolded it. The dirt path would be coming up pretty soon. He looked in the rear view mirror. The headlights had dropped back, and he only caught glimpses of them rounding curves. He tried to put his finger on what was wrong with the car behind him. It had been on the freeway. A passing car's headlights had

flashed over the following car . . .

He saw the dirt path. It was barely wide enough for a car. He turned onto it, dropping the gear selector into low range. It was steep, but the powerful motor pulled the car easily to the top.

There was a large, tree-covered plateau. The log cabin was to the right of the road, just visible through the trees.

Even before he could stop the car, she had the door open and was stumbling, then running into the woods. The dress flew behind her, revealing flashes of white thighs.

Joe jammed on the brakes, throwing the gear selector into park. He was out of the car, his eyes never leaving the flashes of white, trotting in the direction she went.

He heard her hysterical sobbing up ahead as she crashed through branches. He trotted easily, ducking low branches and sidestepping trees. He wasn't worried. With that dress and high heeled shoes, it would just be a matter of time before she either twisted an ankle or tripped herself.

She gave out a short scream. Then the crashing stopped and all Joe could hear was his own noise. He stopped and listened. There was a crack of splitting wood up ahead. He moved slowly towards it, stepping very cautiously.

She came from behind a tree, swinging a branch. Joe took the blow full force on his left ear. It was a good shot, but the branch wasn't big enough to hurt a dog. Then she was on him, scratching, kicking. Joe slapped her with his left hand. She staggered. Then he swung from the shoulder with his right. She stiffened, and crumpled to the soft grass.

Joe stood over her, panting. His ear was bleeding, and he felt the sting of fingernail cuts on his cheek. Six women had died under his hands. There had been the usual tears, offerings, and hysterics. But none had given him nearly the trouble this one had. He hoped Lou appreciated what he was doing. Maybe one district wouldn't be enough payment.

Joe picked her up, surprised how little she weighed, and carried her to the cabin. The rotted door splintered open after the second kick, and he carried her to the one couch in the sparsely furnished room.

It was chilly and damp. Joe got a fire started in the natural rock fireplace, lit a lamp, and then began searching for the money. The place only had two rooms, and being furnished the way they were, he soon covered all the obvious hiding places. He was thinking

how cheap Lou was with his Christmas presents when a moan came from the couch.

Constance slowly sat up, pulling the dress to her knees. Her right eye was beginning to swell. She looked at Joe. "You had the chance. Why didn't you . . . ?"

Joe pulled an old wooden chair opposite her and sat in it. "It's coming, sweetheart. It's coming."

She ran her fingers through her dark hair and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't even care any more."

"Look, sweetheart. *You* know it's coming, *I* know it's coming. As long as Lou is the big man, I have to follow orders. It won't always be that way—I've got plans—but it *is* that way now. Six months ago if you'd offered me a hundred grand and you, I'd have jumped at it. But I got a district now, and I'm moving up, and all because I follow orders. So, it's up to you, baby. You can have it quick, and feel nothing; or you can have it slow and painful."

She looked puzzled. "But I . . ."

"The money, sweetheart. The money!"

A look of disbelief came over her. "But I thought . . . don't you already have . . . ? she started laughing hysterically. "You stupid, ignorant slob. The fireplace—the money was in the fireplace!"

Joe jumped out of the chair to see flaming thousand dollar bills drop into the crackling flames. The laughing grew louder. He tried to pull out some of the scorched bills, but the flames leaped at him, singeing the hair on his arm. The high female laughter was breaking his eardrums! He had to shut her up! He crossed the room and grabbed the slender white throat with his left hand. Then he began pounding his right fist into the laughing face. The sound kept ringing in his ears. Even after the laughter had stopped, he kept pounding.

He stopped and let the limp form slide to the floor.

Panting and sweating, he flopped onto the couch and waited for calmness to return.

The rest was fairly simple. He loaded her into the front seat of the car, backed down the dirt path to the road, and shifted her into the driver's seat. Then, after carefully wiping all his fingerprints from inside the car, he started the engine. He pushed the cold, slim foot onto the accelerator until the engine was screaming. The car was aimed at the six-hundred-foot drop bordering the road. Standing as far away from the car as possible, he reached inside and hit the gear selector into "Drive". Engine screaming, back wheels spinning,

the car lunged forward. It hit the edge, and for an instant seemed to be suspended. Then it dropped, bouncing once and exploding, the pieces falling into the dry rock valley.

It was done.

The headlights went on, and Joe waited for the black sedan to pull alongside him. When the car stopped, Joe saw what it was that had puzzled him. The lights of the passing car on the freeway had showed three shadows inside the car. Joe had expected only Nick, the driver. Why would Lou send three men just to drive him back to Los Angeles?

"Did you get the money, Joe?" Nick asked. He was a blond-headed kid who always smiled.

"It's gone," Joe said. "She burned it."

"That's a shame," Nick said. The back doors of the sedan were opening. Joe saw the punched-in faces of the two goons getting out.

"What is this, Nick? I told you she burned it!"

"I know, Joe. I know. And I believe you. But it doesn't make any difference. Sure, Lou will be disappointed, but it just doesn't make any difference. You gotta go."

The goons were coming towards him, backing him to the cliff.

"Please," Joe said. "Maybe we can make a deal."

Nick smiled. "No deals, Joe. Lou says you got plans, big plans, plans that maybe don't include him. He says maybe you're gettin' too big. Sorry, Joe, but you understand, don't you? It's nothing personal. We're just following orders."

Dear Fans:

My desk is so weighed down with mail, requesting information about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club, I hope you won't mind if I reply in an open letter. Here are the particulars:

Membership dues are fifty cents which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year. You can imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.

Most sincerely,
Pat Hitchcock

P.O. Box 5425
Sherman Oaks, California

Doubtless, there are some persons for whom "truth is a poison". Conversely, equally disastrous effects may result from the opposite view, given a literal interpretation.

This Day's Evil

by Jonathan Craig

It had been a near thing. It had been so near that even now, as he crouched there in the bushes behind the small frame house of the man he had come to kill, there was still a taut queasiness in his stomach, and the sweat that laved his ribs was chill.

Half an hour ago, he had been five minutes away from murder. He had stood at the back door of the house, one hand on the heavy automatic in his pocket, the other raised to knock. Then, through the barred but open window, he had heard the hollow pound of heavy boots across the front porch, the hammering of a big man's fist on the door, and the lazy rise and fall of Sheriff Fred Stratton's sing-song voice calling out a greeting to the man inside.

"Charlie!" Stratton had said in that fond, bantering tone he always used with Charlie Tate. "Charlie, you no-good rascal, your time has come. Open the door before I break it down."

He hadn't heard Charlie's reply. He had already been running toward the bushes in the backyard, his knees rubbery and his stomach knotting spasmodically with the realization that if the sheriff had come five minutes later he would have caught him in the house with a dead man.

Now, hidden from the house by the bushes, his fear-sharpened senses acutely aware of the incessant drone of insects and the sickening sweetness of lilacs, Earl Munger shifted his weight very slowly and carefully, trying to still the tremor in his legs.

To have been caught in the act by that lazy, fat slob of a sheriff would have been just his luck, he reflected. Sheriff Fred Stratton was the laziest, slowest man in the county, with a maddening, syrupy drawl that made you want to jam your hand down his throat and pull the words out for him.

They made a good pair, Fred Stratton and Charlie Tate. Stratton had lots of fat, and Tate had lots of money. Not that Tate would have the money long; just as soon as the sheriff left, Tate would have neither the money nor his life.

There were sure some strange ducks in this world, Earl thought sourly. Take Charlie, now. Here he was, seventy if he was a day, with nobody knew how much money hidden in his house, and living like a pauper. He didn't trust anybody or anything, unless maybe it was the sheriff, and he especially didn't trust banks. If all the cash money he'd collected in rent from the property he owned all over the county was in the house, as it almost had to be, there'd be something pretty close to fifty thousand dollars. Charlie never spent a dime. He was a crazy old miser, with bars and bolts on every door and window, just like in the story books, and for all the good his money did him, he might just as well be dead.

And he would be, Earl promised himself again. The money might not do any good for Charlie, but it would sure do a lot of good for him. At twenty-three, he owned the clothes he had on, and another outfit just like them, and nothing more. But after today things would be different. There'd be no more conversations like that one night before last with Lois Kimble, when he'd asked her to go for a drive with him.

"A drive?" Lois had said, the perfect doll's face as innocent as a child's. "A drive in *what*, Earl?"

"The truck," he had said. "It's more comfortable than it looks."

"You mean that old thing you haul fertilizer around in all day?"

"It doesn't smell," he said. "If it did, I wouldn't ask you."

"I'll bet."

"It doesn't. And it rides real good, Lois. You'd be surprised."

She looked at him for a long moment, the wide gray eyes inscrutable. "I'd be ashamed," she said. "I really would, Earl."

"You figure you're too good to ride in a truck? Is that it?"

She started to turn away. "I meant I'd be ashamed if I were you," she said. "I'd be ashamed to ask a girl to . . . Oh, it doesn't matter anyhow. I've got to be going, Earl."

"Sure, it matters. Listen—"

"Not to me," she said, walking away from him. "Good-by, Earl."

And an hour later he had seen her pass the feed store where he worked, beautiful in her thin summer dress, wide gray eyes fixed attentively on the well-dressed young man beside her, the low-slung red sports car growling arrogantly through the town as if it were affronted by the big unwashed sedans at the curbs, impatient to be back with its own kind in the city where the bright lights and the life and the pleasure were, where there were places that charged more for a dinner than Earl made in a week.

But after today, all that would be changed. He'd have to wait a cautious time, of course, and then he could leave the stink of the feed store and the town far behind, and the young man in the sharp clothes and the red sports car with the beautiful girl on the seat beside him would be none other than Earl Munger.

This afternoon, he had rushed his deliveries so that he would have a full hour to kill and rob Charlie Tate before his boss at the feed store would begin to wonder where he was. He had hidden the small panel truck in the woods back of Charlie's place and then approached the house by a zigzag course through brush and trees,

certain that no one had seen him, and that he could return to the truck the same way.

He wondered now why he hadn't robbed Charlie before, why he'd waited so long. And yet, with another part of his mind, he knew why. To rob Charlie, it would be necessary to kill him. The only way to get into his house was to have Charlie unlock the door, and Charlie couldn't be left alive to tell what had happened.

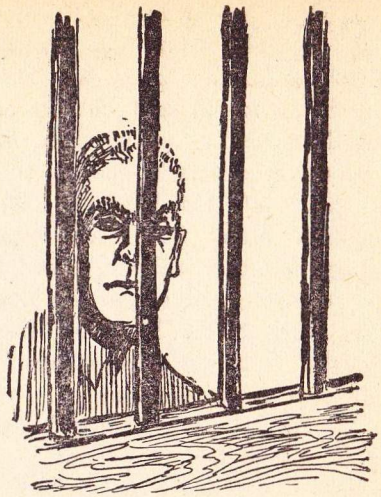
Then he heard the muffled slam of Charlie's front door, and a few moments later the sudden cough and roar of a car engine on the street out in front, and he knew that Sheriff Stratton had left.

Now! Earl thought as he left the bushes and moved swiftly to the back door. I can still do it and be back at the store before anybody starts getting his suspicions up. Once again he closed one hand over the automatic in his pocket and raised the other to knock.

Charlie Tate's footsteps shuffled slowly across the floor, and a moment later his seamed, rheumy-eyed face peered out at Earl through the barred opening in the upper half of the door.

"Hello, Earl," he said. "What is it?"

"The boss asked me to bring



you something, Mr. Tate," Earl said, glancing down as if at something beyond Charlie's angle of vision.

"That so?" Charlie said. "What?"

"I don't know," Earl said. "It's wrapped up."

"I didn't order anything," Charlie said.

"It's too big to stick through those bars, Mr. Tate," Earl said. "If you'll open the door, I'll just shove it inside."

Charlie's eyes studied Earl unblinkingly for a full ten seconds; then there was a grating sound from inside, and the door opened slowly, and not very far.

But it was far enough. Earl put his hip against it, forced it back another foot, and slipped inside,

the gun out of his pocket now and held up high enough for Charlie to see it at once.

There was surprise on Charlie's face, but no fear. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"I'm taking your money," Earl said. "Wherever it is, get it, and get it now."

Charlie took a slow step backward. "Don't be a fool, son," he said.

"Don't you," Earl said. "It's your money or your life, Charlie. Which'll it be?"

"Son, I—"

Earl raised the gun a little higher. "Get it," he said softly. "You understand me, Charlie? I'm not asking you again."

Charlie hesitated for a moment, then turned and moved on uncertain feet to the dining room table. "It's in there," he said, his breathy, old-man's voice almost inaudible. There was a bottle of whiskey on the table, but no glasses.

"In the table?" Earl said. "I'm telling you, Charlie. Don't try to pull—"

"Under the extra leaves," Charlie said. "But listen, son—"

"Shut up," Earl said, lifting one of the two extra leaves from the middle of the table. "I'll be damned."

There were two flat steel document cases wedged into the shallow opening formed by the framework beneath the leaves.

Earl pulled the other leaf away and nodded to Charlie. "Open them," he said.

"You can still change your mind," Charlie said. "You can walk out of here right now, and I'll never say any—"

"Open them, I said!"

Charlie sighed heavily, fumbled two small keys from his pocket, and opened the document cases.

It was there, all right, all in neat, banded packages of 20's and 50's, each of the packages a little over two inches thick.

The size of his haul stunned him, and it was several seconds before he could take his eyes from it. Then he remembered what else had to be done and he looked questioningly at the wall just over Charlie Tate's left shoulder.

"What's that?" he asked. "What-'ve you got *there,* Charlie?"

His face puzzled, Charlie turned to look. "What are you talking . . . ?" he began, and then broke off with an explosive gasp as the butt of Earl's automatic, with the full strength of Earl's muscular arm and shoulder behind it, crashed against his skull just two inches behind his right ear.

He fell to the floor without a sound, all of a piece, the way a bag of old clothes held at arm's

length would fall, in a limp heap.

Earl knelt down beside him, raising the gun again. Then he lowered it and shoved it back into his pocket. Nobody would ever have to hit Charlie Tate again.

He started to rise, then sank back, the sudden nervous tightening of the muscles across his stomach so painful that he winced. It was all he could do to drag himself to the table. He uncapped the bottle of whiskey and raised it to his lips, shaking so badly that a little of the liquor sloshed out onto the table. It was a big drink, and it seemed to help almost at once. He took another one, just as big, and put the bottle back down on the table.

It was then that he heard the car door slam shut out front, and saw, above the sill of the front window, the dome light and roof-mounted antenna of Sheriff Fred Stratton's cruiser.

A moment before, Earl Munger would have sworn he could not move at all, but he would have been wrong. He moved too quickly to think, too quickly to feel. It took him less than five seconds to close the document cases and shove them under his arm, and it took him even less time than that to reach the back door and close it soundlessly behind him. Returning to the truck by the roundabout route that would prevent his being seen took the better part of ten minutes, every second of it a desperate fight against an almost overpowering urge simply to cut and run.

He'd left the truck on an incline, so that he would be able to get it under way again without using the starter. Now he pushed the shift lever into the slot for second gear, shoved in the clutch, released the hand brake, waited until the truck had rolled almost to the bottom of the incline, and then let the clutch out. The engine caught, stuttered, died, then caught again, and he drove away as slowly, and therefore as quietly, as he could without stalling the engine again.

Half a mile farther on, he turned off onto a rutted side road that led to a small but deep lake known locally as Hobbs Pond. There he shoved the gun and the packages of money into a half-empty feed sack, making sure they were well covered with feed, and then sent the metal document cases arcing as far toward the center of the lake as he could throw them.

Then, after burying the bag under half a dozen other bags of feed and fertilizer in the truck, he started back toward the store. The money would probably be safe in the truck for as long as he wanted to leave it there, but there was no

sense in taking any chances. Tonight or tomorrow he would bury it somewhere, and then leave it there until the day when he could pick a fight with his boss, quit his job, and leave the area for good without raising any questions.

Back at the store, Burt Hornbeck came out on the front loading platform and eyed him narrowly.

"Didn't I see you gassing up that truck at Gurney's this morning?" he asked.

"That's right," Earl said.

"Well, how come? You ever know Gurney to buy anything from this store?"

"No."

"You bet 'no'. What Gurney buys, he buys at Ortman's. Next time, gas it up at Cooper's, like I told you. Coop buys here, and so I buy from Coop. Got it?"

"The tires needed air," Earl said. "Coop hasn't got any air hose."

"Never mind the air hose. After this, gas that truck up at Coop's. I'm beginning to wonder how many times I got to tell you."

Not too many times, Earl thought as he walked back to the washroom to throw cold water on his face. Another couple or three weeks, a month at the most, and he'd be buying gas for a sassy red sports car, not a battered old delivery truck.

The whiskey had begun to churn in his stomach a little. But it would be all right, he knew. From now on, everything would be all right. For a man with thousands of dollars everything had to be. That was the way of the world.

When he came back out to the loading platform, Sheriff Stratton's car was there, and the sheriff was talking with a fair-sized knot of men. The sheriff was sitting on the old kitchen chair Hornbeck kept out on the platform, his enormous bulk dwarfing it, making it seem like something from a child's playroom.

Trust the fat slob not to stand up when he can sit down, Earl thought as he edged a bit closer. The laziest man in the county, if not in the state. If Stratton was on one side of the street and wanted to get to the other, he would climb in his car, drive to the corner, make a U-turn, and come back, all to save walking a lousy forty feet. And talk about fat. The county could save money by buying a tub of lard and nailing a star on it. They'd have just as good a sheriff, and it wouldn't cost them a fraction of what they had to pay Stratton.

"What happened?" Earl asked George Dill, who had wandered over from his grocery store.

"It's old Charlie Tate," George

said. "He's done took poison."

"He *what?*" Earl said.

"Poison," George said. "He killed himself."

The sheriff glanced up at Earl and nodded. "Howdy, Earl," he said, making about six syllables out of it. "Yes, that's what he did, all right. Lord only knows why, but he did." Beneath his immaculate white Stetson, the sheriff's round, pink-skinned face was troubled, and the small, almost effeminate hands drummed nervously on his knees.

"He—poisoned himself?" Earl said.

"I always said he was crazy, and now I know it," Norm Hightower, who owned the creamery, said. "He'd have to be."

There were a dozen questions Earl wanted to ask, but he could ask none of them. He wet his lips and waited.

The sheriff took a small ivory-colored envelope from the breast pocket of his shirt, looked at it, shook his head wonderingly, and slipped it back into his pocket.

"Charlie gave me that about half an hour before I found him dead," he said. "He told me not to open it until after supper. But there was something about the way he said it that bothered me. He tried to make it sound like maybe he was playing a little joke on somebody, maybe me. But he didn't bring it off. I had this feeling, and so as soon as I got around the corner I stopped the car and read it."

"And it said he was going to kill himself?" Joe Kirk, who carried the Rural Route One, said.

"That's what it said, all right," the sheriff said.

"But he didn't say why?" Frank Dorn, the barber, asked.

"No," Stratton said. "All he said was, he was going to do it, and what with." He reached into his righthand trouser pocket and drew out a small blue-and-yellow tin about the size of a package of cigarettes. "And that's another thing I can't understand, boys. It's bad enough he would want to kill himself. But why would he do it with a thing like this?"

"What is it?" Sam Collins, from the lumber yard, asked.

"Trioxide of arsenic," the sheriff said, putting the tin back in his pocket. "I found it on the floor beneath the table."

"How's that again, Sheriff?" Sam Collins asked.

"Ratsbane, Sam," Stratton said. "Arsenic. I reckon there isn't a more horrible death in this world than that. It must be the worst agony there is."

"Why'd he want to take such a thing, then?" Jim Ryerson, the

mechanic from Meckle's Garage, asked.

"It's like I told you," Norm Hightower said. "He was crazy. I always said so, and now I know it."

The sheriff got to his feet, ponderously, looking at the now badly-sprung kitchen chair regretfully, as if he hated to leave it. "Well," he drawled in that slow, slow singsong of his, "I reckon maybe I'd better call the coroner and the others. At least Charlie didn't have any kin. It seems like kinfolks just can't stand the idea of somebody killing himself. They always carry on something fierce. I've even had them try to get me to make out they died a natural death or got killed somehow. Anything but suicide. They can't stand it at all."

"I fed arsenic to some rats once," Tom Martin, the druggist, said. "I'd never do it again. When I saw what it did to those rats, I . . . well, I'd never do it again. Even rats don't deserve to die like that. It was the most awful thing I ever saw."

"Like I said before," the sheriff said. "I just can't understand old Charlie killing himself that way."

"Maybe he didn't know exactly what it would do to him," Tom Martin said.

"Maybe not," the sheriff said. "I don't see how he could know, and still take half a box of ratsbane and dump it in a bottle of whiskey and drain almost half of it. There must have been enough arsenic in that bottle to kill everybody here and half the other folks in town besides." He moved off slowly in the direction of his car, picking his way carefully, as if to complete the short trip in the fewest steps possible. "I'd better be seeing about those phone calls," he said. "There's always a big to-do with a thing like this. Of course, Charlie's not having any kin is a help, but there'll still be a lot of work."

On the loading platform, Earl Munger tried to fight back the mounting terror inside him. No wonder the sheriff had taken one look at Charlie Tate lying there on the floor and thought he had died of poison. Why should he have looked for wounds or anything else? And how long would it be, Earl wondered, before the ratsbane really did to him what the sheriff had thought it had done to Charlie Tate? It was already killing him, he knew; he would feel the first horrible clutch of agony at any moment.

He forced himself to walk with reasonable steadiness to the truck, and although the door felt as heavy as the door of a bank vault, he managed to open it somehow

and get in and drive away slowly.

Once on the highway that led to Belleville, he mashed the gas pedal to the floorboard and kept it there. He had to get to a doctor, and in this forsaken area doctors were few and very far between. The nearest was Doc Whittaker, four miles this side of Belleville. Whittaker might be a drunk, but he knew his business, at least when he was sober.

But when he reached Whittaker's place, Mrs. Whittaker told him her husband was out on a house call. He half ran back to the truck, already stabbing with the ignition key as he jumped inside, and took off with a scorch of rubber that left Mrs. Whittaker staring after him with amazement.

The next nearest doctor was Courtney Hampton, six miles east of Belleville on Coachman Road.

He was beginning to feel it now, the first stab of pain deep in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't like the other pains, the ones he had felt earlier when he was scared; it wasn't as acute, but it was growing stronger, and it was deep, deep inside him. It was the arsenic, and it was going to kill him.

There was a red light ahead. The Belleville cut-off. He kept the gas pedal on the floor, and when he reached the intersection, he shut his eyes for a moment, waiting for the collision that was almost sure to come. Brakes screamed and tires squealed on both sides of him, but no one crashed into him, and he started down the long straight stretch of highway that would bring him to Coachman Road.

Eighteen minutes later, Earl Munger sat on Doctor Hampton's operating table, a rubber tube in his stomach, while the doctor filled a hypodermic needle, and then, without Earl's feeling it at all, inserted it in the back of his upper arm.

"And so you spread your lunch out right there where the insect spray could get to it," Hampton said, almost with amusement. "And sat there eating sandwiches garnished with arsenic, without even knowing it." He glanced at Earl as if he expected him to say something, tube in his stomach or not. "Well," he went on, "you wouldn't be able to tell, of course. That's the insidious thing about arsenic. There's no smell or taste. That's why it's been a poisoner's favorite all through the ages."

"You want me to come back again, Doc?" Earl asked when Hampton had removed the tube.

"Not unless you feel ill again," Hampton said. "That will be ten dollars, please."

On his way home, Earl Munger,

for the first time in his life, knew the meaning of pure elation. It was a strange feeling, one he couldn't quite trust at first; but with every mile the feeling grew, and the happiness that flooded through him was the kind of happiness he had known as a child when things and people were the way they seemed to be, and not, as he had learned all too soon, the way they really were.

He took the long curve above the old Haverman place almost flat out, feeding more gas the farther he went into it, the way he had read that sports car drivers did. Even the old delivery truck seemed to handle like a sports car, and it amused him to think that, with the way he and the truck felt just now, he could show those fancy Ferrari and Lotus and Porsche drivers a thing or two.

He felt like singing, and he did. He felt like a fool; he felt as if he were drunk, but he sang at the top of his voice, and he was still singing when he braked the truck to a stop in front of the feed store and got out.

He would take the long way home, he decided. It was the better part of two miles that way, but he felt like walking, something he hadn't felt like doing in more years than he could remember.

He began to sing again, walking slowly, enjoying himself to an extent he would once have believed impossible. He sang all the way to his rooming house, and then, just as happily but a bit more quietly, continued to sing as he climbed the stairs to his room on the second floor and opened the door.

Sheriff Fred Stratton sat there in Earl's only chair, the pink moon face as expressionless as so much suet, the small hands lying quietly on the brim of the spotless white Stetson in his lap.

Earl stared at him for a moment, then closed the door and sat down on the side of the bed. "What are you doing here, Sheriff?" he asked.

"We were waiting for you at the store," Stratton said. "My deputy and me."

"I didn't see anybody," Earl said. "Why would you be wait—?"

"We didn't mean for you to see us," Stratton said. "It didn't take us long to find that money, Earl. And the gun too, of course."

"Money?" Earl said. "What money? I don't know anything about any money. Or any gun, either."

Stratton reached up and took the small, ivory-colored envelope from the breast pocket of his shirt. "Letter from my youngest daughter," he said. "Looks like she's bound and determined to make

me a proud granddaddy again."

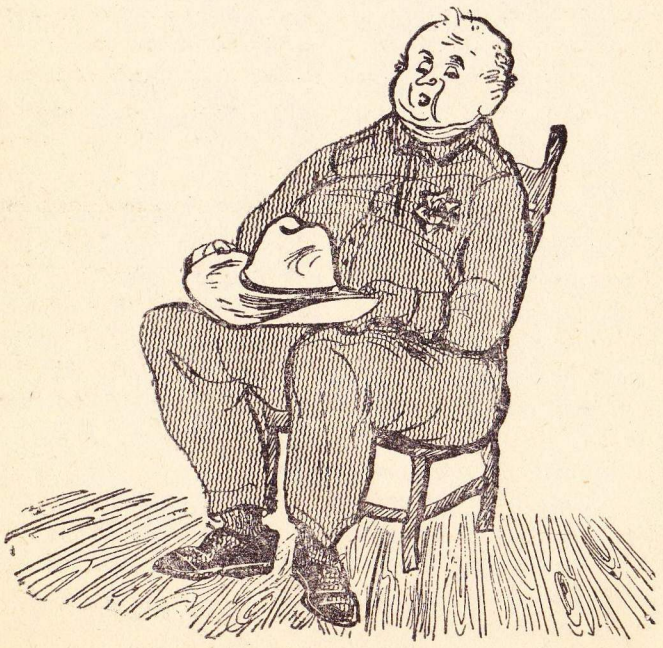
"That's the same letter you told everybody Charlie Tate gave you just before he—" Earl began, then broke off abruptly.

"That's right," Stratton said, putting the envelope back in his pocket and taking out the small blue-and-yellow tin. "Just like I told them this little box of throat lozenges was ratsbane."

Earl felt his mouth go dry. "Not poison?" he heard himself say. "Not arsenic?"

"No," Stratton said. "And even if Charlie *had* been meaning to poison himself, he wouldn't have put the poison in a bottle of whiskey. He never took a drink in his life. That bottle on the table was mine, son. Charlie always kept a bottle on hand for me, because he knew I was a man that liked a little nip now and then."

Stratton glanced down at the tin. "I dropped this at Charlie's house when I was there the first time, and so I went back to get it.



When I saw what had happened, and that Charlie had opened his back door to somebody, I knew the killer had to be a man he knew pretty well. Otherwise, Charlie would never have let him in the house."

"But why?" Earl said. "Why did you . . . ?"

"Why'd I make up all that about the letter and the lozenges?" Stratton said. "Well, I got the idea when I noticed the killer had helped himself to the whiskey. I'd had a drink myself, the first time I was there, and I could see that somebody had taken it down another couple of inches, not to mention spilling some on the table. I figured the killing must have rawed somebody's nerves so much he'd had to take a couple of strong jolts to straighten himself out."

Stratton paused, studying Earl with tired, sleepy eyes that told him nothing at all. Earl waited until he could wait no longer. "And then?" he asked.

"Well," Stratton said, "there's one sure thing in this world, son. A man that thinks he's been poisoned is going to get himself to a doctor, and get there fast. And since there're only four doctors within thirty miles of here, all I had to do was call them and ask them to let me know who showed up."

"But I had the symptoms," Earl said. "I was in pain, and I—"

"Sometimes if a man *thinks* a thing is so, then it *is* so," Stratton said. "You were dead certain you'd been poisoned, and so naturally you had the symptoms." He got to his feet, put the big white hat on his head very carefully, and gestured toward the door. "Well, Earl, I reckon we'd better head over toward the jail."

"A trap," Earl said bitterly. "A dirty, lousy trap. I guess you figure you're pretty smart, don't you?"

Stratton looked surprised. "No such thing," he said. "Just pretty lazy. I saw a chance to make your guilty conscience do my work for me, and I took it. That's how it is with us lazy folks, son. If there's a way to save ourselves some work, we'll find it."

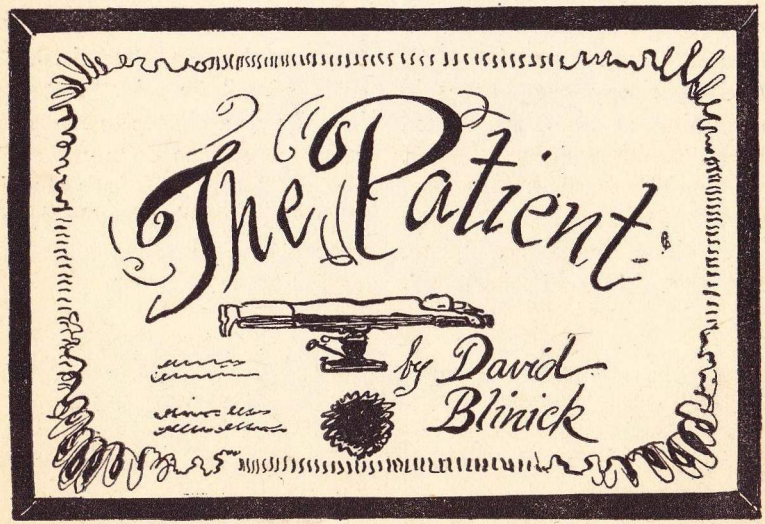
As time passes, medical men seem to assume more and more the aspect of good mechanics. Some, however, must be careful not to lean over too far backward.

IT WAS a quarter past nine when Mrs. Ellis left. He accompanied her to the door and opened it. "Stay out of those overstuffed chairs for a while, and be sure you sit up straight when you're watching television," he cautioned her again. "You've got to be careful with that back."

Mrs. Ellis smiled her thanks, and he stood leaning against the door, gazing down th corridor at her figure, noting with satisfaction that the slight limp was now gone.

No lights shone from the doors of the other offices on his floor. Jackson City's only professional building closed early. Ordinarily he too would have been gone, but Mrs. Ellis had a flare-up of her sciatica and had to wait for her husband to return from work to baby-sit for her.

He glanced briefly at the neat gold-leaf lettering on the door as he closed it. His lips curled in a



wry smile as he read:

Dr. Harry Jackson
Chiropractor

Opening an office in Jackson City had been Meg's idea. He'd given up his Chicago practice when he joined the Marines, and after Korea he felt he didn't want to open up in the city again. "Let's settle down in some small town and raise a family while I'm building a practice," he said. "A place that'll be a real home for the kids."

Then Meg had seen that 'Office for Rent' ad. "The people of this town are bound to remember your name. Dr. Harry Jackson of Jackson City. It's a good omen."

Omens and hunches governed most of Meg's activities, although they'd never yet produced any especially good results. They were as much a part of her personality as her fly-away blond hair and breathless manner.

Well, the Jacksons had been in Jackson City almost a year, and the good omen hadn't paid off. He'd hardly made a dent in this town, and even happy-go-lucky Meg was becoming discouraged.

With a sigh, he walked back through the waiting room, pausing absently to straighten a neat pile of magazines that needed no straightening, and to switch off a couple of lights.

Entering the inner office his eye took in the large adjusting table in the middle of the room. He was reminded that the guard on the release catch was stuck. Better fix this before Meg comes in again, he thought, and grinned as he recalled her warning words of yesterday. He dug out some tools and set to work.

The phone rang when he was lost in work. It was Meg.

"Are you still there?" she asked in a fighting voice.

"I'll be leaving in a few minutes, hon," he said, "and I won't complain if the dinner is burnt or eaten up." The door chime sounded before she could answer.

"Hold on, someone just came in." He put the receiver down and strode to the waiting room.

A tall, burly, fortyish man was standing near the outer door. His body was slouched to one side and he had his hand jammed deep into his topcoat pocket. He was cleanshaven but swarthy, and in the dimmed room his face had a menacing look.

"Are you alone, Doc?" His voice was harsh but low.

"What can I do for you?" countered Dr. Jackson. He spoke calmly but a foreboding chill enveloped him.

"I wanna talk to you for a minute."

"Be with you right away—busy

on the phone." He stepped back quickly into the inner office, closing the door, and picked up the receiver.

"Look, honey, someone just came in and I may be held up for a while." He grimaced at the accidental pun.

"Your voice sounds funny," she said. "Who on earth is it at this hour?"

"I don't know. A man. He wants to see me." He tried to sound casual but his throat felt dry.

"You're worried," she said, nervously. "Hang up and I'll call the police. I've got a hunch that—"

"You and your hunches!" he interrupted furiously. "Let me handle it my way. Just relax and I'll call you back as soon as he's gone." He hung up and returned to the waiting room, reassured by his own boldness.

The man was now sitting in a chair, fingering a cigarette. Dr. Jackson motioned to him and he arose with difficulty. Watching him, Dr. Jackson became conscious of a welcome loosening in his own limbs. No doubt about it, the man had trouble with his back. Meg and her hunches!

At his desk he jotted down the man's case history. He'd had a flat tire just outside of town; while lifting the spare onto the wheel he'd felt a snap and a severe pain at the base of his spine. His name was Charles Jones and he lived in Pilotsville, fifty miles away.

Dr. Jackson had him strip to the waist, then step on the platform of the adjusting table. He advanced the lever on the side of the table to accommodate the more than two-hundred pound weight of the man. Gently he pulled the table down to the horizontal position, making sure that the catch at the head of the table caught, because he hadn't yet finished working on the safety guard.

With sensitive fingers he palpated the patient's spine. It was an obvious case of sacroiliac strain. He deftly adjusted the distorted areas, working quickly and surely.

He had finished giving the adjustment, and was about to check the results when the door chimed. Another late patient? He stepped out to the waiting room, closing the door behind him, then stopped in open-mouthed dismay.

Three policemen with drawn guns seemed about to pounce on him. One of them, noting his white office coat, spoke up. "What's goin' on, Doc?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, Officer." He felt his face redden in embarrassment.

"But your wife called," the policeman said. "Your wife said

to hurry, you're being held up."

"Oh no—no!" His hands flew involuntarily to his head. "My wife—she's very impulsive. She was . . . nervous, about a late patient. It's a mistake and I am sorry."

"But you're sure everything's alright?"

"Quite sure, believe me."

Looking slightly disappointed the policemen left, and he returned to his patient who was lying relaxed on the table.

"Another late one, Doc?"

"Uh—yes—I made an appointment for tomorrow." He was glad the man hadn't heard. Well, so the hunch had gotten the better of Meg. Poor Meg! She was a sweetheart, if only she could forget those hunches and omens.

The phone screamed. Meg's voice was frightened. "Everything alright, darling?"

"Oh, everything's fine." Sure, when he finally did get a new patient in, Meg had to sic the cops on him.

"Did the—they come? The police?"

"They did." His voice was righteously icy.

"Darling, I was frightened. I had a hunch—"

"Yes, I know. Look, I'm busy. We'll discuss it later. Goodbye now." His face had softened but his voice had not.

The man on the table was fidgeting. "My back feels better, Doc, and I think I'll be going."

"Sure. Have you out in a couple of minutes. Just want to check back."

His hands slid down the patient's spine for a comparison check of the sacroiliac. The chime sounded. His heart sank. What now? He opened the door to the waiting room and stuck his head out.

A police sergeant stood there, report book in hand. Dr. Jackson stepped into the waiting room and quickly shut the door behind him.

The sergeant eyed him grimly. "What's the joke, Doc? You know you've got four police cars outside and a hungry mob waiting to see the body?"

Dr. Jackson's arms lifted slightly and dropped again in a gesture of helplessness. "I've already explained—" he said. "My wife—"

"I know," said the sergeant gruffly. "I've got one myself."

He paused to scribble something in his book, then shutting it, said, "I'd better call this back to headquarters. Mind if I use your phone?" He started for the inner office, but Dr. Jackson barred the way.

"Please, Officer, my patient doesn't know what a ruckus he started. If you phone from inside, well,

it'll be embarrassing for both of us."

The sergeant looked doubtful, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Okay, I understand—I think." He made for the outer door. "Tell the missus to take it easy next time," he called back from the door.

What a nightmare, Dr. Jackson breathed as he returned to his patient. But the man was no longer lying docilely on the table. Instead he was standing beside it with a small automatic in his hand.

"What's goin' on, Doc? I saw the cop."

Dr. Jackson was stunned, his eyes fixed hypnotically on the gun.

"You did a good job, and I would've paid you well. But you had to play detective and call the cops. And I don't like cops."

They were standing face to face near the head of the horizontal table, with only its narrow width separating them. Dr. Jackson's teeth were clenched tightly, his face blanched, and wild thoughts flew through his brain. Dare he try to disarm the man? The hand that held the gun moved forward toward him across the dividing adjusting table.

"Turn around—you—" the man said.

Slowly Dr. Jackson pivoted on his right foot, then with lightning suddenness he jammed his left foot on the release catch at the base of the table. Zoom! With catapultic speed and a jangling crash, the table, unrestrained by the weight of a body, shot upwards, striking the extended arm with such force that the gun clattered to the floor and the man himself was hurled backward against the wall. Before he could recover, Dr. Jackson lunged for the gun and leveled it at him.

A moment later the police sergeant came charging into the room, gun drawn. The table was still vibrating from the terrific impact of the powerful springs, suddenly released.

"I was outside phoning—" the sergeant said. "What did he try to do, Doc, hold you up?"

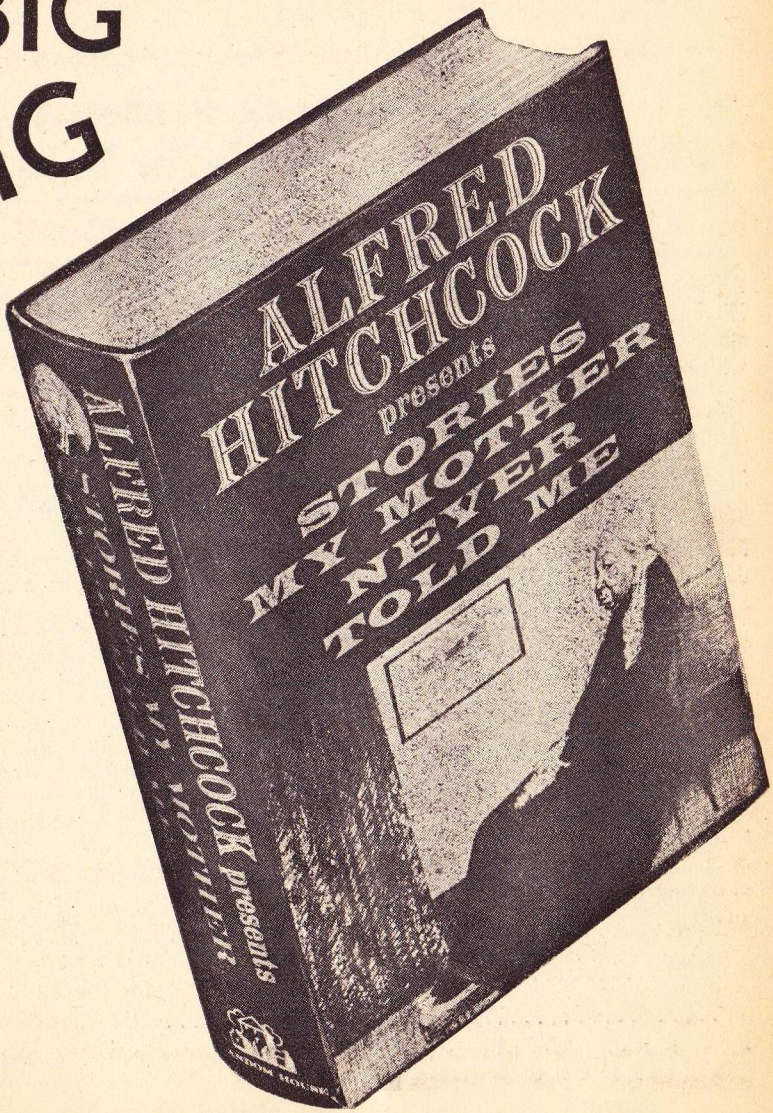
After Doc's breathless explanation, the sergeant said, "I think this bird is wanted in Pilotsville. A bank job was pulled there yesterday. But say, Doc, what made you think of that stunt with the table?"

Dr. Jackson smiled. "Something Meg, my wife, said yesterday. 'You'd better have that thingamujig fixed. I've got a hunch it'll hurt somebody.'"

The sergeant chuckled. "Know what, Doc? You'd better get some more chairs for your waiting room. Because I've got a hunch that tomorrow you'll be the town hero."

BIG BIG BIG

Money Saving Offer



For details please see other side ➡

Long have scholars wondered over where has gone the past. For some, who think in cycles, all the past is future; while for others the past is but the present become invisible.

THE chill, electric silence of a November night hung over the woods and crept up to the edge of the campfire. Two men, facing each other across the flames, sat sipping hot coffee while they observed the night.

"Do you have the feeling," asked Clayton Warner suddenly, "that

you've been here before?" He had a young, serious face, and mild, scholarly eyes.

The other man was older, with a bearded, apple-cheeked face that caught the firelight, and an ancient, tattered great-coat that made him look grotesque in the flickering firelight.

"Yes," he said musingly, "but that ain't surprisin', seein' that I've deer hunted in these woods many a year."

Far off, an owl called eerily in the quiet night, and the forest listened. In the glow of a pale moon, just beginning its climb through clawlike branches of trees on the ridge, the two men saw the woods move closer. Clayton Warner shivered a little and wrapped both hands about his cup to warm them.

"That's not what I meant," he said. "Have you ever entered a room, and somehow known that whatever you saw next would be familiar to you? That for the next few minutes everything would fall into a familiar pattern you couldn't do anything about?"

The old man grunted, and getting a coal from the fire, began to puff life into his pipe.

"Hit's natural," he said, with the calm satisfaction of age. "Happens to everybody now and then. My old grandma claimed it was tokens left over from another life, or some kind of spirit message from the other world."

"What would you think," asked Clayton carefully, "if I told you that this happens to me all the time lately?"

"Why, I'd say," said the old man drily, "that I'd suppose that kind of thing would begin to taste of the keg after a while."

"I just don't understand it," sighed Clayton. "I don't have a runaway imagination at all. As a matter of fact, I'm afraid lots of people think I'm dull as lead, just a small town schoolteacher plugging along on the way to nowhere."

He looked past the old man to the shimmering woods and the faint redness of the firelight on the near trees.

"And yet, ever since I came to this town, these things have been happening," he continued, "and it's weird. Not so much people as places. I come to a place, and I'm mortally sure I've been there before. I can even tell what the inside of some of those old houses on Tulliver Street look like, though I've never been in them."

"How do you know you're right then?" asked the old man mildly. His eyes twinkled in the firelight as he puffed away at the pipe.

"I've checked myself," answered

Clayton. "Store buildings and such. I even went in that old ramshackle mill building that's been empty for years. I had a feeling I'd know just what it looked like inside, including that old wooden machinery, and I was right. It was as familiar as my own home town."

He lit a cigarette and snapped the lighter shut angrily. "And then there's this other thing I've told nobody about." He paused, a bit anxiously, and peered into the shadows that flickered over the old man's face, but his companion remained inscrutable.

Clayton knew he ought to get back to town. This was deer season, and the schools were closed, but he had papers to grade and he was already very tired. He had met this old man, a stranger to him, late that afternoon at a deer stand, where the leaves went scudding down a long hollow in the wind, and the woods were brown and open. The old man had been standing by a tree, and so well did his colorless clothing and brindle-grey beard fit into the pattern of the woods, that Clayton had not seen him until he spoke.

Neither had seen a deer, but they fell into conversation, and Clayton, who was an ardent deer hunter, was so arrested by something, perhaps the old man's

knowledge and his stories of the seasons past, that he had stayed with him and came here to the old man's camp to share a pot of coffee. The old man too was hunting alone.

"I don't reckon," said his companion in the silence, "that you'd ever been to town sometime when you were just a tad and maybe didn't know it."

"Never," said Clayton firmly. "I was born in Indiana, six hundred miles from here, and I was never out of the state until I went to college. My family always hated to travel."

The owl called again, from a dark hollow, and another answered, and then another. For a moment the woods were alive with the laughing, hooting cry of owls, and then the silence de-

scended again, like ominous frost.

Clayton wondered if he should tell the old man the whole story. Normally a quiet, systematic man, he had found his life nearly derailed by the strange manifestations his mind had forced on him. He knew no one well enough to tell these things, or perhaps he knew everyone too well to tell them. He made up his mind abruptly, with customary finality.

"I'm not a storyteller," he said with a sigh, "but I want to tell somebody about this. It's a kind of ghost story," he added apologetically.

The old man hunched over his crossed legs and picked the coffeepot gingerly from the fire. He poured his cup full and blew at the rim to cool the hot tin.

"It's a fine night for a tale, or a fox race," he said encouragingly, "and I'm partial to both. We'll have a drop of the horn to make it better."

He took an old flask from his coat and passed it over. They each had a long draught from the bottle and the old man put it away with a satisfied sigh.

"You can smell the feet of the boys that plowed the corn," he said with gusto.

The fiery moonshine coursed through Clayton's veins like electricity, and he felt warm with it immediately. He lit a cigarette and began talking, as the old man cleaned his ancient rifle in the firelight.

"I've always hunted, since I was a boy," said Clayton, "anything you could hunt, any time of the year you could hunt it. I didn't do any deer hunting until I came to this part of the country, and I guess I tried to make up for all the years I hadn't hunted deer.

"It was last spring when Joe Coppard, down at the post office, told me about the old Reese place north of town. The deer were so thick in there, he said, that they kept the grass mowed like a lawn. I went out there, and he was right. The place looks like something the world forgot." He broke off. "Have you ever seen it?"

The old man nodded.

"Well, then, you know how it looks, the house falling in, briar thickets and wild fruit trees in the yard, and the orchard, with all of those gnarled, ancient apple trees in a sea of bluegrass. The place chilled my blood, sort of. It's so completely abandoned and lonely, with the empty windows of the house looking over those barren fields, and the quiet over everything. As if everything there were waiting."

"It didn't always look like that," said the other man.

"Yes, I know that now," said Clayton. "I saw it first in the late afternoon, with the evening light on it. The trunks of the trees were gray and weathered, and the boards of the house were the same way, and all through the yard and orchard the growing things were that odd, lifeless color that very old things take on, waiting for spring. I knew just what the house looked like inside, the way the rooms were laid out, and the placement of the furniture. I didn't go in, though, because somehow the place was so lonely and silent I didn't want to disturb its quiet. I made a circle out through the orchard and found more deer signs than I'd ever seen in one place and I decided that the deer came in at night and fed on the bluegrass."

Clayton watched as the old man opened the breech of his rifle and, placing a finger in it to reflect the light, peered down the barrel.

"I made up my mind," he continued, "to come back one night when the moon was shining and hide in a tree in the orchard. There was something about the old place that fascinated me. Does that make sense to you?"

The old man shrugged and spat in the fire.

"Night huntin's the best they are," he said laconically. "When I was a young man, I spent many a night under the stars, listenin' to the dogs run mostly in the dark woods."

"Then you know the attraction of it," said Clayton, "the mystery of not being able to see very far, and not knowing what it is that's coming through the leaves toward you. I got started hunting with a wounded rabbit call, and that's the weirdest kind of thrill I know, realizing that after you've called, and you're waiting there in the dark, you're being hunted by something you don't know about. Have you ever hunted like that?"

"I have been the hunter and the hunted at the same time," answered the old man.

"Game wardens?" Clayton surmised briefly, and the old fellow chuckled as he squatted in the firelight, wiping each of his cartridges with an oily rag and inserting them one at a time in the rifle. "Go on with your tale," he said.

Clayton stared into the fire a moment. "It was April before I got back there," he said, "and it was amazing how the place had changed. I left my car on an old woods road, so no one would wonder about it, and walked through the woods. I came up in back of the house, just about dusk, and stood there in a little cedar grove looking over the orchard.

Every single tree was in bloom, and it was like looking down on a bank of clouds, nearly, to look over the tops of those trees. Up in the house yard the firebush was blooming too, and a big cherry tree that I had thought was dead was swelled out like cotton candy with pink blossoms. It was beautiful, but it was sad, too. All those trees, planted and pruned and cultivated by somebody, and now they were blooming here for no one, in the stillness of that forgotten place.

"I walked through the orchard, and saw fresh deer tracks again. I looked around until I found a tree that was right for sitting in, where I could see everything fairly well and pulled myself up in it. I had a gun with me, an old shotgun. I always carry a gun in the woods, because I'd have felt naked without it, but I didn't intend to kill a deer. I got comfortable in the broad fork of the tree with a limb to rest my back against, and tested my view. I could see the old cart track coming to the house, grown over with weeds two feet high, and the moonlit house itself behind the rotten palings that were more honeysuckle than fence. I could see where a little hollow came into the orchard field, and I was sure that this was where the deer had been coming in."

He lit another cigarette with a stick from the fire, and blew the smoke upward. The old man sat like an Indian, hugging his knees in thoughtful contemplation of the rising moon. There was no sound but the slight hissing of the fire.

"I sat there," Clayton went on, "for a long time before anything happened. The whippoorwills were calling, and the night was full of sounds, but I couldn't see much until the moon got up. The smell of all those blossoms was overpowering in the still air, and in the moonlight the trees hardly looked real around me. They were like clouds of vapor, and after a while I lost my sense of distance and couldn't tell for sure where the ground was. Then I saw a movement, and there was a deer feeding in the grass a few yards away. After a few minutes I saw another one move into my view, and then another. I couldn't tell much about size and I never could pick out antlers for sure, but I could see their white patches plainly, and after I stared a minute or two, their outlines. It was quite a sensation. I knew that I could kill one with the shotgun, but I didn't want to. It was as if I were invisible, with the power to watch them for hours without being detected, and it wouldn't have been right to take advantage of it. I just

sat there, listening to my heart pound, and watched them move about the orchard."

He paused, and the old man took the opportunity to pass the flask over. They both drank in silence, and washed down the liquor with hot coffee. The fire was dying down to coals, but neither made any effort to refuel it.

"I have no idea how long I'd watched, but I was beginning to get stiff in the back," said Clayton. "You know how it is, sitting in a tree. I was just easing myself into a more bearable position, when I heard something coming from the direction of the road. At first I thought it was a deer running, but I soon realized it couldn't be that. It was the sound of a horse galloping on the road, and you could hear his shoes clopping in the hard gravel. Then I heard the hoofs leave the hard road and take the cart track to the house, and a thousand things went through my mind before I noticed that the deer hadn't even raised their heads. I think I had just decided that it must be a range horse the deer were used to, and relaxed a little, when I heard the door to the house swing open with a sound of unoiled hinges, and I swiveled my eyes toward the house. The moonlight was slanting in across the porch, and I could see the black patch that was the open door. I fastened my eyes to it, listening at the same time to the horse.

"Then, as if in a dream, I saw a man step out onto the porch, and I saw the blue gleam of a rifle barrel."

Clayton put his cup down, and his hand trembled a little. "I heard the creak of a saddle and the clink of metal from the road, and I saw the man on the porch duck off to the side and kneel behind a big leafy bush near the yard fence."

He took a long stick and poked aimlessly at the fire.

"Then the horse came over the hill and I saw that it had a rider. I couldn't see his face well, but he was tall, and had on a slouch hat, and a military jacket of some kind, with buttons that winked in the moonlight. I think he had a mustache too, but I'm not sure. I sat there in the tree and watched him ride up to the gate and stop, and for the life of me, I could neither move, nor think clearly enough to imagine what could be happening, or what I should do. I was like a man watching a play, sure that what I was watching couldn't be real, and that I could have no effect on the outcome, whatever I did. Then the gun roared behind the bush with a noise that was loud, but more like the echo of a shot than the actual report. I saw

the tall man jerk back in the saddle, stiffen and finally topple to the ground, his hand still gripping the reins."

Clayton threw the stump of his cigarette into the fire. "You might think," he said slowly, "that these things I have told you would have scared me out of my wits, but that part was yet to come." He looked fixedly at the old man, who returned his gaze across the fire.

"I was sitting there, half frozen with shock, wondering what I should do, when I glanced down, and saw that the deer were still peacefully cropping the grass below me. Neither the sound of the horse, the grating of the door, the sight of the men nor the sound of the shot had disturbed them in the least, and yet, in the minutes that I had watched them, I had seen them put up their ears and stand rigid at the rustle of a rabbit in the honeysuckle vines, and twice bolt and run a few yards when some slight sound disturbed them.

"I knew then that what I had seen couldn't be real, but was part of these hallucinations that have plagued me since I came to this place. There was no horse, although I could see him as clearly as I see you; prancing about skittishly there at the gate, still held by his dead master's hand, and snorting with fear at the smell of blood. There was no man in the yard, although I saw him, watched him stand up and lever a shell into his gun before he walked out to look at his handiwork. There had been no shot, although the ring of it was still in my ears.

"I clung to the tree like a man in a dream and watched the ghost with the rifle come out the yard gate and free the reins from the dead man's clutch, and I saw him send the horse off with a slap on the rump. I was still watching, as he dragged the dead man into the yard, and I saw him bury the body beneath the bush. The moon was right overhead as he leveled the ground over the grave and tamped it with his feet, and I got an idea that I could get down now and sneak away under the shadow of the apple trees. I had nearly forgotten the deer but as my foot scraped on the bark of the tree, I saw their heads come up, staring toward me, bodies poised for flight.

"I sat there a moment, unsure of what to do, but I knew I couldn't stay in the tree any longer, whatever happened, and I grasped a branch and slid to the ground."

The old man had not said a word, but the smoke from his pipe had risen in puffs as regular as smoke signals, and Clayton knew that his eyes were open and watching.

"The instant I moved, the deer were gone. I saw white tails leaping and heard the shrill whistling of the bucks. There seemed to be deer in every direction, and as I looked toward the house, one leaped the yard fence and ran by the murderer's bush; and I saw the flash of his flag as he cleared the back fence. I stood silent a moment, waiting for something to happen, but nothing did, and at last, gathering my courage, I walked to the gate and looked in."

Clayton paused to get out his cigarettes again and lit one slowly, listening to the cries of the whippoorwills with obvious enjoyment.

"And you saw nothing?" asked the old man. Something in the old man's tone made Clayton wonder whether the old fellow fully believed him, yet he felt his companion would not be satisfied if he left anything out of his story.

"I saw the murderer cleaning his shovel in the moonlight," he replied, "and a mound of fresh dirt. I stared at him a moment. He was a big man, with a mustache and sideburns, nearly bald. He had on suspenders and boots. I was so close I could see his jowls quiver with the fatigue of the work he'd just done, but he didn't see me at all. And then, as I was looking at him, horrified, he just disappeared."

It seemed the end of the story, and the old man sat for a moment in silence.

"What do you mean, disappeared?" he asked.

"Just that," said Clayton. "I don't mean that he faded away, or dissolved; he just wasn't there any more, neither he nor the shovel nor the mound of dirt. I was standing by the gate in the moonlight, alone, and the whippoorwills were calling, as they are now. I looked around me, and there was no sign of a horse, no bloodstains or dragmarks in the dirt. Only a set of deer tracks where

the deer had leaped the fence. And the old house with its vacant windows staring out over the moonlit orchard. I don't know exactly how I made it back to my car," he said after a moment of contemplation, "but I made it there, frightened half out of my wits. I drove home, and I said nothing to anyone about what I had seen."

"I'm not surprised," said his companion with a grunt. "Most folks would figure you'd need to be tapped for the simples. But that ain't all, is it?"

"No," said Clayton, "it isn't." He waited while the old man dragged up a dead limb to give new life to the fire. For a moment the flames illuminated them both, and the old man's face glowed like porcelain in the red light.

"Time is a barrier people can't cross," Clayton said, after a while, "a wall you can't break down or get over. I teach my school children about the Emperor Charlemagne, or Paul Revere, and they memorize the things I want them to, but they don't *know* that these people existed. It's like the theory that nothing exists except while you're looking at it. You might say that a man only exists while there is still a man alive who has seen him, and after that he becomes a legend, a thing of the past, and as far from reality as the times he lived in. So it seems to me."

He looked at the old man, as if not sure what he was saying was getting across.

"I think what's happened to me is some sort of distortion in this wall of time, as if the material of the wall had turned to glass, so that I alone could look through, but not touch the things on the other side."

The old man scratched his head and set his cap back straight.

"You mean you can see things like you just told me, but you can't do anything about them," he said reflectively.

"Yes," said Clayton, "I have that feeling. I went back to the Reese place the next day, in the middle of the afternoon. I'd left my shotgun in the orchard, and since it was Saturday, I was afraid some hunter would find it. I got the gun and walked up to the house, almost despite myself, not knowing what I expected to see. The house was grey and forsaken in the sunlight, and smelled of rot and mildew. Wasps buzzed in and out of its crevices and the weeds in the yard were so thickly tangled I had to step carefully to get to the porch. Most of the porch had fallen in, but I got close enough to see that the door hadn't been opened in at least a year. There was a rusty chain which ran

through a hole in the door and one in the doorframe, and a padlock on it. By this time I wasn't surprised. That left me only one thing to do to test my sanity."

"You had to look under the lilac bush," said the old man calmly.

"That's exactly what I had to do," nodded Clayton, glancing at him briefly. "I carry a trench shovel in the car along with my chains, and I got it and started digging. I only had to dig a few feet, but I never want to work like that again, with the old house brooding over my shoulder, and every creak of its old timbers and every sound in the grass behind me making me stand up to look. I'd spent most of the afternoon, and the light was failing, and the roots of the lilac bush were like iron. I chopped and hacked and scooped dirt like a madman, and suddenly the shovel came up with what I was looking for: a brass button, green with mold. Then I found a bone. Another five minutes' work, and I'd found a skull."

For a moment the two men sat in silence, as if each were lost in thoughts of his own. Then the old man spoke.

"What did you do then?"

"I filled in the grave," replied Clayton, "and went home."

A shower of sparks climbed suddenly from the fire and whirled up among the tree branches, and the dark woods seemed to move again to the undulation of the flames.

"That's quite a tale," said the old man finally, chewing his pipe.

"It's a true one," said Clayton simply. "You know about the old Reese place. Can you tell me anything of it that would help to explain it?"

The old man stared into the fire and brushed at the silver edges of his whiskers.

"Well," he said, "some says one thing, some another, and it's all been a good while back." He worked the cork from his bottle, took a comfortable swallow, and replaced the cork carefully, his eyes never leaving the fire.

"Sam Reese, they say, was an easy-come, easy-go sort of devil, and he looked a lot like your tall man on the horse. His brother Burl was a hard worker, not as smart as Sam, nor as forward, but he was a plodder, and they both worked on the farm till Sam fell for a town girl and took up sparkin' instead. Worst thing about it was, the girl was Minnie McBain, and his brother, though he'd never got around to sayin' anythin' about it, had picked out Minnie to be *his* wife, whenever the farm got out from under the mortgage. It made bad blood between them,

though it wasn't much of a contest. Burl was the kind who looked at a woman and blushed, and pulled his hat off when one came in a room. Sam was a regular ladies' man, they say, and could talk a wasp out of stingin' him."

"You seem to know a lot about them," remarked Clayton, offering his host a cigarette.

"Old folks talk," said the old man, shaking his head. "It was the talk of the country, seein' what happened. Sam got the girl in the family way, got skeered of matrimony and left the country. Some said he joined the army, and I reckon he did. Burl, he married the girl and made that house for her instead of the cabin he and Sam had shared, but he didn't have no luck."

The old man stuffed tobacco in his pipe and spat in the fire.

"The girl, she died a-birthin', and the little 'un too, and Burl kept pluggin' along, makin' a crop now and then, and everyone said he was waitin' for his brother to come home. But far as anyone knowed, he never did come."

From somewhere, miles away, came the cry of the hounds in the night. The pack ran echoing up a great hollow, where the sound was muffled in the big woods, and then crossed a ridge, where their plaintive buglings were clear; then they faded again and were gone. There remained only the brittle starlight and the humming silence of the fire.

Very slowly, but deliberately, Clayton turned from the fire and slid his rifle up until the muzzle was trained on the older man.

"I wondered," he said, cocking the hammer, "why this strange insight had come to me, and why I saw these things. I was meant to catch a murderer."

The old man looked at him bemused, and puffed his pipe.

"I believe you're seein' things again," he said drily.

"The lilac bush," said Clayton, with a tight mouth. "You said, *'You had to look under the lilac bush,'* but I'd never mentioned what kind it was."

He gained his feet carefully, and looked down on the old man. "You know why? Because there wasn't any bush at all when I got back there in the daylight. It was only when I began to dig in the place where I'd seen the bush the night before that I found the old, gnarled roots of a lilac, dead for dozens of years."

The old man sighed. "And just what would you aim to do, son, if you could get anybody to believe you?"

"I'll do what I was meant to do,

I suppose," said Clayton calmly, "bring you to a justice you've escaped."

He held the rifle in one hand, and digging in his coat pocket, pulled out a greenish object which he held to the firelight.

"Here's the proof," he said, "or part of it. A button from your brother's coat."

The old man stared up at him, and he smiled, showing rows of uneven, worn teeth. His eyes shone red as if the fire were contained in them.

"There's a small mischance in your figurin', young man," he said, "and I'll tell you where it lies. How old do you calculate me to be?"

"That's not hard to guess," said Clayton coldly, keeping the rifle trained. "You were thirty or thirty-five when I saw you bury your brother, and I reckon you're near seventy-five now."

The old man laughed, with a dry, wheezing sound. "That would make it forty years ago or so." He chuckled. "No, no, that'll never do. Sam Reese went off to the army in the summer of sixty-three, a hundred years ago last June, and he came back a year later, nearly to the day."

"Prove it," said Clayton.

"Prove it yourself," said the old man, grinning. "Look at the button and use your eyes," he added.

"Hardly," said Clayton, getting a tighter grip on the rifle. He threw the button to the old man. "If there's something to be proved, you show me."

The old man held the button a moment, smiling, as if it warmed his hand, then he spat on it, keeping his eyes fixed on Clayton. He began to polish it on his ragged coat, and as he polished it he spoke.

"He killed her, as surely as I killed him, her havin' a baby he didn't care enough about even to give it a name. And after I married her she wasn't happy with me; she kept waitin' for him to come back. She didn't say nothin', but I could tell. Well, I was waitin' too, and I had a lot of time to study about it after Minnie died. The night that horse come down the road, I killed my brother, with this gun you see here, and I've expected you, or someone like you, over the years. But it'll be small satisfaction to you, young feller, and maybe I'll have some peace. Here!"

He held up the button in the light, and Clayton bent a little to look at it, keeping his rifle pointed at the old man's chest.

The button was nearly eaten away with corrosion, but the old man's rubbing had brought some

of the brassy metal to life, and Clayton could see clearly the three letters upon it.

"And now," said the old man, "what do you see?"

"C,S,A," read Clayton. "Confederate States of America."

"And there's your proof," said the old man. He handed the button carefully to Clayton, and he took it as carefully and dropped it into his pocket, still keeping the gun trained on the old man. "There's proof," the old fellow repeated, "that you're wrong, or that I'm 140 years old.

"You see, you found me all right, but you're too late for it. Your glass wall lies between us, and you can't touch me, only see me."

Clayton blinked.

"Do you reckon," said the old man, "that this is the end of it? Or do you reckon you'll go on being able to see inside things for the rest of your life?"

He smiled with narrowed eyes at the flames, and in a motion quick for so old a man, swung up his rifle from the ground and pointed it at Clayton. "Or do you suppose," he asked almost mischievously, "that it works the other way 'round?"

With the flash from the muzzle Clayton fired too, and the woods reverberated endlessly with the report. For a moment Clayton stood stock still, eyes squeezed shut with the sight of the muzzle blast in them.

And then he opened them slowly. There was nothing to see but the empty clearing in the woods and the firelight winking among the tree trunks, and the drifting, acrid smoke from what had been the old man's parting joke. Clayton shook his head slowly, trying to remember what he was doing standing in the woods in the middle of the night, but nothing would come, except that he must have fallen asleep by his fire.

"Deer hunting," he thought, "you get so tired you go to sleep on your feet." His hand in his pocket closed around a small metal object, which he absent-mindedly withdrew and pitched into a drift of leaves.

The voluntary acceptance of self-limiting rules applies to murder as well as to other games. Equally applicable, a ruinous spoil-sport can make inroads into the best laid plans.

THE POWER TO KILL

By Philip Ketchum

WHEN I was eight years old I decided to kill my grandfather. He was a thin, scrawny man, bony, sharp featured, and he had a cackling laugh. He used it on me with a devastating effect. He laughed at my mistakes, my awkwardness, my petty rebellions. He was amused when I was caught doing something wrong. He scoffed at my games, my imagination, my daydreaming. I hated him more than anything in the world. One night he died in his sleep and I was heartbroken. I cried and cried and cried. People thought I cried because I loved him. They were wrong. I cried because he had escaped. Now I would never enjoy

the great pleasure of killing him.

I remember Miss Tadbald, my sixth grade teacher. By that time I was twelve, thin, gangling, and not a very good student. I was a Boy Scout. I did not want to be a Boy Scout but my parents thought it would be good for me. Soon I was glad I had joined. As a Boy Scout I learned a lot of things about how to handle a knife, how to build a fire, how to tie knots. This knowledge would help when I killed Miss Tadbald. She had black, piercing eyes, a sharp nose, and a tight, thin mouth. She could look at me and see what I was thinking. If I made a mistake in a problem, she saw it. If I skipped my reading, she found out. If I whispered in class, she knew it was me. Others could do wrong, but not me. Day after day after day she made me stay after school, embarrassed me, took away my playtime. I made at least a dozen plans to trap her, torture her, kill her, but one day her mother got sick and she went back home to look after her. A substitute teacher took her place. Miss Tadbald never returned to the school. I never saw her again.

Then there was Lorena Whitcomb. I loved her, and I came to hate her. She was my first true love. I was seventeen when I met her. Before then I had experienced several puppy-love affairs, had developed a flickering interest in girls, but Lorena did not fit into such a category. She burst into my life with so much sweetness, and so much bitterness, it hurts me today to remember her. I became her slave, would have died for her. She destroyed my appetite, my honesty, my sense of rseponsibility. She was tall, slender, beautiful, had straw-colored hair, blue eyes, wide red lips. Her voice was sultry, tempting, promising everything. Her whisper could make me tingle. I did not want to believe it when I learned she was unfaithful, that she had turned away from me. The murder I devised would have been quite dramatic, but before I could accomplish it I came down with the mumps, and was put to bed. Then, while I lay suffering, my father got word he was to be transferred east. Of course I had to go too. Somewhere between the mumps and the trip east, Lorena disappeared from my life.

The university was good for me. It helped me grow up, it challenged my thinking. I learned a great many things. Some did not come from text books or class lectures. One of my extra-curricular activities was the achievement of a better understanding of murder. There were no classes on this subject, but murder is as old as man.

There is a wide experience in the field. The history of every civilization is sprinkled with murder. Some are fine examples of the art and can be studied, analyzed, understood. I might even say there is a philosophy of murder, but I am afraid the average moralist would not accept such a view.

A few principles can be defined and be made understandable. They stand above morality, have little to do with ethics. Take the matter of the power to kill. This is an amazing gift. I have it; you have it; everyone has it, even the lowest and the most ignorant. This is an inherent possession. No one has to buy it, or earn it, or steal it. It is as free as air. I can take your life. I do not care who you are, how powerful you are, how strong, how wealthy, how important. If you are a king, or a prince, a president, a general or a peon, your life is in my hands. I can snuff it out, put a period to your living. All I need is to get a gun, point it at you, and pull the trigger. There is no trick to it at all.

What an amazing power—the power to kill. Aware of it, how can anyone feel small, unimportant, a nothing? In my hands rests your destiny. I can take your life whenever I wish. I am a veritable king. Beware of me—because you live only at my pleasure.

This is true of everyone, yet everyone cannot use the power to kill. I have done considerable research on the subject. In my notebooks are pages and pages of charts, analyzing this phase of the problem, but there is no need to set up and explain the probability equations. A number of generalizations can cover the matter. While everyone has the power to kill, who are those that can make use of it? Who are those that would back away? I think we can say this—that the tender cannot kill, nor the soft, nor the weak, nor the timid. Murder requires a toughness of character, a sense of harshness, a background of strength. We can say this in another way. To be a murderer, a man must be courageous, must have imagination, must be daring. Think about it for a moment, see if we are not right. We are considering murder—planned murder; designed murder; plotted murder. I tell you this definitely. To be a murderer requires all the fine qualities of manhood.

There is another point to analyze. I would set this up as a premise—that murder is one of the highest arts. If murder is one of the highest arts, then it should be reserved to those who can qualify as being worthy of it. I am not talking about the murderer now. I am considering the victims, those

to be killed, and I would add that, if murder is one of the highest arts, then the unworthy, the ignoble, and the wishy-washy weak, should be excluded from such benefits.

Do you see what we have done? It is this: We have set up a governing chart covering the subject of murder. Since all have the power to kill, each is a potential murderer. Yet to be a murderer, a man must pass certain tests. He must be strong, courageous, imaginative, decisive, daring. And his victims must not be the unworthy, people of no importance. They must not be the ignoble, less than him, below his station. They must not be the wishy-washy weak, who will come to their own ends soon enough anyhow.

If I had not made a careful analysis of murder, I might have killed a number of my associates while I was at the university. One was a girl who was unappreciative. I was actually on the point of taking her life when I realized she was unimportant, a pretty girl but a nobody. By the time she was thirty she would be fat, flaccid, the mother of a brood of chubby children. There was a young man I nearly killed. He was in several of my classes, a big, bruising individual, crude as the farm he came from. Just in time I realized he was of the ignoble, an earthy person far below my station. There was a professor I thought of murdering, a very intelligent man but one of the wishy-washy weak, a man of no courage. He cringed in the ivory towers of his profession. I could afford to ignore him.

Actually, I am a very normal person, a mathematician, a scientist. I am also a potential murderer. I am aware of my power to kill. I have courage, imagination, daring, strength of character, and it is good that I have. Tonight I will need those qualities. Tonight I must kill someone. I have weighed all considerations. I know what I must do. My victim is not unworthy, she is not ignoble, she is not one of the wishy-washy weak. She is an important person, of high station, of character. I cannot ignore the challenge she presents. I will tell you about her, why I must kill her, and how I will do it. This is very important to me. To you, it can be a demonstration.

The name of my victim is Fleur Bronski. She is twenty-five, and rather attractive. For a number of months I have been living with her. She was lonely; I was kind. I may even have told her I loved her. Sometimes we are careless about the words we use. Surely, I could not have meant it seriously. More than anything, my living

with her was a convenient arrangement, a temporary thing.

Fleur is an artist, possibly a good artist. She thinks. Most women never do. And she is honest. There are many fine things about her, and it is regrettable that I have to kill her, but what other course can I follow? She told me, yesterday, that if I tried to leave her, she would kill me. She was not hysterical, nor frantic, nor wild. She was very calm, very positive. I am sure she meant exactly what she said.

As evidence of this I must recount one of our conversations. It was held long ago, just after I had moved into her apartment. In straightening one of the drawers, I came cross a gun. It was fully loaded, a very lethal weapon, and as I held it in my hand I said, "Fleur, what's this?"

"A gun," she answered, and she even smiled.

"Where did you get it?" I asked curiously.

"In a store. I bought it."

"But why?"

Her face sobered instantly. "Do you remember Aaron Friedlander? But of course you don't. He was an art critic. Possibly the most important critic in the country."

"A young man?"

"Silly! Of course not. He was at least eighty. An authority on art."

"But where does the gun come in?"

"Do you remember my painting, *Delilah at Midnight?* It's one of the best things I've ever done. I submitted it in the Fall Festival Contest. I think I might have had a chance, but Mr. Friedlander didn't like it. He made fun of it, ridiculed it, said it was horrible. He was an impossible man."

"What happened to him?"

"He died right after the Fall Festival Contest. I think it was a heart attack."

"But the gun. . . ."

She smiled again. "Put it away, dear. I didn't have to use it."

I didn't say a word as I replaced the gun but I was faintly excited, and I had a new respect for Fleur. She was a potential murderer, just as I. She had the courage, the strength, and the daring to use the power to kill. If Friedlander had not died of a heart attack, he would have died of a bullet.

In a way it is too bad I was unable to fall in love with Fleur. If I were a pedantic individual cut into an ordinary mold, I might have been satisfied with the monotony of marriage. Instead, I am a different breed of animal. I live by change, by variety, by new experience. I will wear no harness. I will not sink into the morass of comfort and conformity. I cannot walk

flat-footed, but I walk on my toes. I soar above the earth. This is the way it must be, always. Margo Dupres is not a destination. I tried to explain that to Fleur, but it was beyond her. She was ridiculously jealous.

I went into the matter this morning, quite fully. Margo Dupres is a new experience. She is young, beautiful, and wealthy. She is of the generation and group which flies to Paris for breakfast after a night on the town here. Then, on impulse, they might decide to go skiing in Switzerland, or bathing at Biarritz. It is the go-go-go crowd, filled with excitement, adventure, fun. Someday I will do some serious writing. To prepare for it, I must sample everything that is possible.

"I think you are crazy," Fleur said.

I shook my head. "No, this is a step I must take, a dip into another phase of living."

"What will you do about money? You have been using mine. Now, will you live on Margo?"

I was even able to smile. Money is something I have never worried about. It is a shackle. I will have nothing to do with shackles.

"Will you marry her?" Fleur asked.

"What's marriage?" I shrugged my shoulders. "A few words, a ceremony, a promise easily broken.

"We didn't get married."

"Then we've nothing to worry about."

"I think we should now," Fleur said. "I want to get married."

I sighed, and started again, explaining how I felt, but I got nowhere. Fleur could paint a canvas so wild it defied the imagination, a riot of colors and form, modern as tomorrow. But in her personal life and within the framework of her beliefs, she was very provincial. We had not married, but we would. She definitely counted on that, and in view of the breach between us, it became imperative.

I broke it off. I told her bluntly that I was leaving. That was that. But Fleur had a final word. If I left, she would follow me, find me, and kill me. She would do that if she had to follow me around the world.

That is the way things stand right now. Margo is waiting for me at Yacht Harbor. We will sail up the sound. We may stop at Shelter Island; we might head for Maine, or Miami. The destination is unimportant, but what about Fleur and the promise she made? Can I forget her? She has the power to kill. There is only one way to cancel her threat, and that is murder.

This morning, while she was away, I moved out my things. And

now, this afternoon, I am waiting for her to return from the studio. Usually she gets back by three-thirty. If she is not late, I should be able to join Margo by six. She said we would sail on the tide, just at sunset.

A little while ago I looked at Fleur's gun. It has not been used. It is still loaded. I had thought of using it, but I have changed my mind about that. Fleur is a gentle person. If she is to die, she should die gently. Therefore I have decided to make a game of it. I will be nice to her when she comes home. I will suggest that we go out for dinner. Before we go she will want a bath. She always does. And she takes a tub bath, never locks the bathroom door. What would be easier than to walk into the bathroom with a radio in my hand. She has a small set, and I have a long extension cord. I will plug in the set, turn it on, walk into the bathroom and drop the radio into the tub of water. It can be made to look accidental, or it can be made to look like a suicide. A simple plot, but very effective—a perfect example of the high art of murder.

Fleur just telephoned. She is on her way here and she seemed pleased that I answered the telephone. She said, "Darling, you're already home? You surprise me."

From her voice I knew that she was shutting her eyes to reality. She was still clinging to the belief that I would not leave her. I smiled, and let her have her dreams, and said, "I've been waiting for an hour."

"Then I'll hurry." Fleur said. "I've a bottle of wine in the closet. Put it in the refrigerator. And don't touch the canapés." Fleur isn't one of the world's best cooks, but she can set up a *paté de foie gras* which is heavenly.

Fifteen minutes have passed. Fleur has not yet arrived. I did not expect her this quickly, but it had suddenly occurred to me that she's not coming. Just a moment ago I felt a sharp cramp in my stomach. I thought it was a gas pain, but I was wrong. The pain is still there. It is growing stronger —and stronger—and stronger. It is even beginning to fog my thinking. That *paté de foie gras*—could it have been poisoned?

Definitely! And why am I surprised? The power to kill belongs to everyone. Fleur was quicker than I, that's all. She has made me the victim. I have failed, but the example still stands. The art remains. You have the demonstration I promised. Fleur! Ah, what a woman!

As Solar Pons and his distinguished associates discover, the exotic East exports more than spices and wise men. The perceptive importer must discern between the valuable and the questionable treasures.

SOLAR PONS and I were at breakfast one fair morning only a week after our return from the country and the curious affair of the Whispering Knights, when the door below was thrown violently open, and there was a rush of feet on the stairs that stopped short of our threshold. Pons looked up, his grey eyes intent, his whole lean figure taut with waiting.

"A young woman, agitated," he said, nodding. He flashed a glance at the clock. "Scarcely seven. It is surely a matter of some urgency to her. The hour has only now occurred to her. She hesitates. No, she is coming on."

The sound of footsteps was now scarcely audible, but they came on up the stairs. In a moment there was a faint, timorous tapping on the door to our quarters, and an equally timorous voice, asking beyond the door, "Mr. Pons? Mr. Solar Pons?"

A Novelette by

August Derleth

"Pray play the gentleman, Parker," said Pons.

I sprang up and threw open the door.

A sandy-haired young woman not much over her middle-twenties stood there, a package wrapped in a shawl pressed to her breast. She looked from one to the other of us with candid blue eyes, her full lower lip trembling uncertainly, a slow flush mounting her cheeks toward the scattering of freckles that bridged her nose and swept under her eyes. Then, with that unerring intuition that women especially seem to have, she fixed upon Pons.

"Mr. Pons! I hope I'm not intruding. I had to come. I had to do something. Uncle will do nothing—just wait for whatever is to happen. Oh, it's dreadful, Mr. Pons, dreadful!"

"Do come in, Miss . . . ?"

"I am Flora Morland of Mor-

land Park, Mr. Pons. You may have heard of my uncle, Colonel Burton Morland?"

"Retired resident at Malacca," said Pons promptly. "But do compose yourself, Miss Morland. Let me take that box you're holding."

"No, no!" she cried, and pressed it momentarily closer to her body. Then she bit her lip and smiled weakly. "But that is why I came. Forgive me, Mr. Pons. You shall see for yourself—now."

She threw back the shawl and revealed a box, scarcely as large as a cigar box, made of *kamuning* wood. It was beautifully carved on the top and around on all sides, with curious figures, like a bas-relief. It seemed obviously Oriental in design.

"Open it, Mr. Pons!" She shuddered a little. "I don't know how I could bear to have carried it all this way. I can't look again!"

Pons took the box gently from her. He pushed the breakfast dishes to one side and set the box on the table. He stood for a moment admiring its workmanship, while Miss Morland waited with an apprehensive tautness that was almost tangible in the room. Then he threw it open.

I fear I gasped. I do not know what I expected to see—a priceless jewel, perhaps?—a bibliophile's treasure?—something fitting to the exquisite box containing it. Certainly it was nothing I could have dreamed in my wildest imaginings! In the box laid a mummified human hand, severed at the wrist, affixed to the bottom of the box by two bands of white silk.

Pons' emotion showed only in his eyes, which lit up with quick interest. He touched the dried skin with the fingertips of one hand, while caressing the carved box with the other.

"Intarsia," murmured Pons. "An Italian art, Miss Morland. But this box would appear to be of Oriental origin; the subjects of the ornamentation are all Oriental. Would you care now to tell us how you came by it?"

He closed the box almost with regret, and, Miss Morland having taken the stuffed chair near the fireplace, came to stand against the mantel, filling his pipe with the detestable shag he smoked.

Miss Morland clasped her hands together. "I hardly know how to begin, Mr. Pons," she said.

"Let us start with this fascinating object you have brought us," suggested Pons.

"It was delivered to my uncle three days ago, Mr. Pons. I myself took it from the postman. It was mailed first-class from Kuala Lumpur. My uncle was in his study that morning, and I took it

in to him. I recall that his face darkened when he saw the package, but I supposed that it was only in wonder at who might have sent it. It was ten years ago that he left Malaya. He looked for some clue to its origin; there was no return address on the package. He began to take off its wrappings. I had turned away from him to put some books back on the shelves, when suddenly I heard him make a kind of explosive sound, and on the instant he slipped from his chair to the floor. He had swooned dead away. I ran over to him of course, Mr. Pons—and that's how I came to see what was in the box. There was a little card, too—linen paper, I thought, Mr. Pons—I believe such details are important to you. On it was written in a flowing hand a single sentence: *I will come for you.*"

"The card is not now in the box," said Pons.

"I suppose my uncle removed it. I closed the box, Mr. Pons. I couldn't bear to look at what was in it. Then I brought my uncle around. I expected him to tell me what was in the box and what it all meant, but he said nothing—never a word. Seeing that the box was closed, he assumed that he had closed it before or as he fainted, and that I didn't know what was in it. Mr. Pons, I was deeply shocked by what was in the box, but I was even more profoundly disturbed by my uncle's failure to say anything at all of it to me. Since the day he received it, furthermore, he has been very busy, and everything he has done is in the way of putting his affairs in order."

"Did your uncle notify the police?"

"If so, I don't know of it, Mr. Pons."

Pons puffed reflectively on his pipe for a moment before he asked, "I take it you are an orphan and have been living with your uncle. For how long?"

"Ten years," she replied. "My mother died when I was very young, and my father five years after Uncle Burton returned from Malaya. He has been very kind to me. He has treated me as his own child."

"Your uncle is not married?"

"Uncle Burton was married at one time. I believe there was some cloud over the marriage. My father occasionally talked about my aunt in deprecatory terms, called her 'the Eurasian woman'. My cousin Nicholas, who spent the last five years' of Uncle Burton's tenure with him in Malacca, also married a Eurasian woman. My aunt died before my uncle's return to England."

"Your cousin?"

"He returned with Uncle Burton. He's a barrister with offices in the City. His wife is the proprietress of a small, but I believe thriving, importing business in the Strand."

"Your cousin—Nicholas Morland, is it?"

"There were three brothers, Mr. Pons—my father, Nick's father, and Uncle Burton."

"Your cousin, I take it, was your uncle's assistant in Malacca?"

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"How old is your uncle, Miss Morland?"

"Seventy."

"So he was fifty-five when he retired," mused Pons. "How long had he been the resident in Malacca?"

"Fifteen years. He went out there when he was forty. I never really knew him, Mr. Pons, until his return. I hadn't been born when he was sent out. But Uncle Burton seemed to be very fond of me from the moment he saw me, and it seemed only natural that he would invite me to live with him when Father died. Uncle Burton is very wealthy, he has many servants, and, though he is regarded by some of them as a martinet, they do stay, most of them. And he has a large and secluded home in Chipping Barnet. It seemed the most natural thing to do, to live with him. He sent me to school, and through a small private college. For my part, I am expected to play hostess whenever he has one of his small parties, which are attended chiefly by my cousin and his wife and some other ex-Colonials and their wives. I rather like that now, though I didn't at first. But my uncle is the soul of rectitude. He will tolerate no deviation from proper conduct, so there are never any social problems for me to deal with."

"Your uncle's heirs—who are they?"

Our client looked momentarily startled. "Why, I suppose Nick and I are his only heirs," she said. "I know nothing of his affairs, Mr. Pons. But there is no one else. All our relatives of my uncle's generation are dead, and Nick and I are the only ones of our generation. Nick has no children, so there is no coming generation, either." She took a deep breath and asked impulsively, "Mr. Pons, can you get to the bottom of this mystery? It troubles me very much to see Uncle Burton—well, preparing for death. That's what he's doing, Mr. Pons, it really is."

"Your uncle has no knowledge of your coming here, Miss Morland?"

"None. I left at dawn. He sel-

dom rises before eight o'clock."

"Then you've not had breakfast, Miss Morland."

"No, Mr. Pons."

"Allow me!" Pons strode to the door, opened it, stuck his head out and called, "Mrs. Johnson, if you please!" He turned back to our client. "Pray give me a few minutes to ponder your problem, Miss Morland. In the meantime, Mrs. Johnson will be happy to prepare breakfast for you in her quarters. Will you not, Mrs. Johnson?" he asked of our long-suffering landlady as she appeared on the threshold.

"That I will, to be sure, Mr. Pons. If you'll come with me, Miss?"

Miss Morland, too surprised to protest, allowed herself to be led from the room by Mrs. Johnson.

The door had hardly closed behind them before Pons was once again at the box, opening it. I was drawn to his side.

"Is this not an unique warning indeed, Parker?" he asked.

"I have seldom seen anything as gruesome."

"It was intended to be. I submit that this severed hand must have a deep significance for our client's uncle. What do you make of it?"

I bent and peered closely at it, examining it as well as I could without disturbing it or removing it from the box. "A man's right hand," I said. "Of probably about forty, not much older, certainly. It is brown-skinned, not only from age. Eurasian?"

"Native. See how beautifully kept the nails are! This man did little work. There are no observable callouses. The hand is smooth even to the fingertips. How long would you say this hand has been severed?"

"Without more scientific apparatus, I should think it impossible to say."

"Could it be as old, say, as Colonel Morland's tenure in Malacca?"

"I should think so. But what could it mean to Morland?"

"Ah, Parker, when we can answer that question we will know why it was sent to him." He smiled grimly. "I fancy it concerns some dark episode of his past. He retired at fifty-five. Is that not early?"

"His health, perhaps, demanded his retirement."

"Or his conduct."

"Miss Morland speaks of him as a model of rectitude."

"And as something of a martinet. Conduct in search of rectitude may be as reprehensible as its opposite." He touched the silk bands. "What do you make of these, Parker?"

"If I may venture a guess, white

is the color of mourning in the Orient," I said.

"The bands are new," observed Pons.

"That is certainly elementary," I could not help saying. "I can think of several reasons why they should be. What puzzles me is the reason for being of the hand in the first place."

"I submit its owner kept it as long as he lived."

"Well, that's reasonable," I agreed. "It has been properly mummified. Are we to take it that the owner is not still alive?"

"If he were sufficiently attached to this appendage while he lived, would he so readily have sent it off?"

"Hardly."

"Unless it had a message to convey or an errand to perform."

"Absurd!"

"Yet it did convey a message to Colonel Morland. It may be gruesome, but surely not so much so as to cause a normal and healthy man to swoon at sight of it. It reminds me of that horrible little trifle of wizard lore known as the glory hand, the bewitched, animated hand of a dead man sent to perform its owner's wishes, even to murder."

"Superstitious claptrap!"

"Colonel Morland, at least, is convinced that his life is in danger, and that the threat to it emanates from Malaya. Let us just have a look at the ship's registry before our client returns to determine the number of ships that have docked from Malaya in the past few days."

We had time to search back five days before our client returned from Mrs. Johnson's quarters; during those five days no ship from Malaya had docked at England's ports, though a freighter, the *Alor Star,* was listed as due within twenty-four hours. At Miss Morland's entrance, Pons thrust the papers aside.

"Thank you, indeed, Mrs. Johnson," said Pons as our landlady turned at the threshold. "And now, Miss Morland, two or three questions occur to me. Pray be seated."

Our client, now somewhat more composed and less uncertain in her manner, took her former seat and waited expectantly.

"Miss Morland, when your uncle came around, did he say or do anything significant?" asked Pons.

"He didn't say a word," she answered. "He was very pale. He looked for the box and seemed relieved to find it closed. He picked it up at once. I asked him, 'Are you all right, Uncle?' He said, 'Just a trifle dizzy. You run along.' I left him, but, of course, I did

watch to be sure he would be all right. He hurried straight to his bedroom with this box. He hid it there, for when he came out again in a few moments, he no longer carried it. He then locked himself in his study, and within two hours his solicitor came. He could only have sent for him, because Mr. Harris would certainly not otherwise have come to call at that hour."

"You evidently found the intarsia box, Miss Morland."

"My uncle has in his bedroom only a cabinet, a bureau, and an old sea chest which he fancied, and which had accompanied him on his journeys. He served a short term in the Royal Navy as a young man, before entering the foreign service. He acquired the chest at that time. I knew that the box had to be in one of those three places, and I found it carefully covered up in the chest while my uncle was closeted with Mr. Harris. Last night, about eleven o'clock, after he went to sleep, I slipped in and took the box so that I might be ready to come to you without the risk of waking Uncle Burton by taking the box this morning."

"Did your uncle mention the box to anyone?"

"I don't know, Mr. Pons. But I should think that, if he had spoken of it to Mr. Harris, he would have shown it to him. Yet Uncle Burton never left the study while Mr. Harris was in the house; so he could not have done so."

"I see. I think, then, Miss Morland, our only recourse is to ask your uncle the questions you cannot answer."

Our client's hand flew to her lips; an expression of dismay appeared in her eyes. "Oh, Mr. Pons," she cried, "I'm afraid of what Uncle Burton might say."

"Miss Morland, I believe your uncle's life to be in great jeopardy. This belief he evidently shares. He can do no more than refuse to see us, and he can certainly not take umbrage at your attempt to be of service to him."

Her hand fell back to her lap. "Well, that's true," she decided.

Pons looked at the clock. "It is now nine. We can take the Underground at Baker Street and be at Watford Junction within the hour. Let us leave the box, if you please."

Our client sat for but a moment, undecided. Then, pressing her lips determinedly together, she got to her feet. "Very well, Mr. Pons. My uncle can do no worse than give me the back of his tongue!"

As we drew near to the home of Colonel Morland in the cab we

had taken at Watford Junction, Pons' face grew more grim. "I fear we are too late, Miss Morland," he said presently.

"Oh, Mr. Pons! Why do you say so?" cried our client.

"No less than four police vehicles have passed us—two returning, two going our way," he answered. "I should be very much surprised not to find the police at Morland Park."

Miss Morland pressed a handkerchief to her lips.

Nor was Pons in error. Two police cars stood before the tall hedge that separated the parklike grounds which our client indicated as her uncle's home, and a constable stood on guard at the gate in the hedge.

"Young Mecker," murmured Pons at sight of him.

As the cab pulled up, Mecker stepped forward to wave it away. Then, his arm upraised, he recognized Pons getting out. His arm dropped.

"Mr. Pons!" he cried. "How could you have learned?" Then he caught sight of our client. "Could this be Miss Flora Morland?"

"It could be," said our client. "Please! Tell me what has happened?"

"Inspector Jamison has been looking for you, Miss Morland. Please come with me."

"Never mind, Mecker," interposed Pons. "We'll take her in."

"Very well, sir. Thank you, sir." He shook his head, frowning. "Dreadful business, sir, dreadful."

Our client stood for a moment, one hand on Pons' arm, trembling.

"I am afraid, Miss Morland," said Pons with unaccustomed gentleness, "that what your uncle feared has come to pass."

We went up a closely hedged walk arbored over with trees to a classically Georgian country house of two and a half storeys. The front door was open to the warm summer morning; just inside it stood the portly figure of Inspector Seymour Jamison of Scotland Yard, talking with another constable. He turned abruptly at our entrance, frowning.

"Mr. Solar Pons, the private enquiry agent," he said heavily. "Do you smell these matters, Pons?" Then his eyes fell upon our client. "Aha! Miss Flora Morland. We've been looking for you, Miss Morland."

"Please! What has happened?" she beseeched him.

"You don't know?"

"I do not."

"Colonel Morland was found murdered in his bed this morning," said Jamison coldly. "The house was locked, no windows had been forced, and you were

missing. I must ask you, Miss Morland, to come into the study with me."

"I should like to look into the bedroom, Jamison," said Pons.

"By all means. The photographer is there now, but he should be finished soon. Just down the hall, the third door on the left. Around the stairs."

Our client shot Pons a beseeching glance; he smiled reassuringly. Then she turned and went submissively with Inspector Jamison into the study, which was on the right.

Pons pushed past the police photographer into the late Colonel Moreland's bedroom. Before us lay a frightful scene. Colonel Morland, a tall, broad-chested man, lay out-spread on his back on his bed, a wavy Malay *kris* driven almost to the hilt into his heart. Most shocking of all—his right hand had been severed at the wrist and lay where it had fallen in a pool of blood on the carpet beside the bed. Gouts of blood had spattered the bed; a froth of blood had welled from the dead man's lips to colour his thick moustache; and the wide staring eyes seemed still to wear an expression of the most utter horror.

The room was a shambles. Whoever had slain our client's uncle had torn it apart in search of something. The Colonel's sea chest lay open, its contents strewn about. The drawers of the bureau, save for the very smallest at the top, had been pulled open and emptied, and the contents of the tall wardrobe-cabinet, even to the uppermost shelves, were banked about the hassock that stood before it. The sight was almost enough to unnerve a stronger man than I, and I marveled at Pons' cool, keen detachment as he looked searchingly upon the scene.

The photographer, having finished, departed.

"How long would you say he has been dead, Parker?" asked Pons.

I stepped around gingerly and made a cursory examination. "At least eight hours," I said, presently. "I should put it at between midnight and two o'clock—not before, and not very long after."

"Before our client left the house," murmured Pons.

He stood for a moment where he was. Then he stepped gingerly over to the bed and looked down at Colonel Morland's body.

"The *kris* does not appear to have been disturbed," he said, "which suggests that the murderer carried a second weapon solely for the purpose of severing his victim's hand."

"A ritual weapon!" I cried.

"And carried away with him!"

Pons smiled lightly. "Cut with a single sweeping stroke, very cleanly," he observed.

He stepped away from the bed and began to move carefully among the objects strewn about, disturbing nothing. He went straight to the bureau, the top of which had evidently not been disturbed, for what I assumed to be the dead man's watch and wallet lay there. The wallet was the first object of Pons' attention; he picked it up and examined its contents.

"Twenty-seven pound notes," he murmured.

"So the object of this search could hardly have been money," I said.

Pons shook his head impatiently. "No, no, Parker—the murderer was looking for the intarsia box. The top of the bureau was not disturbed because, had it been there, the box would have been instantly apparent; nor have the top drawers been opened because they are not deep enough to hold the box."

He moved cautiously to the side of the bed, avoiding the pool of blood which had gushed from Colonel Morland's cleanly severed wrist. "The murderer must have stood just here," he said, and dropped to his knees to scrutinize the carpet intently. He was somewhat hampered by the presence of bloodstains, but I could see by the glint in his eyes that he had seen something of significance, however invisible it was to me, for he gave a small sound of satisfaction, as he picked something from the carpet just back from the edge of the great bed and put it into two of the little envelopes he always carried.

Just as he rose from his position, Inspector Jamison came into the room, wearing a patent glow of confidence.

"Nasty little job here, Pons," he said almost cheerfully. "You'll be sorry to learn I've sent Miss Morland off to the Yard to be put through it."

"Indeed," said Pons. "What admirable—and needlessly precipitate dispatch! You have reason to think her involved?"

"My dear fellow," said Jamison patronizingly. "Consider. Every window and door of this house was locked. Only four people had keys—Colonel Morland, whose key is on his ring; his valet, who was his batboy in Malacca and who discovered his body; the housekeeper, and Miss Morland. All of their keys are in their possession. Nothing has been forced. Miss Morland, I am told by Mr. Harris, the Colonel's counsel,

stands to inherit sixty percent of a considerable estate, considerable even after the Crown duties."

"It does not seem to you significant that on so warm a night this house should have been locked up so tightly?" asked Pons.

"You're not having me on that, Pons," retorted Jamison, grinning. "We know all about that intarsia box. Morland was in fear for his life."

"You are suggesting then that Miss Morland slipped into the room, stabbed her uncle, cut off his right hand, searched the room until she turned up the box, and then made her way to Number 7B to enlist my services?"

"Hardly that. She is hardly strong enough to have driven that *kris* into him with such force."

"Hardly," agreed Pons dryly.

"But there is nothing to prevent her having hired an accomplice."

"And what motive could she possibly have had for cutting off her uncle's hand?" pressed Pons.

"What better way could be devised to confuse the investigation into the motive for so gruesome a crime?"

"And Miss Morland seems to you, after your conversation with her, the kind of young lady who could lend herself to such a crime?"

"Come, come, Pons. You have a softness for a pretty face," said Jamison.

"I submit that this would have been a most fantastic rigmarole to go through simply to inherit the wealth of a man who, by all the evidence, granted her every whim. No Jamison, it won't wash."

"That intarsia box—she tells me it is in your possession. We shall have to have it."

"Send 'round to 7B for it. But give me at least today with it, will you?"

"I'll send for it tomorrow."

"Tell me—you've questioned the servants, I suppose? Did anyone hear anything in the night?"

"Not a sound. And I may say that the dog, which habitually sleeps at the front door of the house, outside, never once was heard to bark. I need hardly tell you the significance of that."

"It suggests that the murderer entered . . ."

"Or was let in."

"By the back door."

Jamison's face reddened. He raised his voice. "It means that since the dog did nothing in the nighttime the murderer was known to him."

Pons clucked sympathetically. "You ought to stay away from Sir Arthur's stories, my dear chap. They have a tendency to vitiate your style."

"I suppose you will be telling us to look for a giant of a man who can charm dogs," said Jamison with heavy sarcasm.

"Quite the contrary. Look for a short, lithe man who, in this case at least, probably went barefooted." He turned and pointed to the scarcely visible hassock. "Only a man shorter than average would have had to use that hassock to look at the top shelves of the cabinet. The indentations in the carpet indicate that the hassock's usual position is over against the wall beside the cabinet."

Jamison's glance flashed to the hassock, and returned, frowning, to Pons.

"If you don't mind, Jamison, I'll just have a look around out in back. Then perhaps you could send us back to Watford Junction in one of the police cars."

"Certainly, Pons. Come along."

Jamison led the way out and around the stairs to a small areaway from which doors opened to the kitchen on the right, and a small store room on the left, and into the back yard. A maid and an elderly woman, manifestly the housekeeper, sat red-eyed at a table in the kitchen. Jamison hesitated, evidently of the opinion that Pons wished to speak with them, but Pons' interest was in the back door, where he crouched to look at the lock. He really inspected it.

"We've been all through that, Pons," said Jamison with an edge of impatience in his voice.

Pons ignored him. He opened the door, crouched to examine the sill, then dropped to his knees and, on all fours, crawled out to the recently reset flagstone walk beyond it. From one place he took up a pinch of soil and dropped it into one of his envelopes. At another he pointed wordlessly, beckoning to Inspector Jamison, who came and saw the unmistakable print of human toes.

Then Pons sprang up and went back into the house, Jamison and myself at his heels. He found a telephone directory, consulted it briefly, and announced that he was ready to leave, if Jamison would be kind enough to lend us a police car and driver.

Once again on the Underground, I asked Pons, "We're not going back to 7B?"

"No, Parker. I am delighted to observe how well you read me. I daresay we ought to lose no time discovering the secret of the intarsia box. Since Colonel Morland is dead, we shall have to ask Nicholas Morland whether he can explain it. You'll recall that he spent the last five years of his uncle's residency with him. He has an office in the Temple. I took the

trouble to look him up in the directory before we left Morland Park."

"I followed the matter of the murderer's height readily enough," I said, "But how did you arrive at his being barefooted?"

"There were in the carpet beside the bed, just where a man might have stood to deliver the death blow, three tiny files of soil particles, in such a position as to suggest the imprint of toes. The soil was quite probably picked up among the flagstones."

"And, you know, Pons—Jamison has a point about the dog."

Pons smiled enigmatically. "The dog did nothing. Very well. Either he knew the murderer—or he didn't hear him, which is quite as likely. A barefooted man could travel with singular noiselessness. And Morland Park is a paradise for prowlers!" He looked at me, his eyes dancing. "Consider the severed hand. Since you are so busy making deductions, perhaps you have accounted for it."

"Now you press me," I admitted, "that seems to me the most elementary detail of all. I suggest that an indignity the late Colonel Morland committed in the past has now been visited upon him."

"Capital! Capital!" cried Pons. "You have only to keep this up, my dear fellow, and I can begin to think of retiring."

"You are making sport of me!" I protested.

"On the contrary. I could not agree with you more. There are one or two little points about the matter that trouble me, but I have no doubt these will be resolved in due time."

For the rest of the journey Pons rode in silent contemplation, his eyes closed, the thumb and forefinger of his right hand ceaselessly caressing the lobe of his ear. He did not open his eyes again until we came into Temple Station.

Nicholas Morland proved to be a somewhat frosty man in his early forties. He was dressed conservatively, but in clothes befitting his station. Save for the difference in years, he was not unlike his late uncle in appearance, with the same kind of moustache, the same outward thrust of the lips, the same bushy brows. His frosty mien was

superficial, for it collapsed as he listened to Pons' concise summary of events, and little beads of perspiration appeared at his temples.

"We must rely upon you, Mr. Morland," concluded Pons, "to explain the significance of the intarsia box and its contents."

Morland came shakily to his feet and walked back and forth across his office, biting his lip. "It is something I had hoped never to have to speak about," he said at last. "Is it really necessary, Mr. Pons?"

"I assure you it is. Scotland Yard will expect to hear about it before the day is out. I am here in advance of their coming because I am acting in the interests of your cousin."

"Of course. I quite understand."

He took another turn or two about his office, and then sat down again, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Well, Mr. Pons, it is a matter that does not reflect at all well upon my late uncle," he began. "As Flora may perhaps have told you, Uncle Burton married an Eurasian woman, a very fine, very beautiful woman some ten years his junior—perhaps as much as fifteen, I cannot be sure, though I suspect my wife would know. I am sure you are aware that matters of moral conduct among the ethnically mixed peoples of the Federated States of Malaya are considered lax by British standards, and perhaps it was true that my aunt engaged in improper conduct with Bendarloh Ali, an uncle of my wife's, who belonged to one of the better native families in Malacca. My uncle thought he would lose face, and he set about to prevent it. My aunt died; there is some reason to believe that it was by poison at my uncle's hands. Her lover was arrested. Some valuable items belonging to my uncle were found in his home. He was accused of having stolen them, on no stronger evidence than their presence in his home, and he suffered the indignity of having his right hand cut off at the wrist. That is the sum total of the matter, sir."

"How long ago did this happen, Mr. Morland?"

"Only a month or two before he was sent home. The Sultan of Malacca was outraged—though he had approved the punishment, he was later led to repudiate it—and demanded the recall of the resident. The Governor really had no alternative but to relieve my uncle of his post."

"Over fifteen years, then. Does it seem likely that he would wait so long to take vengeance?"

"Not he, Mr. Pons. My uncle's victim died three months ago. I think it not inconsistent of the Malay character that his son might

believe it incumbent upon him to avenge the honor of his house and the indignity done his father."

"I submit it would be an unnatural son who would separate his father's right hand from his remains," said Pons.

Morland shook his head thoughtfully. "Mr. Pons, I would tend to agree. There is this point to consider. The hand sent my uncle may *not* have been Bendarloh Ali's. Even if it were, I suppose the family represents that ethnic mixture so common in Malacca that no standard of conduct consistent with ancient Malay customs could be ascribed to it."

Pons sat for a few moments in contemplative silence. Then he said, "You are very probably aware that you and your cousin will share your uncle's estate."

"Oh, yes. There is no one else. We are a small family, and unless Flora marries, we will very likely die out entirely. Oh, there are distant cousins, but we have not been in touch for many years." He shrugged. "But it's a matter of indifference to me. My practise is quite sufficient for our needs, though I suppose my wife can find a use for what Uncle Burton may leave us, what with the constant innovations at her shop."

The telephone rang suddenly at Morland's elbow. He lifted it to his ear, said, "Morland here," and listened. When he put it down after but a brief period, he said, "Gentlemen, the police are on the way."

Pons got to his feet with alacrity. "One more question, Mr. Morland. Your relations with your uncle—were they friendly, tolerant, distant?"

"The three of us had dinner at Morland Park once a month, Mr. Pons," said Morland a little stiffly.

"Three?"

"My wife's cousin lives with us. Uncle Burton naturally would not exclude him."

"Thank you, sir."

We took our leave.

Outside, Pons strode purposefully along, some destination in mind, his eyes fixed upon an inner landscape. Within a few minutes we were once more on the Underground, and rode in silence unbroken by any word from Pons, until we reached Trafalgar Station and emerged to walk in the Strand.

"Pons," I cried finally, exasperated at his silence. "It's noon. What are we doing here?"

"Ah, patience, Parker, patience. The Strand is one of the most fascinating areas in the world. I mean to idle a bit and shop."

Within half an hour, Pons had exchanged his deerstalker for a conservative summer hat, leaving his deerstalker to be dispatched to our

quarters by post; he had bought a light summer coat, which he carried loosely on his arm; and he had added a walking stick to his ensemble, all to my open-mouthed astonishment. He presented quite a different picture from that to which I had become accustomed in the years I had shared his quarters, and he offered no explanation of his purchases.

We continued in the Strand until we came to a small shop modestly proclaiming that antiques and imports were to be had.

"Ah, here we are," said Pons. "I beg you, Parker, keep your face frozen. You have an unhappy tendency to show your reactions on it."

So saying, he went into the shop.

A bell, tinkling in a back room, brought out a dapper, brown-skinned man of indeterminate age. He came up to us and bowed. He looked little older than a boy, but he was not a boy. He smiled, flashing his white teeth, and said, "If it please you, gentlemen, I am here to serve you."

"Are you the proprietor?" asked Pons abruptly.

"No, sir. I am Ahmad. I work for Mrs. Morland."

"I am looking," said Pons, "for an intarsia box."

"Ah. Of any precise size?"

"Oh, so—and so," said Pons, describing the size of the intarsia box Miss Morland had brought to our quarters.

"Just so. One moment, if you please."

He vanished into the room to the rear, but came out in a very few moments carrying an intarsia box, which he offered to Pons.

"Seventeenth century Italian, sir. Genuine. I trust this is the box you would like."

"It is certainly exquisite work," said Pons. "But, no, it is not quite what I would like. The size is right. But I would like something with Oriental ornamentation."

"Sir, there are no antique intarsia boxes of Oriental manufacture," said Ahmad. "I am sorry."

"I'm not looking for an antique," said Pons. "I am, of course, aware that intarsia boxes were not made in the Orient before the eighteenth century."

Ahmad's pleasant face brightened. "Ah, in that case, sir, I may have something for you."

He vanished once more into the quarters to the rear of the shop.

When he came out this time he carried another intarsia box. With a triumphant smile, he gave it to Pons. Then he stood back to wait upon Pons' verdict.

Pons turned it over, examining it critically. He opened it, smelled it, caressed it with his fingers, and smiled. "Excellent!" he cried. "This

will do very well, young man. What is its price?"

"Ten pounds, sir."

Pons paid for it without hesitation. "Pray wrap it with care. I should not like any of that beautifully wrought carving to be damaged, even scratched."

Ahmad beamed. "Sir, you like the intarsia?"

"Young man, I have some

knowledge of these things," said Pons almost pontifically. "This is among the finest work of its kind I have seen."

Ahmad backed away from Pons, bowing, his face glowing. He retired once again into the back room, from which presently came the sounds of rustling paper. In just under five minutes Ahmad reappeared and placed the carefully wrapped intarsia box in Pons' hands. He was still glowing with pleasure. Moreover, he had the air of bursting with something he wanted to say, which only decorum prevented his giving voice.

Pons strolled leisurely from the shop and away down the street. But, once out of sight of the shop, he moved with alacrity to hail a cab and gave the driver our Praed Street address.

"Did you not have the feeling that Ahmad wished to tell us something?" I asked when we were on our way.

"Ah, he told us everything," said Pons, his eyes glinting with good humor. "Ahmad is an artist in intarsia. I trust you observed the costly antiques offered in Mrs. Morland's shop?"

"I did indeed."

"It suggested nothing to you?"

"That her business is thriving, as Miss Morland told us." I reached over and tapped the package Pons held. "Did it not seem to you that this box is very much like Miss Morland's?"

Pons smiled. "Once the first box is turned out, the pattern is made. The rest come with comparative ease. They are probably identical, not only with each other, but with a score or more of others."

Back in our quarters, Pons carefully unwrapped the intarsia box he had bought and placed it beside our client's. Except for the fact that there was some difference in age

between them, they were virtually identical. Pons examined the boxes with singular attention to detail, finding each smallest variation between them.

"Are they identical or not?" I asked finally.

"Not precisely. The box Miss Morland brought us is at least seventy-five years old; it may be a hundred. It is made of the same beautiful *kamuning* wood out of which the Malays fashion the hilts of their weapons. I trust you observed that the handle of the *kris* which killed Colonel Morland was of this same wood. It has been polished many times and waxed; there is actually some visible wearing away of the wood. The other is a copy of a box like this, made by a skilled artist. I suppose there is a demand for objects of this kind and I have no doubt they are to be had in all the shops which have imported pieces from the Orient for sale. Chinese boxes like this are most frequently in metal or ceramic; wood is more commonly in use from Japan down the coast throughout the Polynesians and Melanesians in the south Pacific." He dismissed the intarsia boxes with a gesture. "But now, let us see what we have from the late Colonel Morland's bedroom."

He crossed to the corner where he kept his chemistry apparatus and settled himself to examine the contents of the envelopes he had used at Morland Park. There were but three of them, and it was unlikely that they would occupy him for long. Since I had a professional call to make at two o'clock, I excused myself.

When I returned within the hour, I found Pons waiting expectantly.

"Ah, Parker," he cried, "I trust you are free for the remainder of the afternoon. I am expecting Jamison and together we may be able to put an end to Scotland Yard's harassing of our client."

"Did you learn anything at the slides?" I asked.

"Only confirmation of what I suspected. The particles of soil I found on the carpet beside the bed were identical with the soil around the flagstone, even to grains of limestone, of which the flagstones are made. There seems to be no doubt but that the soil was carried into the house by the bare toes of the murderer. Other than that, there was also just under the edge of the bed a tiny shaving of camphor wood, which is also commonly used by the Malays who work the jungle produce of that country."

"We are still tied to Colonel Morland's past," I said.

"We have never strayed from it,"

said Pons shortly. "But thus far in the course of the inquiry, unless Scotland Yard has turned up fingerprints on the handle of the *kris,* we have only presumptive, not convicting evidence. It is all very well to know the identity of the murderer; the trick is to convict him. Ah, I hear a motor slowing down. That will be Jamison."

Within a moment a car door slammed below, and we heard Jamison's heavy tread on the stairs.

The Inspector came into our quarters gingerly carrying a small package, which he surrendered to Pons with some relief. "Here it is, Pons," he said. "I had a little trouble getting the loan of it."

"Capital!" cried Pons. He took the package and carried it to the intarsia box he had bought in the shop on the Strand. "I don't suppose you're armed, Jamison?"

"The tradition of the Yard," began Jamison ponderously.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Pons. "Parker, get my revolver."

I went into the bedroom and found Pons' weapon where he had last carelessly laid it down on the bureau.

"Give it to Jamison, will you?"

"I don't know what you're up to, Pons," said Jamison, with some obvious misgiving on his ruddy face. "P'raps that young woman's turned your head."

The contents of the Inspector's package had vanished into the intarsia box, which Pons now took up, having resumed the garb he had bought in the Strand shops.

"Let us be off. I want to try an experiment, Jamison. Frankly, it is no more than that. It may succeed. It may not. We shall see."

Our destination was the antique and imports shop in the Strand, and all the way there Pons said nothing, only listened with a sardonic smile on his hawk-like features to Jamison's weighty discourse on the damning circumstances which made our client seem guilty of arranging her uncle's death.

As the police car approached the shop, Pons spoke for the first time to Constable Mecker, who was at the wheel. "Either stop short of the shop or drive past it, Mecker."

Mecker obediently stopped beyond the shop.

"Now, Jamison," said Pons brusquely, as we got out of the car, "hand on gun, and pray be ready. Try to look a little less like a policeman, that's a good fellow."

Pons led the way into the shop, carrying the carefully wrapped intarsia box he had bought only a few hours previously. An extraordinarily handsome Eurasian woman came forward to wait upon him. She was of indeterminate age. She

could have been anywhere between twenty and forty, but certainly did not seem over thirty.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"The young man who waited on me this noon," said Pons, unwrapping the intarsia box as he spoke. "Is he here?"

She nodded, raised her voice to call, "Ahmad!" and stepped back.

Ahmad came out, a look of polite inquiry on his face. He recognized Pons as his noon-hour customer. His eyes fell to the box.

"Sir! You are disappointed?"

"In the beauty of the box, no," said Pons. "But the interior!"

Ahmad stepped lightly forward and took the box, discarding the wrappings. "We shall see," he said, bowing almost obsequiously.

Then he opened the intarsia box.

Instantly, a dramatic and frightening metamorphosis took place. Ahmad's smiling face altered grotesquely. Its mask of politeness washed away to reveal dark murderous features, suffused with sudden rage and fear. He dropped the intarsia box—and from it rolled the severed hand of Colonel Burton Morland! Simultaneously, he leaped backward with a feline movement, tore down from the wall behind him a scimitar-like *chenangka,* and turned threateningly upon Pons.

For scarcely a moment the scene held. Then Mrs. Morland began to waver, and I sprang forward to catch her as she fainted. At the same moment, Inspector Jamison drew his gun upon Ahmad.

"My compliments, Inspector," said Pons. "You've just taken the murderer of Colonel Morland. I think," he added blandly, "if I were you I should take Mrs. Nicholas Morland along and question her about the profit motive in the death of her husband's uncle. I believe it almost certain that hers was the brain in which this devilish crime was conceived. —Is the lady coming around, Parker?"

"In a few moments," I said.

"Call Mecker," said Jamison, finding his voice.

Pons stepped into the street and shouted for the constable.

"It was not alone the fact that no ship had docked recently from Malaya that made an avenger from the Orient unlikely," said Pons as we rode back to Praed Street on the Underground, "but the same aspect of the matter that so impressed Jamison. The murderer clearly had prior knowledge of Morland Park, something no newly arrived foreigner could have had, and he must have been someone who had ample opportunity to take an impression of the back door key,

since he would prefer to enter by that door not guarded by the dog. Nothing in that house was disturbed, save Colonel Morland's room. Not a sound aroused anyone throughout the entry into the house and the commission of the crime.

"Yet it was evident that the murderer also had knowledge of the indignity done to Bendarloh Ali. Miss Morland had no such knowledge. Her cousin Nicholas had. Presumably, since his wife was of Bendarloh Ali's family, and had been in Malacca at the time Ali was so brutally punished, she knew as much as her husband. It is not too much to conclude that her cousin, who was therefore also of Bendarloh Ali's family, knew the circumstances also. Ahmad, of course, is that cousin. Ahmad had been as frequent a visitor at Morland Park as his employer. He knew the grounds and the house. The shaving of camphor wood, as much a product of Malaya as *kamuning* wood, places Ahmad indisputably in the late Colonel Morland's bedroom.

"Manifestly, the preparations were made with great care. Mrs. Morland directed her relatives to send the hand of Bendarloh Ali to Colonel Morland in the intarsia box which she forwarded to Malay for that purpose. That the box had served as a model for Ahmad's carefully-wrought imitations did not seem to her important, since Ahmad had been instructed to bring the box back from Morland Park. Ahmad undoubtedly killed Colonel Morland to avenge the family honor after Bendarloh Ali died, but I think it inescapable that his desire for vengeance was planted and carefully nourished by Mrs. Nicholas Morland, whose real motive was not vengeance, but the control of the unlimited funds which would be at her disposal when her husband came into his share of his uncle's estate.

"One of our most sanguinary cases, Parker. And though we have taken the murderer, I suspect that the real criminal will go free to enjoy the expansion of her shop according to her plan. It is one of life's little ironies."

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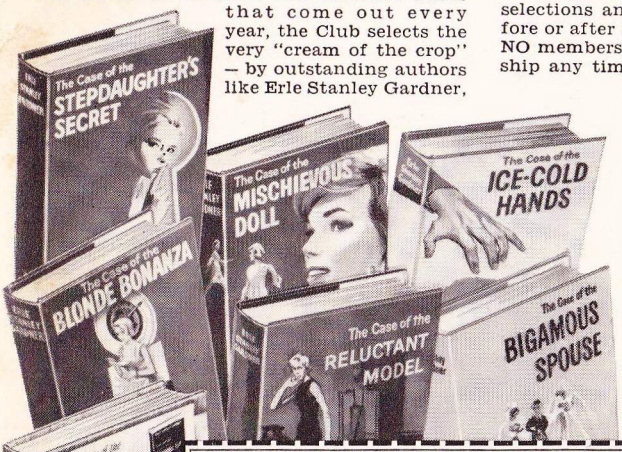

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