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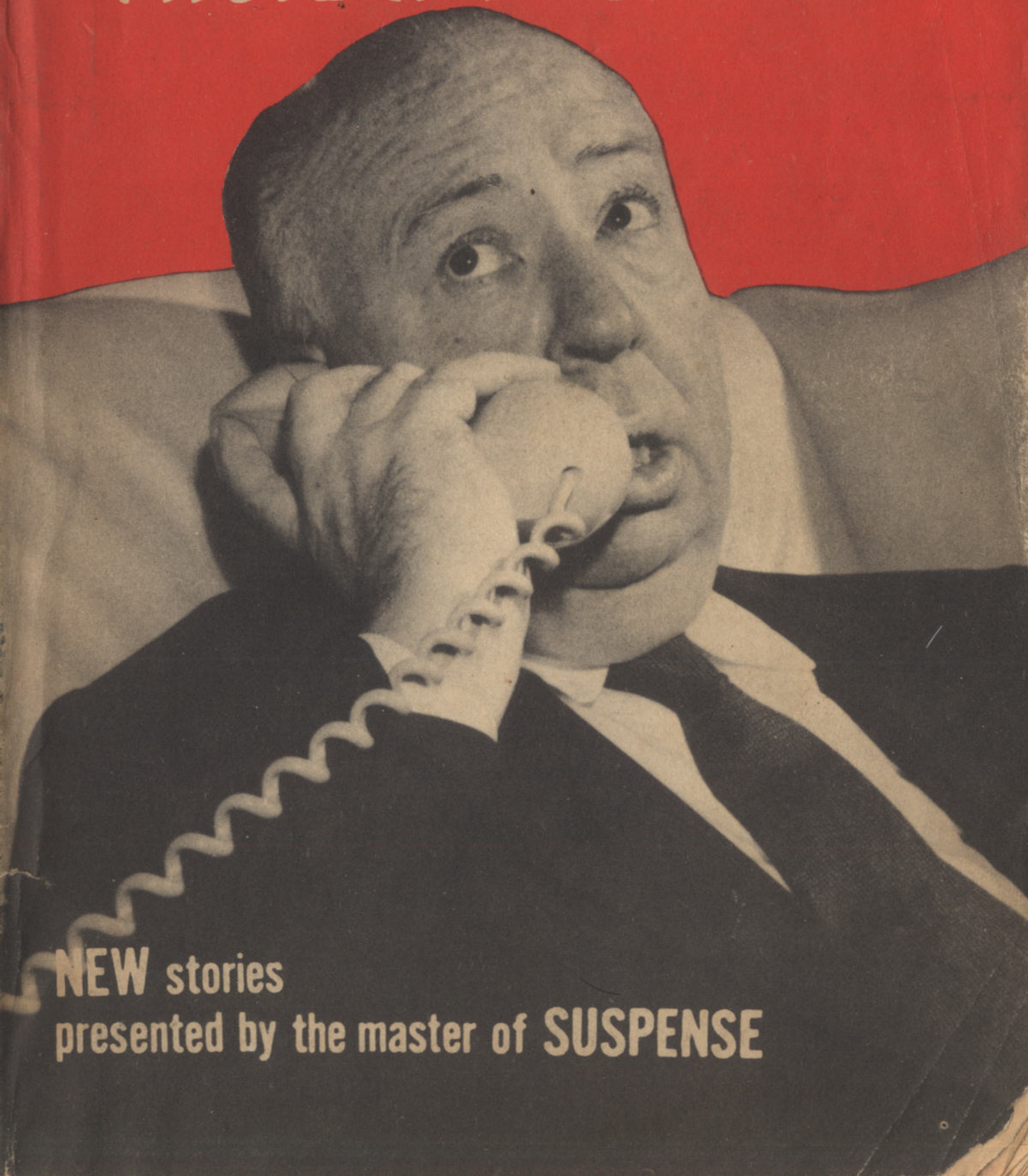
ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories
presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

May 1970

Dear Reader:

For the first time I have noticed that the common housefly is capable of three Immelmanns and a double reverse with a chandelier while buzzing out an admirable rendition of Shoo Fly Pie. I might never have observed this phenomenon if it were not for lengthy telephone conversations.

Seldom does a ceiling come under such close scrutiny as during a telephone conversation. Usually it is a dull conversation that prompts the study, but there it is. The call may serve a useful purpose, however, in the discovery of certain details that otherwise would go unheeded.

If one's eyesight is sufficiently acute, for instance, it might be observed that the plaster is cracking. This could result in a check for roof leaks. It could also mean that a heavy body fell to the floor upstairs. You can see that it could lead to all sorts of things.

Though the telephone does play a part in many of the following new stories, there is little time to observe aerobatics or survey ceiling cracks. The plots are calculated to hold your attention even if a raven should appear or the sky should fall.

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VOLUME 15, NO. 5 MAY 1970

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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SHORT STORIES

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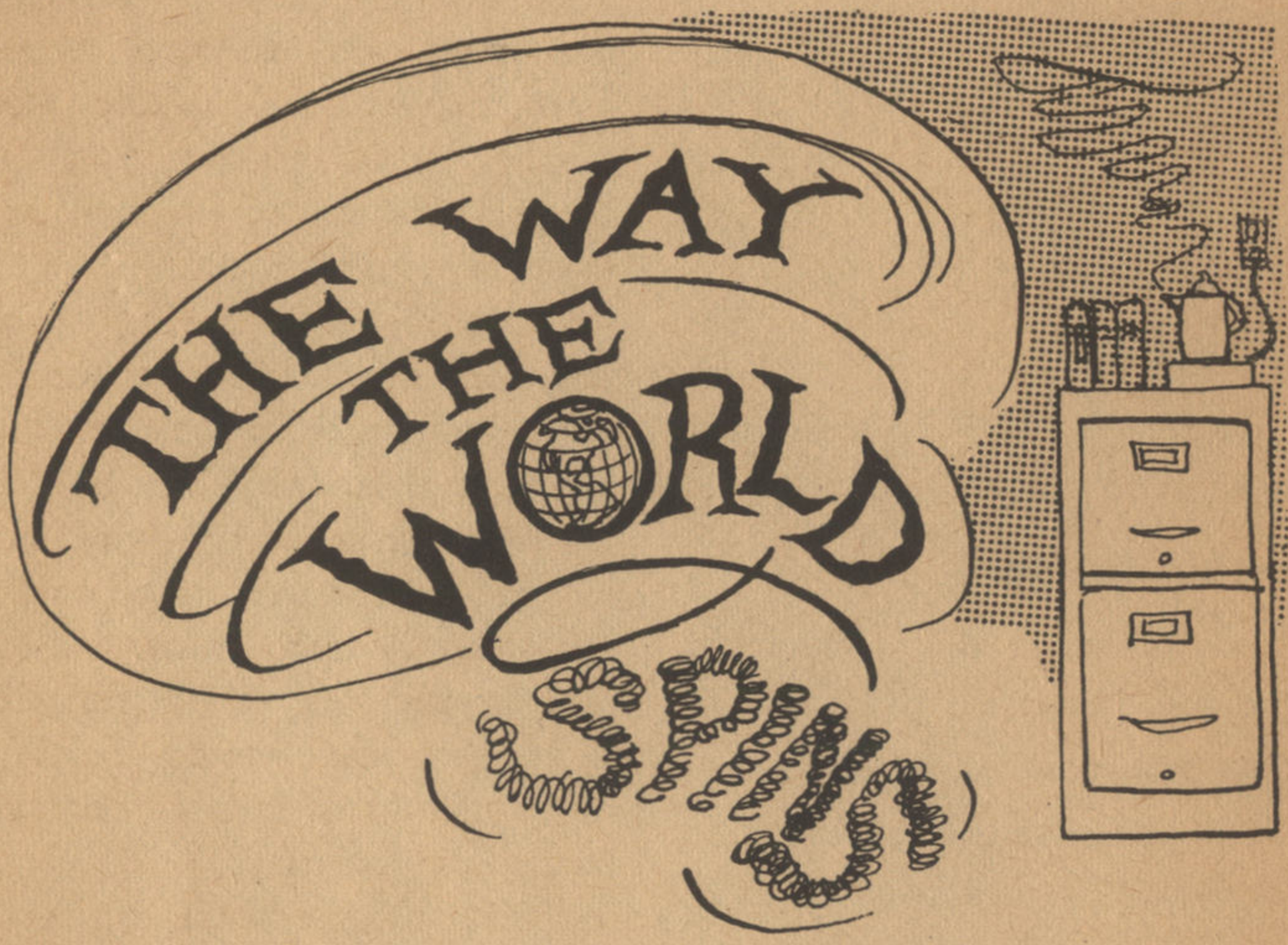
The way the world spins now, ever narrowing its concentric span, would a terminal press astound?



by Bill Pronzini

IT WAS VERY COLD this morning as I stood at the edge of a small, grassy slope in Golden Gate Park, my hands pressed deep into the pockets of my topcoat, and looked out over the flat, shallow water of Lloyd Lake. On the far bank, to the right of where the lake turned into the mouth of a tiny green valley, a narrow waterfall bubbled whitely over a rock stairway. Eucalyptus trees grew among the gray rocks there, and the smell of them was redolent on the quiet, chill air.

Ducks, like small, white toys, floated on the surface of the lake. Farther down the slope, and ringing the lake at intervals, were great bushes of chrysanthemum, explosions in white and tipped in pink.

At the base of the slope, below me, stood the tall marble and stone Portal of Residence of A. N. Towne, Vice President and General Manager of Southern Pacific Railroad, a relic of the conflagration of April 18, 1906. It was one of

several historic "Portals of the Past" that marked this section of the park.

Overhead, the cold, white sun had come through the early-morning fog. Reflections of light danced on the surface of the lake now, turning it from gray to a translucent blue. It was all very peaceful, almost pastoral, in its serenity. San Francisco is a nice city, sometimes.

I heard the sound of a siren and looked toward John F. Kennedy Drive and the gently rolling lawns beyond. A white city ambulance came into view and pulled off the Drive in front of the lake. Two men got out, took a stretcher from inside the ambulance and carried it up onto the path. A uniformed patrolman came forward to meet them, motioning. I watched them talking for a moment, and then the two men started up the spongy slope to where I stood.

I turned then, looking toward the small knot of men at the foot of a fanning, stilted cypress tree. They had covered the body of Christine Vance with a sheet, and it lay before them, white and cold on the damp ground. I was glad they had covered her. It did not seem right that she should be lying there uncovered, even in death, on such a cold morning.

The two men from the ambulance crested the slope. One man wiped a hand across his forehead. "Damn stretcher is heavy."

"Think of it going down," the other man said.

They began walking toward the knot of men. As they approached, one of the men detached himself from the group, came over and stood beside me, looking out over the lake. After a moment I turned, too. We stood in silence.

The man, whose name was Eb-

erhardt, was a detective lieutenant with the San Francisco Police. He took a pipe from his pocket, tamped tobacco into it and put it into his mouth, but he did not light it.

"Well?" he said without looking at me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You don't know her?"

"No."

"She had your card in her purse," Eberhardt said.

"Yes, that's what you said."

"Were you working on something for her?"

"I'm between clients."

"Maybe she talked to you, then."

"I don't know her, Eb," I said. "I told you that."

"Why would she have your card?"

"She may have been planning to see me at some time."

"But she never did?"

"No."

"You hand out a lot of cards?"

"Not many."

"How do you suppose she got one?"

"I couldn't say."

"All right."

We stood looking at the lake, not speaking. After a while I said, "I'd tell you anything if I knew it. You know that."

"Sure."

"Can I go now?"

"You going down to your office?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I'll drop by later."

"If you like."

Eberhardt turned and went back to the group of men. They were just lifting the body of Christine Vance onto the stretcher, and I could see that one slim, white hand had fallen from beneath the sheet. About twenty-three years old, and somebody had shot her dead.

I went down the slope, slowly, to keep my feet from slipping on the soft, mossy bank, then followed the path around the edge of the lake to the drive and went to my car. I sat there for a moment, and suddenly felt very cold. I put the heater on and started the car, waiting until the engine warmed up before I pulled away. Even with the heater on high, I could not seem to get warm.

My office smelled of dust and stale cigarette smoke. I opened the window, letting in the traffic noise from two floors below, and sat down at my desk. The dregs of a cup of coffee and the waxed wrapping from a sandwich littered my blotter. Living alone for a long time does that to you. I put the cup in my bottom desk drawer and threw the wrapping in the wastebasket.

Still a little cold, I looked out of the open window. Pneumonia or

suffocation—it was six of one and a half dozen of the other. I lit a cigarette, coughed, and put it out again. You could add lung cancer, too.

Sitting there, I thought about how it was to grow old. Nothing surprises you, or even shocks you anymore, not even death. You begin to look at it with a kind of detached objectivity, a disembodied eye. You don't feel it inside, the

way you did when you were a young man. It is a sad milestone when a man no longer feels awe in the presence of death.

After a time I went to the hot plate on top of the metal file cabinet. I lifted the lid on the coffeepot there and looked inside. It was about half full, and there didn't seem to be any of the greenish substance that collects around the edges sometimes. I plugged in the cord and went over and sat down again. The clock on the wall read a quarter of ten.

I picked up the phone and called my answering service. "Any messages?" I asked the girl.

"A Mr. Gerald Demeroy called," she said.

"Did Mr. Demeroy say what he wanted?"

"Only that he wished you to return his call. He said it was urgent."

"What's the number?"

She gave it to me and I wrote it down on my desk pad. The coffee was bubbling on the hot plate. I got up again and poured some into a fresh cup. I looked in my desk for some sugar, couldn't find any, so I sat down and looked at the number on my pad. All right, Mr. Demeroy.

I dialed the number. A young, feminine voice answered. "Hello?"

"Mr. Demeroy, please."

"May I ask who is calling?"

I gave my name.

There was a brief pause, and then the voice said, "Oh," and there was another pause. Then, "Just a moment."

I drank some of the black coffee, waiting. A pigeon flew by outside the window, squawking the way pigeons do. On the street below, a bus clanked past, polluting the air with its exhaust; voices rose, floating; the sounds of a city.

A man's voice came on the line and identified itself as Gerald Demeroy. "I was wondering," he said, "could you come out to see me?"

"Possibly," I answered. "What is it you want?"

"You find people, do you not?"

They get that kind of snappy talk from the television. "Well," I said, "that would depend."

"I'd rather not discuss it over the phone. Do you suppose you could come out?"

I did not feel like leaving the office but there was nothing for me to do here.

"Yes," I said, "I think I can. What's your address?"

He gave me a number, then asked, "Do you know where that is?"

"In Sea Cliff."

"Yes. What time may I expect you?"

"Right away," I said. "Good-bye, Mr. Demeroy."

"Good-bye."

I sat looking at the dead line. Sea Cliff was a synonym for money. Well, I could figure what it was. His wife had run off, or his daughter; if it was the wife, she would be trying to recapture a fading youth with some Adonis on a beach in Acapulco; if it was the daughter, she would be shacking up with some bearded artist in Carmel Valley. It's an old, sad story. You would think they'd get onto it, but they never do.

Still, I needed something to do. I did not want to think about the young girl named Christine Vance who had been lying in Golden Gate Park with a bullet in her head and my card in her purse.

I called my answering service and told them I would be out for a while. Then I put on my coat and went down the hall to the office of a man named Novinski, who was a very able CPA. For some unknown reason, he likes to work with his door open, looking into the hallway. I asked him if he would mind keeping an eye out for anyone who might come around for me, and he said he would be delighted to. It was sort of a game between us. I had been asking him the same question, and he had been giving me the same answer for a much longer time than either of us cared to remember.

Sea Cliff sits high on a bluff overlooking the entrance to San Francisco Bay. It is quiet and discreet and aloof, and it is said that you can measure a man's success in San Francisco by the size and location of the home he buys there.

If this is true, Gerald Demeroy was a very successful man, indeed I parked my car on the street and sat there for a moment, looking at the house. I felt uncomfortable. I seemed always to feel that way in Sea Cliff, the same feeling a man might have if he found himself at a formal party dressed in slacks and a sport shirt.

I sat there, smoking, then left the car and walked up the brick stairs and along the brick path to the door. Behind the house I could see the gray and white waters of the Pacific Ocean.

At the door, I pressed a small pearl button and chimes, muted and rolling, sounded inside. I stood waiting, holding my hat in my hands.

The door opened finally, and a tall, thin girl, perhaps twenty or twenty-one, looked out. She had blonde hair that was cut short into what we used to call an Italian bob, and her wide eyes were green and oddly flecked with yellow. She was

wearing gray slacks and a white blouse, and her manner was nervous, fidgety, like a caged squirrel.

I gave my name and said, "Mr. Demeroy is expecting me."

"Yes," she said. "Well, come in."

Inside, the hallway was very dark. The girl led me down it and through an archway into the livingroom. The floor was tiled in lieu of carpeting, and my heels clicked loudly. It made me self-conscious, and I leaned forward, walking on the balls of my feet.

The girl stopped before a large, bulky sofa. "I'll tell my father you're here," she said.

"Thank you."

The girl went out. I sat on the sofa with my hat on my knees and looked at the room. The Spanish effect seemed overdone. The furniture was old and heavy and ponderous. An imposing scrolled desk, an electric typewriter on top of it, stood on one side of the room. There was no sound, not even the ticking of a clock. My feeling of discomfort increased. I wanted a cigarette, but there were no ash trays that I could see.

I sat there about five minutes, and then a man in a dark, conservatively-cut business suit came through the archway from the hall. He walked across to me, carrying himself in the approved British manner—the brittle posture of breeding—and extended a well-manicured hand.

I got to my feet and took the hand. There was strength in his grip. "How do you do?" he said. "I'm Gerald Demeroy."

"How do you do?" I said, and felt foolish saying it.

He was about forty-five, a handsome man with a smooth, tanned, aesthetic face and an impressive head of bluish-silver hair. His eyes were gray, steady, and contained a tangible power; I couldn't read them at all. He was trim, athletic, with no sign of a thickening at the middle the way there is with some men when they approach middle age; tennis, I decided, and an hour or two a day in the pool.

"Please sit down," Demeroy said, and I sat down again. "Would you care for a drink?"

I refused. Drinking in the morning depresses me, but of course I did not tell him that.

"I believe I'll have one, if you don't mind."

I said nothing. It was his house.

He went to a small serving tray near the patio archway, poured some amber liquid into a glass, lifted it and put his head back and tossed it off like a longshoreman. He set the glass down carefully, pivoted and then stopped, facing the hall archway. The tall, thin girl who had let me in was standing

there. Demeroy impaled her with his gray eyes. "Haven't you something to do, Bianca?"

She brought a thin hand up and touched her chin. Then she turned quickly and hurried off down the hallway.

Demeroy came over to the sofa and sat opposite me. "My daughter," he said. "An inquisitive girl. She wants to be a writer someday."

I nodded. "You mentioned something on the phone about finding someone, Mr. Demeroy," I said. It sounded awkward, but I didn't know how else to start.

"Yes," he said. "My son."

"Your son?"

"Yes, my son Jeff. He's been missing for two days now. I'm frankly rather worried."

Well, thinking you can't have them all figured, I cleared my throat. "Have you contacted the police?"

"No," he said. "I'm sure you can understand my reasons for not doing so."

I understood, all right. The people of Sea Cliff judiciously avoid any contact with the police unless it becomes irrevocably necessary. The merest hint of a scandal lowers their rating in the Social Register; discretion, in Sea Cliff, is an absolute.

I said, "Do you have any idea where your son might be?"

"None at all. He left for school Monday morning—he's a law student at the university, you see—and he hasn't returned. I have contacted several of his friends, but none of them seems to know where he's gone."

"Maybe he went off on a lark," I said. "Hitchhiking down south. They do that sometimes."

"Jeff is a very conscientious young man," Demeroy said. "He is not given to . . . larks, as you call them. If he had been planning to make some sort of trip, he would most certainly have informed me beforehand. That's his picture there on the table behind you." Demeroy raised a hand in an affected, somewhat theatrical gesture.

I turned politely and looked at the picture. The boy was blond and well-groomed, with nice, even features. He looked the way you would expect a boy from Sea Cliff to look. I brought my eyes back to Demeroy and smiled and nodded, and wished I were back in my office.

Demeroy said, "He and my daughter are all that I have now. My wife died three years ago, and it's rather difficult to be both a father and mother to growing children."

I fussed with my hat. "Look, Mr. Demeroy," I said, "I'd like to help you find your son. But I don't

know the first thing I could do."

His gray eyes studied me.

"You've talked to the boy's friends," I said. "I'm afraid that would be about all I could do, too. I could go to the university, and speak with his teachers and nose around, but that seems rather pointless in view of what you've told me. By the time I learned anything, the boy would, in all likelihood, have returned home. I'm sure the reason for his being gone the past two days is an innocuous one."

Demeroy's face was stoic. "Am I to take that to mean you won't help me?"

"No, sir, not at all. I'm simply trying to be honest with you. I'll try to locate your son if that is your wish."

"I see," Demeroy said. "But in your considered opinion, I'm making a mountain out of a molehill at the present time."

"When a member of your family is 'missing', there's always cause for worry, Mr. Demeroy," I said. "However, two days is a very short period for a college student—even a conscientious one—to be away from home."

"You would suggest, then, that I wait before taking action?"

"I'm not trying to suggest anything, Mr. Demeroy. I'm only offering an opinion. If you sincerely feel there's some cause for alarm—that your son may be in some kind of trouble, or has met with an accident of some kind—then by all means you should do whatever you feel necessary to have him located."

Demeroy stood abruptly. I got to my feet, too, and we stood looking at each other. I still could not read his eyes. After a time he said, "Perhaps I have been overly concerned. A typical parental reaction."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"May I call on you again if Jeff does not return home, or if I have not heard from him within a more reasonable period of time?"

"Certainly."

Demeroy took a wallet from the pocket of his suit coat, extracted several bills and extended them to me. "You've been extremely helpful," he said, "and most kind."

"That isn't necessary, Mr. Demeroy."

He ignored my words, pressing the bills into my palm, then showed me to the door. I thanked him and we shook hands and said good-bye. In my car, I looked at the bills: fifty dollars. I put them in my wallet. Fifty dollars—I could have got five times that, maybe more. I could have . . . Then I stopped thinking like that, because it never gets you anywhere. What I'd told Demeroy had been the truth. When it comes to lying for

profit, you either can or you can't, and that's all there is to it.

After I left Sea Cliff, I began to feel a little better.

Eberhardt came around to my office at two-thirty.

I was sleeping, sitting up in my desk chair. The sound of the door opening startled me, and I was half out of my chair before I realized what it was. Eberhardt came inside and shut the door. He walked across to the only other chair and sat down tiredly.

"You're getting old," he said. "Sleeping in the afternoon like that."

"Sure."

"Have you got any coffee?"

I had put some on when I returned from Gerald Demeroy's. There had been no telephone messages, and Novinski informed me that no one had come calling. So I had put the coffee on, drunk a little of it, and smoked, and thought, and then I had fallen asleep.

I poured some coffee into a relatively clean cup and took it to Eberhardt. "I don't have any cream or sugar."

"You never do," he said. He tasted the coffee. "This is lousy."

"Uh huh."

He drank from the cup. "New development on this Christine Vance thing. I heard it around noon from the coroner's office."

I waited.

"She was pregnant," Eberhardt said. "Three months."

I took in a breath, let it out slowly. "They never learn, do they?"

"It seems not."

"Did you find out anything about my card being in her purse?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Eberhardt said. "It seems Christine had been getting some kind of crank letters in the mail. You know the kind. She was pretty upset about them, I gather, and was planning to see a detective."

"Me."

Eberhardt inclined his head. "You," he said. "I guess she never got to it, somehow. Anyway, it pretty much puts you out of it."

"Maybe," I said. "How did you learn all this?"

"We did some checking around," Eberhardt said. "Friends of the dead girl, you know. She lived with a kid named Lainey Madden. Both of them are students over at UC, in Berkeley. We got it from her."

"You think there's some connection between these crank letters and Christine's death?"

"Possibly," Eberhardt said, "but the way it looks now, Christine's boyfriend is it."

"She had a steady one, then?"

"Uh huh. Engaged to be married, in fact."

I lit a cigarette, nodding thoughtfully.

Eberhardt went on, "Naturally we wanted to talk to this boyfriend. We called his home a little while ago. It seems he's missing. His father says he's been missing for two days, now."

I sat up very straight on my chair. "Missing?" I said. "For two days?"

"That's right. Nobody knows where the kid went. He and Christine had a fight, according to the Madden girl. The boy took off right after that."

I moistened my lips slowly. "What's this boy's name, Eb?"

"Demeroy," Eberhardt answered. "Jeff Demeroy."

A few minutes later, after he had gone, I sat at my desk and looked through the window at the gray sky. The pale sun had vanished now, and a thick, roiling fog moved in from the west. The smell of it was already thick in the air.

Jeff Demeroy . . . I had told Eberhardt about talking to Gerald Demeroy earlier this morning, and he was very interested. Mr. Demeroy had not mentioned to him that he had called me about his son, but before we could discuss the point at length, a call had come through for Eberhardt—something urgent, I gathered, though he didn't offer to tell me what it was—and he had left hurriedly, saying he would see me later.

I kept thinking, sitting there alone in my office, about that card in Christine Vance's purse, and about the crank letters Eberhardt had said she received. He didn't seem to think there was any tie-in, but I had the feeling there was, somehow, in some way.

After a time, I leafed through the city telephone directory and found a listing for Lainey Madden on Broderick, out near the Presidio. I wasn't sure why exactly, but there seemed to be some reason why I should talk to her.

The house where Lainey Madden now lived alone was what I think is called a Queen Anne Victorian. It was old and tired and a bit frowzy, but standing with its turrets and gables still held proudly erect. It had, at one time, been somebody's fine home—until time and the scavengers came along—and then it had been subdivided into small apartments. On the row of mailboxes in the foyer I found *C. Vance—L. Madden* listed for an apartment on the second floor, rear, number 203.

I went inside and climbed old and musky-smelling stairs. There was a little brass plate on the door of 203 with a white card that said

the same as the mailbox. I knocked.

I heard the pad of bare feet and then the door opened and a girl looked out. "Can I help you?" she asked quietly.

"Are you Lainey Madden?"

"Yes?" she said, looking at me questioningly. She was a very pretty girl, with long, straight black hair and great sad eyes, colt brown, and a small, round little mouth. She wore no makeup, and the sad eyes were red-flecked. She was dressed in one of those shapeless, printed dresses the girls wear when they aren't expecting any company.

I told her who I was, and asked her if I might speak to her about Christine Vance.

"Are you trying to find out who killed her?" she asked.

"Not officially, no," I said. "But there was a card of mine found in her purse."

"Yes, the police asked me about it when they were here," she said. "I told them she had it because of the letters."

"Yes," I said. It seemed awkward to be talking to her from the hallway, and I shuffled my feet slightly. She seemed to sense it, too.

"Won't you come in?" she invited.

"Thank you."

I stepped inside and she closed the door. We were in a small but comfortable front room. "Sit down," Lainey said.

I found a place on one of the chairs by the window, moving aside a school book on Anthropology. Lainey sat on the couch, drawing her knees up under her.

"I'm really very sorry to bother you at a time like this," I said.

"It's all right. I've finished my crying now."

It was easy to see that she and Christine Vance had been very close, and that she was making an effort to bear up under the shock of her friend's death. I said gently, "About these letters, Lainey."

"Yes?"

"Can you tell me what they said?"

"A lot of terrible things. Oh, I don't mean obscenities; just crazy things. Threats, mostly."

"What sort of threats?"

"Telling Chris she had better get out of town right away or something terrible would happen to her. Things like that."

"What happened to the letters?"

"I think Chris gave them to Jeff."

"Jeff Demeroy?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what he did with them?"

She shook her head slowly. "No," she said. "But he must still have them, because they were go-

ing to give them to the detective —to you—if they kept coming in the mail."

"Do you know how Christine happened to get my card?"

"I think from Jeff," Lainey said. "A friend of his in school had a stack of them. He collects business cards."

"I see," I said. I felt very old and tired sitting there. "Can you tell me something about Christine?"

"She was a wonderful person," Lainey said without hesitation. "Just the finest person." Her great sad eyes blinked. "She was quiet, kind of shy, really, and sort of, well, unassuming."

"Unassuming?"

"She trusted everybody, do you know what I mean? She had faith in people. I guess she had too much faith," Lainey said, sensing my thoughts in that way a woman has.

I went on to something else. "The police seem to think Jeff Demeroy had something to do with her death."

"That's ridiculous. Jeff wouldn't hurt Chris."

"Do you know him well?"

"Pretty well," Lainey said. "I dated him for a while. That was how he met Chris. I introduced them."

"They were engaged, is that right?"

She nodded. "They were going to be married here in December."

"There was something about a fight," I said.

"Not a fight, really," Lainey said. "Just a kind of argument. It had to do with Jeff's family."

"His family?"

"His father, and his sister, Bianca. They were against the marriage. It was the same old thing, you know? She wasn't good enough for him, and like that."

"They argued about it?"

"Yes. Chris was afraid Jeff's father was going to get between them. God knows, he tried hard enough. Jeff listens to his father, you see, and he was considering postponing the wedding for a while."

I was silent for a time. Then I said, "Did you know Christine was pregnant?"

Lainey averted her eyes. She stared straight ahead for a moment, and then looked back to me. "Yes," she said.

"Did Jeff know?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I know Chris didn't tell him. I was the only one she told."

"Why did Jeff go away, then?"

"Because he wanted to think things over, he said."

"Christine told you that?"

"Yes. She came home crying the night they had the argument and

said Jeff was going away to think about what he was going to do. She was pretty miserable. She was sure he'd go along with his father, and she'd lose him."

"She could have told him about the baby."

"Sure," Lainey said, "and trap him into marriage. She didn't want that. What kind of marriage is that?"

You hear a lot about the kids these days, but not the kids like Lainey Madden. I said, "Can you tell me about last night?"

"Chris got a call about seven," Lainey said. "I was taking a shower, so I didn't hear the conversation or anything. Later on, about nine, Chris told me she was going out."

"Did she say where?"

"No," Lainey answered, "but I kind of thought it was to meet Jeff."

"Oh?"

"Well, she seemed sort of excited. I asked her what it was about, but she just smiled and said she'd tell me when she got back. Only . . ."

She seemed about to cry, but then her face set and her small, round mouth tightened. Suddenly, I wanted to get out of there; you can look at grief only so long. I said, "Do you have any idea where Jeff might have gone to think things over?"

"No, I . . ." Lainey broke off, frowning slightly. Then she said, "Well . . ."

"Yes?"

"They have this cabin down near Big Sur," she said. "The Demeroys, I mean. It could be that Jeff went there."

"Did you tell this to the police?"

"No, I don't think so. I was . . . upset when they came. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"I understand," I said. "Where is this cabin, do you know?"

"Trident Road, I think," Lainey said. "A name like that. I remember Jeff saying once that he went there sometimes when he wanted to be alone or to do some studying for exams."

I nodded thoughtfully, chewing something around in my mind. Neither of us spoke for a moment, and then Lainey said, "I think it must have been some crazy person."

"Pardon?"

"Whoever killed Chris. Nobody who knew her could do a thing like that. Maybe it was the crazy person who wrote those letters."

"Yes," I said slowly. "Maybe it was." I got to my feet. "Well, I guess that's about all. I want to thank you for your time, Lainey."

"It's all right," she said. "I hope I gave you some help."

"I think you did."

She walked me to the door. "The

funeral will be day after tomorrow," she said. "Will you come?"

It was an odd question. I said, "Yes, I'll come."

She nodded, a faint, sad smile on her small mouth. "I want a lot of people to come," she said. "Chris liked people."

A chill touched my neck. "Goodbye, Lainey. Take care."

"Sure," she said.

I went downstairs and outside. There was a telephone booth in a parking lot down the street. I walked there, put a dime in the slot and dialed the Hall of Justice. I asked for Eberhardt.

It took them a while to get him on the line. It was stuffy in the phone booth, and I could smell faintly lilac perfume. When Eberhardt came on, I told him, "I've just been talking to Lainey Madden, Eb."

"Yeah?"

"There was something she didn't tell you this morning," I said. "About where the Demeroy kid might be."

"Big Sur," Eberhardt said. "Family owns a cabin there."

I opened the door of the booth to let in some air. "How did you find out?"

"He told us."

"Jeff Demeroy?"

"That's right," Eberhardt said. "He walked in here a little over an hour ago; that's what that call in your office was about. He said he heard about what happened on the radio, and came right up."

"Are you holding him?"

"Sure we're holding him. What did you think?"

"Is it all right if I come down?"

"What for?"

"I'd like to talk to him, if I can."

I listened to his quiet breathing for a time. Then he said, "I guess you can. Come on down."

It was hot in Eberhardt's office.

He was coatless and appeared to be very tired. His eyes were criss-crossed in red.

I sat in a chair in front of his desk. "What did Jeff Demeroy tell you?" I asked.

Eberhardt shrugged. "That he didn't kill her."

"Is that all?"

"He said he went down to Big Sur to do some thinking," Eberhardt said. "About Christine Vance and him. Been down there since Monday, thinking. But all by himself. No alibi."

"Are you going on the assumption he killed her?"

"Maybe," Eberhardt said noncommittally.

"He didn't know about the girl being pregnant, you know."

"That's what he said. We kept it out of the papers and off the radio and hit him with it when he came

in. He was shocked to beat hell, but he could have been putting on."

"He wasn't putting on," I said. "Have you called his father yet?"

He nodded. "He's with the boy now."

"Did you ask him why he didn't mention talking to me this morning?"

"He said he didn't think it was important."

"Uh huh," I said.

Eberhardt was looking at me critically. "Have you got something?" he wanted to know. "You act like you have."

"I think so, Eb."

"Give," he said.

"I'd like to ask Jeff Demeroy a couple of questions first."

He continued to study me. Then he stood, said, "All right, let's go, then."

Jeff Demeroy was taller than I had imagined him from the photograph. His blond hair was damp with perspiration, and he didn't look so well-groomed now. He sat in a wooden chair, his hands clenched tightly on his knees; he appeared to be very nervous. It might have been because he was a murder suspect, or it might have been prolonged shock at the news of his fiancee's death.

Gerald Demeroy was seated beside his son, a protective arm around the boy's shoulders. On the way down, I had asked Eberhardt to let me talk to Jeff without his father being present, and he had consented. He asked Mr. Demeroy to leave us alone for a few moments; Demeroy didn't like it, but there wasn't much he could do except comply.

When he'd left with one of the officers there, Eberhardt introduced me to Jeff Demeroy. If my name meant anything to him then, his face didn't show it. We sat across the table from him.

"I'm just going to ask you a couple of questions," I said. "You don't mind answering them, do you?"

"No, no," he said. "Go ahead."

"The police found one of my cards in Christine's purse."

His eyes showed recognition. "You're that detective."

"Yes."

"It was on the radio about the card."

"You gave it to her, is that right?"

"Yes. I got it from one of my friends at school."

"How many cards did you get from this friend, Jeff?"

"Two," he said dully. "Why?"

"You kept the other one, didn't you?"

"Yes, I kept it."

"Where is it now?"

"In my room at home, I guess."

"And the threatening letters Christine got in the mail," I said, "what did you do with them?"

"They're there, too."

"Where, exactly?"

He wet his lips. "In one of my bureau drawers."

"One last thing, Jeff," I said. "Did you recognize the handwriting on those letters?"

"They weren't handwritten," he answered. "They were typed."

"All right, Jeff," I said. I paused. "And . . . I'm sorry."

He nodded, putting his head in his hands. He thought I was offering my sympathy for the death of Christine Vance.

He was only half right.

Back in Eberhardt's office, he asked, "What was all that about down there?"

"Don't you see it yet?"

"Maybe I do," he said. Eberhardt is a very smart man, but not one to rush into things. I have known him a long time, long enough to tell whether or not he is satisfied with a case. He wasn't satisfied with this one. He knew, just as I did, that Jeff Demeroy was innocent.

He began to fill his pipe. "Let's hear what you've got to say."

"All right. To begin with, there are two keys to this whole thing. The first is my business card—not the one in Christine's purse, Eb; the one in Jeff Demeroy's room. As soon as the boy told me there *was* a second card, then it all fell into place; there was only one way it could be."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," I said, "that it explains why Gerald Demeroy called me this morning. The coincidence of his telephoning *me*, especially on the morning after his son's fiancee was murdered, is too much to take."

"Your name's in the book, just like all the rest," Eberhardt said, making argument. "Besides, when you saw him he didn't know the girl was dead."

"Didn't he?"

"You're doing the talking."

"He knew Christine was dead, all right. Either he, or his daughter, Bianca, had found both the letters and my second business card in Jeff's room. That's why he called and had me come out to his house, and why he pointed out his son's picture to me there. He had to find out if I *knew* Jeff, if Jeff had been in to see me about the letters Christine was getting in the mail, if I had been working for Jeff and in the process discovered the sender of those letters."

Eberhardt didn't say anything. I was pretty sure it was all clear to him now, too.

I went on, "The thing that put me onto him was his professing not

to have any idea where Jeff had gone off to. Lainey Madden told me about the cabin the Demeroys have near Big Sur, and that Jeff went there sometimes to study and to be alone. Demeroy would surely have known this; it would have been one of the first places he would check if he thought his son to be missing."

Eberhardt's pipe went out. He scowled at it and put it in the ash tray on his desk. "Let's hear about the second key," he said.

"The letters themselves, Eb. They have to be directly connected with Christine's murder. Again, a coincidence would be too much to take."

"What you're saying," Eberhardt said, "is that whoever wrote those letters to Christine Vance was the one who killed her."

"What else, Eb? Anyone who would write crank letters, threatening letters, has to be mentally unbalanced in some way. And probably capable of murder."

"Gerald Demeroy?"

"Demeroy is as sane as you or I," I said. "He's a strong man, a willful man, an influential man; do you think he'd resort to writing crank letters?"

"Then who wrote them?"

"Isn't it obvious? Demeroy was protecting someone by getting me out to his house this morning—but that someone wasn't Jeff. There's only one other person it could be."

"His daughter," Eberhardt said.

"Yeah," I said. "His daughter."

We were silent for a time. Then Eberhardt got slowly on his feet. "I think I'll go down and have a talk with Mr. Demeroy. You coming?"

"No," I said. "I've had enough of this whole thing."

He didn't answer, but he put a hand on my shoulder to let me know he understood. Then he went out and I sat there in his office for a while, smoking, before I decided it was time to leave.

I got the full story from Eberhardt later on that night in my apartment.

Gerald Demeroy had remained adamant to the last, refusing to admit anything, but Eberhardt had called for a matron and they'd gone out to his house in Sea Cliff and confronted Bianca. She'd broken down under questioning and admitted that she had murdered Christine Vance. Shortly after that she had become uncontrollably hysterical, and they'd had to get an ambulance to take her away. Eberhardt had got the details from Gerald Demeroy later, at the hospital.

Bianca had hated Christine Vance, hated her beyond all reason. She couldn't stand the thought

of her brother marrying Christine, living away from her; she saw Christine—in her emotionally unstable mind—as some kind of evil force about to split apart her previously closely-knit family. She'd written the letters to try to frighten Christine away, but when they hadn't accomplished their purpose, she had decided there was only one alternative, only one way to remove this threat.

She'd taken her father's gun—she knew he kept it in his desk in the study—and then she'd called Christine. She'd told her that she and her father had decided to consent to the marriage, and wanted to see her. Christine was naturally overjoyed, and had agreed to meet Bianca that evening. Since Christine had been a trusting girl, she had attached no ominous significance to Golden Gate Park as a meeting place.

Later, when Bianca returned home after killing Christine, she had broken down and confessed to her father what she'd done. Gerald Demeroy had responded then as most fathers would under similar circumstance; he had attempted to protect his daughter. He had got rid of the murder gun, throwing it over the cliff into the ocean, and had burned the incriminating letters—which Bianca found, along with my card, in searching through Jeff's room. Then, today, he had called me for the exact purpose I had postulated to Eberhardt.

The police found, in the fireplace at the Demeroy home, a scrap of one of the letters that had not burned completely. They checked the scrap against the typewriter I had seen in the livingroom, and the script matched exactly. That made it conclusive.

When Eberhardt had finished, I went into my kitchen and got two mugs and filled them half-and-half with coffee and brandy. I took them out and gave one to Eberhardt.

"It's a shame the way the world spins sometimes," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "A damned shame."

We drank from our mugs, and neither of us spoke much after that, thinking our own thoughts.

Should the following induce a psychological momentum in amateur head shrinkers, it is noteworthy that analysis of behavioral disorders is the sphere of licensed practitioners.

MORPHOLOGICALLY, MY DEAR WATKINS

by Pauline C. Smith

EVER SINCE Inspector Roy Donahue, of the Police Laboratory, and Chief of Homicide Lt. William Watkins came to the office to consult my boss, Dr. Simon Unger, I've felt more like a sleuthing partner to Sherlock Holmes than secretary to a psychiatrist.

"Except for one big difference," says my brother, who is Lt. William Watkins. "Holmes always came up with a killer and Unger hasn't."

"Sure he has," I say. "He came up with the killer all right, you just haven't found him."

This remark tended to *infuriate* my brother, my brother being easily infuriated since he is a mesomorph, and mesomorphs are aggressively sure of themselves, therefore quick to become infuriated by even a breath of criticism.

"I can't find something that's not there," growled Bill. "I've had it with that refugee from reality.

From now on, I clue myself in and build on fact, not fantasy."

A very stubborn attitude on Bill's part, after all of Dr. Unger's help, but there again, stubbornness is another mesomorphic trait and just to show how stubborn Bill is, he wouldn't even *talk* to Dr. Simon Unger until after the third killing!

By that time, every woman in town was running scared, and the newspaper was needling Bill with such editorial remarks as: "Where is Lt. Watkins now that we need him?" which almost drove Bill out of his mind since, if anyone wanted to catch the killer, he did.

"Well, I told you," I said, "but you wouldn't listen."

"You told him what?" asked Roy Donahue, who'd stopped in for a beer, which he and Bill were drinking in the kitchen.

"About my boss," I said. "He's got some ideas."

"Who's your boss?" asked Roy.

"A nut head shrinker," said Bill at the same time I said, "Psychiatrist."

Roy, however, being Police Laboratory Inspector and coming up against all the variables of fingernail scrapings and fingerprint whorls which makes him more open-minded than my brother, asked, "What kind of ideas?"

"Oh, like what the killer looks like, how he thinks and—"

Bill jerked his head out of his beer mug. "If he knows all that, he's got to know who the killer is."

"Not exactly," I said.

So they both came to the office the next morning to see Dr. Simon Unger.

Dr. Unger is of medium height and very slim. He wears turtlenecks and Edwardian jackets, he walks quickly on the balls of his feet and doesn't talk much except when he's talking about the relationship of the mind and the body, which he calls "a new school of constitutional psychiatry." Then he runs off at the mouth.

He is, I suppose, middle-aged, about thirty-five. It's hard to tell with all that bushy beard; it's almost as if he's hiding behind it. He is unmarried and I could have a Grade-A Blue-Ribbon love going for him except he's so formal he doesn't even call me Alice. He calls me Miss Watkins when he calls.

This first morning that Roy and my brother came to see him, I'd opened the mail and laid it out in orderly piles on his desk and straightened his pens and pencils and notebook and his mother's picture in the frame. I *guess* it's his mother, being kind of old and looking something like him without the beard. I patted the couch cover and moved the leather chair a little more behind and beyond the head

of the couch the way he liked it, then I went out into my office, which is the reception room, to wait.

Dr. Simon Unger doesn't come in at the same time each morning. Unpredictable is what he is. But that's all right; so are his patients who are generally late, and he probably knows this.

So, "Come in about 9:30," I had told Bill and Roy, hoping the good doctor would be in early, say like 9:45, and the first patient would be late, like say 10:30.

At 9:30 sharp, there they were, Bill because he's a mesomorph and therefore *always* on time, and Roy because he's an endomorph and wishes to please.

Bill, of course, paced the floor like a caged lion, saying, *What kind of banker's hours does this head shrinker keep anyway?* and *Let's get the hell out of here before the department laughs me out of town,* while Roy sat, nice and relaxed, digesting his breakfast.

It was almost ten when Dr. Simon Unger breezed in through the hall door on the balls of his feet to stop in surprise at the sight of his crowded waiting room, and hug the sides of his Edwardian jacket with his elbows, the way he does when he becomes startled and slightly embarrassed.

"Dr. Unger," I introduced in my most polished manner, "this is Inspector Roy Donahue of the Police Laboratory, and my brother, Chief of Homicide, Lieutenant William Watkins. They are here to ask your opinion on the recent crimes."

Bill shot me a look of pure venom at my choice of words.

"Yes, yes, gentlemen. Yes, indeed." The doctor ushered them into his office with nervous jerks of his arm. Once seated though, behind his desk, he calmed down and took over just as I knew he would.

I slipped into the leather chair at the head of the couch and flipped open my notebook. The doctor didn't even notice I was there instead of still out in the reception room where I ought to be, but I thought what he said should be written down for the record except I could do that from memory. Mostly I wanted to hear it all over again and watch Bill's face while he heard it for the first time.

"Now," said Dr. Unger, steepling his fingers and speaking softly, his voice always being so soft you have to lean forward to catch it all. "Now, your killer is probably over thirty but not yet forty years old. He is unmarried and is sexually abnormal . . ."

At the last, Bill pricked up his ears, having a thing against sex. Oh, not nice married sex, since he has a wife and two children to

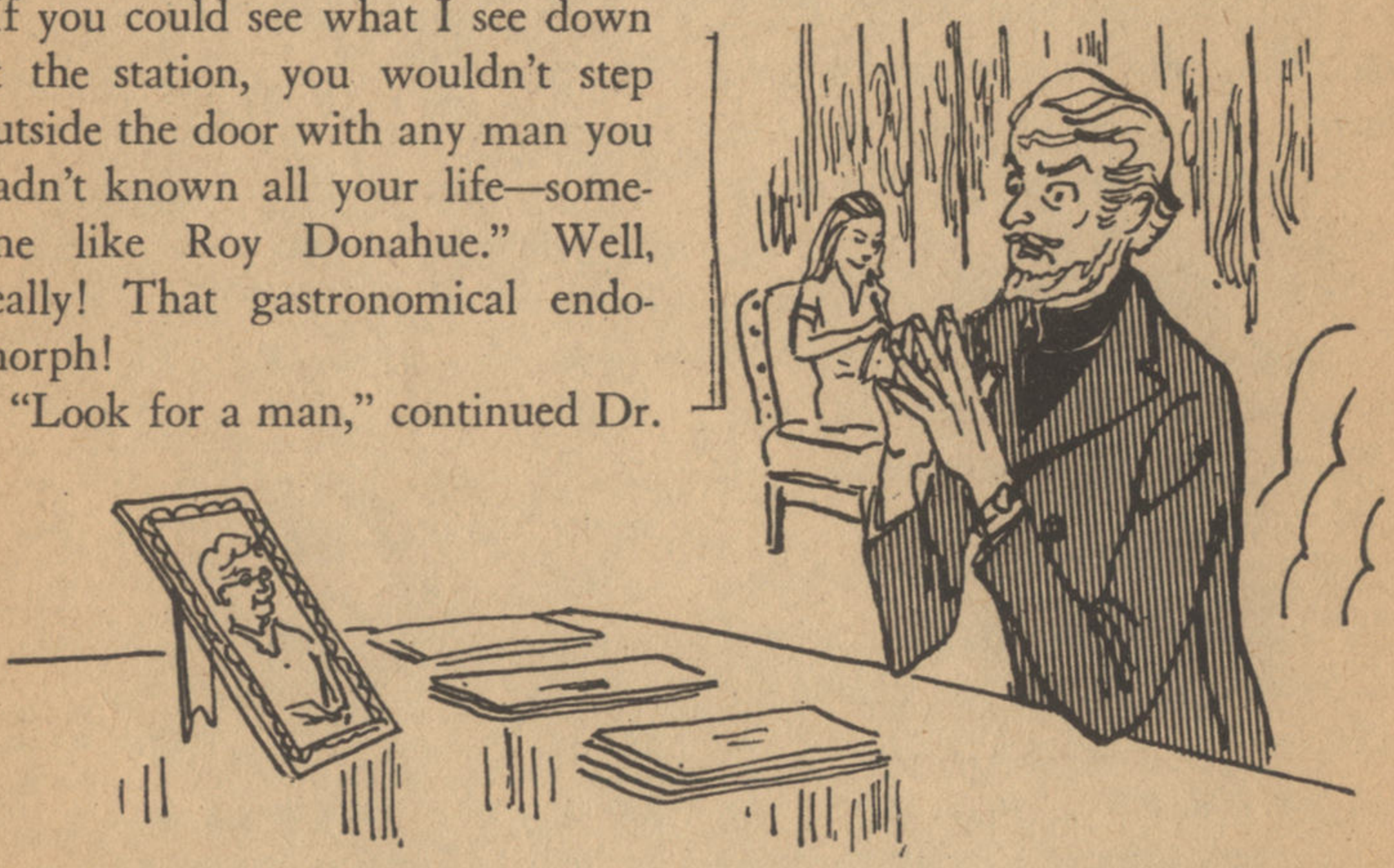
prove it, but any outside-of-marriage sex which he's always lecturing me about in a big-brother-policeman way, like, "See that the guy gets you home by eleven or I'll knock his ears down."

I live with them, Bill and his family. Not that it's ideal, but it's convenient and Bill insists on it. Another one of his pet phrases is, "If you could see what I see down at the station, you wouldn't step outside the door with any man you hadn't known all your life—someone like Roy Donahue." Well, really! That gastronomical endomorph!

"Look for a man," continued Dr. Unger, "who is lightly built, perhaps slightly undersized. When you pick him up, he will probably be suffering from a cold—"

"Oh, come *on*," broke in Bill. He'd grown restless, having been sitting still for more than a minute. He jumped to his feet to say, "What kind of hocus-pocus are you handing out, anyway?"

"Lieutenant Watkins," protested Dr. Unger softly, "I have been following these cases in the newspaper and, believe me, my description of the killer is founded upon the nature of the crimes plus a knowledge of constitutional psychiatry, bringing about theories which, while not based upon an exact science, are useful because the relativity of certain physiques cause certain secretions in body fluids which influence individual actions."



Bill sat down again.

I wrote down in my notebook: Description of an ectomorph.

"Now," said the doctor, leaning forward and disarranging my neat piles of mail, "there have been three crimes, enough to form a pattern of the killer."

"M.O., we call it," said Bill stiffly.

Dr. Unger nodded in his direc-

tion. "A personality M.O.," he conceded. "In each case, the woman killed was between fifty-five and sixty years old. In each case, the killer had written an obscenity with the woman's lipstick upon the woman's own handbag. In each case, the victim had been sexually assaulted before death and left in a small, snug, closed-in place; once a hallway, another time a telephone booth, and the last one in the victim's own car on the edge of town.

"The pattern the killer did not follow is a time sequence. Each murder was committed at a different hour on a different night of the week. Therefore, gentlemen . . ." Dr. Unger rubbed the palms of his hands together as if he were sure of himself, yet he moved his eyes from one officer to the other as if he were self-conscious. "Therefore, gentlemen, the pattern, excuse me, the M.O., being similar yet with differences, I contend these crimes to be the work of an ectomorph."

I underlined "description of an ectomorph," in my notebook.

Dr. Unger raised a protesting hand as Bill began to splutter. "First, why have I labeled this killer ectomorphic? Because of the nature of the crimes, gentlemen. They are the crimes of a schizophrenic. Schizophrenics are almost always ectomorphs and ectomorphs are always slightly built. Remember, I said to look for a killer of small build, probably undersized. A schizophrenic, therefore an ectomorph, therefore slight."

Bill looked confused.

"The obscenities on the handbags indicate that the murderer was unconsciously killing his own mother since no ordinary rapist would seek, for each of his three crimes, a woman in the age bracket of fifty-five to sixty unless he were doing so for a purpose. The purpose in this case, gentlemen, is the murderer's desire to rid himself, over and over, of his long-standing incestuous desires—hence the rape, the murder and obscenities. These being the reasons, gentlemen, that I state the killer is not married, that he is abnormal sexually, and why I place his age somewhere in the thirties, for he invariably selects a victim who would be approximately the age of his own mother."

Bill was on his feet again. "The cold, man," he yelled. "Why do you say the killer will probably have a cold when we find him?"

Dr. Unger smiled thinly. "Medically," he said in a voice which hardly reached across the desk, "ectomorphs are subject to troubles of the upper respiratory tract. They have violent head colds and frequent sore throats. And this, gentlemen, is February, a month in

which the common cold abounds."

To Dr. Unger, his profile of the murderer was quite logical, but Bill, the mesomorph, was puzzled, and Roy, the endomorph, was still digesting the explanation when I heard a sound in the reception room and went in there to find the first patient waiting.

Dr. Unger repeated his original suggestion: "Your killer is probably over thirty but not yet forty years old, unmarried and sexually abnormal. You will be unable to determine when or where he might strike next since, being ectomorphic, he is unpredictable as to time and place.

"You can be sure, however, that the victim will be a woman in her middle fifties or early sixties, left in some snug retreat because ectomorphs like small, snug, closed-in retreats. And when you do find the man, he will be slightly built and very likely suffering from an upper respiratory ailment."

I ushered in the first patient.

Bill and Roy left.

"What the hell was that nut head shrinker talking about?" asked Bill that night.

Well, if he didn't know, he was certainly working on it. During their off-hours, he and Roy spent a lot of beer time discussing underweight sex offenders. They even devised elaborate, if vague, plans for checking out every cold sufferer in town, which was pretty silly, it being a rainy February with billions of cold germs and everyone sneezing. Even Bill was slowed down and took to carrying a box of tissues, and I sat listlessly in the office, filled with virus aches, phoning patients to cancel their appointments because Dr. Unger was home with the flu.

He was sick for three days—that was after the fourth murder—and sure enough, the victim was a lady, sixty-one years old, found in one of those temporary construction shacks out where they're building the new tract, with obscenities written with lipstick on her handbag!

"I don't know where to turn!" yelled Bill, blowing his nose.

Well, if he didn't know, being Chief of Homicide, I certainly didn't; but then he picked up a suspect.

He questioned the man for two days before he and Roy Donahue came back in to see Dr. Simon Unger, who had just returned to the office. "Well," said Bill, "I got your man."

"*My* man?" said Dr. Unger, jerking his head in surprise.

"He answers your description," said Bill, handing over an out-of-focus snapshot of a bone-protruding bruiser. "He's got a cold, too," he added, whipping out a tissue

and wiping his own nose while Roy sniffled blandly. I sneezed all over my notebook, and Dr. Unger popped a throat lozenge into his mouth.

"Not only that," said Bill in triumph, as if he were adding ice cream to his pie-in-the-sky, "he talks dirty, just like those words on the handbags."

Dr. Unger gave the snapshot one contemptuous glance. "This man is merely an underfed mesomorph," he pronounced with scorn. "Furthermore, no true ectomorph with a sex hangup will talk dirty—only write dirty." He snapped the picture back across the desk and added with impatient petulance, "Why don't you find the killer? He must be stopped."

Well, that was adding flame to hot coals, what with the paper saying the same thing editorially, so Bill stomped out angrily with Roy trailing peacefully behind.

It was after that Bill told me he'd had it with Dr. Unger and from then on he planned to do his own clueing and build on facts, not fantasy. "Right, Roy?"

"Let's have another beer," said Roy.

Then Bill spent a frantic time looking for clues that were not there and digging for nonexistent facts. The hardware stores sold door chains like doughnuts. Rainy February crept into blustery March and the editorials wouldn't quit.

It was on an evening while Bill was reading the newspaper that I finally convinced him science was mightier than the fumble. I knew he was reading the latest editorial, the way he kept beating his fist through the paper and from the loud muttering oaths that came from his mesomorphic throat which, when it mutters, carries very well.

"Dr. Unger says," I said, "that if you'd just listen to him, you could pick up that man right now. Before he does any more killing."

Bill crumpled the newspaper and threw it across the kitchen. Roy looked up from his beer and asked pleasantly, "Is that what he says?"

"It certainly is. He says with what he's given you, you could go out and put the finger on that schizophrenic ectomorph right now."

"He's crazy," yelled Bill.

"Yes, he is," agreed Roy.

"He says the only way you can catch a killer of this type is by applying the science of constitutional psychiatry."

"I believe he is right," said Roy, and I thought Bill was going to swing on him.

"He says the man wants to be caught and if it weren't for your stubbornness," I said to Bill, "and

your relaxation," I said to Roy, "you'd have caught him before this."

"Let's go talk to him again," said Roy mildly, finishing off his beer. "Now."

"Now?" yelled Bill. "Why?"

"He says it's been a while since the last murder, so the next one's liable to come along any time and you'd better listen to him."

"That's why," said Roy lazily.

I said if they were going out to his house, I wanted to go along. Because, I said, after all, I worked for him and wouldn't it seem kind of funny, those two barging out in the middle of the night to see a man they hardly knew?

"It isn't the middle of the night," said Bill, being accurate as usual. "It is eight o'clock in the evening."

"I know where he lives," I said, "and you don't."

By then, Bill was all wrapped up in forging ahead, forgetting his firm resolve never to consult that nut head shrinker again. "He's in the phone book," he said.

"No, he isn't. He has an unlisted number."

Roy was watching us both complacently, looking as if he were thinking of opening another can of beer. But maybe he wasn't—thinking about beer, that is.

I put a coat on over my sweater and stretch pants, thinking if Dr. Simon Unger were to see me as I really am, a shapely, untrammeled female, away from the uptight charisma of the office, he might dispense with formality long enough to call me Alice and allow me to get on with the love interest which has been interesting me ever since I started working for him.

We piled into Roy's car and I fed out the directions a block at a time so they'd have to keep me with them as a guide. The address, which I had foraged from the office files, of course, was emblazoned on my heart even though I had never been there, and when we arrived and parked at the curb, I was somewhat surprised, thinking that turtlenecks and Edwardian jackets did not exactly belong to this tiny, lighted house tucked under the protection of giant trees.

I guess Roy thought so, though, but then he's never surprised and always agreeable. "Now, this is a nice, snug, closed-in place," he observed quietly, as we trailed up the bricked walk to the house.

Bill had just raised his hand to punch the buzzer when Dr. Simon Unger opened the door, topcoat over his Edwardian jacket. He halted, hugging his elbows up against his topcoat, a startled look crossing his face, followed by sudden and almost sublime happiness.

Could it be I who caused his joy? I wondered, my heart thudding as I babbled small, embarrassed sounds of apology and limp explanation. None of the sounds were necessary, nor was I, because even after I had my coat off, revealing my untrammeled and shapely form, Dr. Simon Unger neither noticed nor listened to me. It was to Bill and Roy he talked, about yes, he'd been on his way out, and no, it hadn't been necessary, that now it might never be necessary again, a strange remark to make, I thought.

He took us into his den, a tiny, shadowed room, and became immediately assured as soon as he took his place at the littered desk. "And what may I do for you gentlemen?" he asked.

Mesomorphically, Bill was releasing his pent-up energy by snapping the retractor button of his ballpoint pen in an annoying fashion; endomorphically, Roy was limp in the easy chair as he digested his beer; and scientifically, Dr. Simon Unger explained his constitutional psychiatry theory.

"Gentlemen," he said, sniffing just a little, either from the last cold he was getting over or another he was starting, "I would like to explain to you the important medical traits as well as the temperamental traits that tend to occur in each of the three primary components of physique which lead me to suspect an ectomorph as our four-time killer, and which I hope will lead you to apprehend this man, who must be caught for his own as well as for the sake of society."

Snap-snap went the retractor button.

Roy laced his fingers across his stomach and smiled.

"First," said Dr. Simon Unger, "I will explain the simple, yet biologically rational, method for sorting these varieties. The human embryo is composed of three layers, one is the endoderm, an inner layer of cells that predominates in the development of the organs of digestion, another is the mesoderm, the middle layer that predominates in the skeleton and muscles, the third is the ectoderm, the outermost layer, predominating in the skin and nervous system. In almost every human body, one of these layers has more influence than the other two."

Well, I should say so, I thought, watching Bill's muscular workout on the retractor button, and observing Roy as he settled his stomach in a more digestible position.

"Thus," continued the doctor, glancing at Roy, "endomorphs tend to be softly rounded, relaxed in posture. They like to eat and drink. Their natures are loving al-

though their sex drive is low. They are liable to gallbladder trouble and diabetes. Should they become psychotic, which is rare, they would be manic-depressives."

Well! Roy didn't look worried. He smiled blandly.

"The mesomorph," said Dr. Unger with a quick look at Bill, "is muscular, aggressive, dominating and sure of himself. He has a healthy interest in sex in a take-it-or-leave-it manner. He is prone to high blood pressure and coronary problems. Should he suffer mental illness, he would probably be paranoid."

The doctor brightened. "Now the ectomorph," he said.

Snap-snap went the retractor button.

Roy heaved himself up in his chair and took notice.

"The ectomorph is the thinker. He is the brains of the three." The doctor's normally faint voice had become more clear. "He is the introvert, the man who needs no one—"

"No one, Dr. Unger?" questioned Roy placidly.

"Well, his mother," said Dr. Unger. "*This* ectomorph, the one we are speaking of, needs his mother. The ectomorphs are the creative geniuses, you know. They give us the art, the music, ideas . . ."

Snap-snap went the retractor button with its sharp, rhythmic click.

"What kind of ideas, Dr. Unger?" asked Roy pleasantly. "Ideas on killing?"

"Only the schizophrenic ectomorphs," said the doctor. "Schizophrenia is the ectomorphic instability, probably the most interesting of all mental illness."

"I'm sure of that," agreed Roy.

Snap-snap went the retractor button and Roy jerked his head angrily toward Bill and the repeated noise. It was the first time I had ever seen Roy disturbed, and then I felt it—the disturbance in the air of this room, the turbulence. Roy had slouched back again in his chair, his fingers laced across his digestion, as if he had never been disturbed, but the turbulence remained and the snap of the retractor button ceased.

"There are the respiratory troubles, of course," and the doctor coughed delicately. "Despite their apparent frailty, the ectomorphs are the most desirable of all to the opposite sex for they are highly erotic."

You can say that again, I thought, breathing hard.

"However," and he raised a delicate finger, "if they have a sex problem, as did our murderer, you may expect them to become aberrant," and my breathing slowed and gagged in my throat.

"Where is your mother, Dr. Unger?" asked Roy pleasantly.

I yanked my head around to stare at him. Bill tucked his pen back in his pocket. Dr. Unger had a dazed look in his eyes.

"Your mother," nudged Roy without any urgency. "Where is your mother? Does she live with you?"

"No." The answer was sharp and staccato. "She used to. But she doesn't anymore. She has denied me her love."

I grabbed my coat that hung over the arm of the chair I sat in. I wrapped it around me, feeling cold.

"Like the killer's mother denied the killer?" asked Roy, still pleasantly. His hands were still laced across his stomach, still digesting, but I knew he digested more than food and beer. He digested meanings and understanding and explanations. He unlaced his fingers and patted his stomach, for now he was feeling a pang of indigestion.

"Yes, like that," said Dr. Unger eagerly.

"Like you," said Roy.

"Me?" Dr. Unger's face was blank.

"You and your mother."

Bill sprang to attention, not restless attention, but tense, muscled attention.

"You and the mother you unconsciously wish to kill, so you kill other mothers. You don't want to. That's why you explained it to us so carefully. That is why you described yourself so well. That is why you said, 'find the killer', isn't it?"

Dr. Unger's eyes were dazed.

"We have found him, Dr. Unger. You are safe now. That's what you wanted, wasn't it? To be safe in a snug and closed-in place?"

"Oh, yes," said Dr. Unger.

"Well, come on, then, let's go." The words were Roy's, the hand that reached out for Dr. Unger's arm was Bill's.

I hung onto Roy, thinking that with his big appetite and low sex drive and nothing worse to look forward to than manic-depression, I'd sure know where he'd be nights —he'd be home eating, and crying in his beer.

Efforts to psychoanalyze a tree might naturally be met with a bark of laughter.

THE BROTHERHOOD

by Theodore Mathieson

FROM WHERE twelve-year-old Jared sat alone on a stump amid a grove of ponderosas, watching their massive boles glowing sepia in the moonlight, he could hear his parents by the lake as they shouted at each other in the summer night.

"All right, Gert," he heard his father say, "you're the one who wanted to visit your brother."

"You wanted to meet his new wife as much as I did," his mother said. "But you said we'd stop in a motel on the way. I didn't expect to have to sleep in the *wilderness*, in the back seat of our old car!"

"I just suggested it. There wasn't enough money for breakfast unless we did!"

"You could have driven until we got to Artie's. You didn't have to *lay over*, like a tired businessman."

"Well, that's what I am! It's six hours more to Artie's and you don't drive to spell me off, so . . ."

Jared sighed, and tried to shut out their tiresome voices, which had been going on like that all his young

life. He looked around at the encircling pines that towered over him like a stern congregation of elders, and then at their crowns, where they seemed to touch the stars.

"Let me be one of you," he whispered. "Please."

How long he sat there after that, Jared never knew. He came to himself at the sound of his name echoing through the forest, and by reflex started stumbling along the trail back to the camp, aware only of the feeling that he was leaving a place in which he wished to remain forever.

"Well, where have you been?" his mother said as he came within the circle of campfire light. "You always disappear when there is work to be done."

"You're not wanted here," Jared said, impelled somehow to deliver the message.

"W-what is that you say?"

"Those trees don't want either you or dad. You don't belong. And neither does he." Jared pointed to his four-year-old brother Timmy, who was seated at the foot of a ponderosa, picking off the brittle, jigsaw pieces of bark.

"*Stop that!*" Jared cried, as if his brother were plucking off pieces of Jared's own skin. Then he lifted Timmy and put him down away from the tree. The next moment he felt a blow that sent him reeling.

"Who do you think you are—*anyhow?*" his father yelped. "Just for that, kiddo, you're the one who is going to sleep outside the car tonight!"

"That's fine with me," Jared said as, unaware of his parents' stares, he lay down on the soft pine needle mat near a ponderosa, and began running his fingers gently over the subtle intricacies of the glowing bark . . .

"We don't know what's gotten into the kid," his mother said next day to her brother Artie, as Jared fidgeted next to her. Artie, a building contractor, had been married recently to a tall, handsome blonde with a German accent, who, Artie had written in a letter to Jared's mother, which she'd read aloud to the family, *didn't like kids.* As Jared studied Artie's wife curiously, wondering how an adult could not like him when she hadn't even met him, his mother said, "He likes to read too much. I try to keep books away from him, but he's a natural-born dreamer."

"What he needs is a job," his father said. "I'm going to put him to work as part-time janitor in my office next year."

Then Greta, his aunt, said: "It's not unnatural for a boy Jared's age to read and to dream, or to dislike having people talk about him to

his face!" She smiled at the boy.

Jared stared at Greta. For the first time in his life, an adult had taken his part, seemed to understand how he felt.

Shortly afterwards, while Artie took his mother and father and Timmy off to see a new construction job he was working on, Jared found himself alone with Greta.

"Come out in the garden, Jared, and I'll show you my flowers. I also have growing there a Venus's flytrap."

As Greta explained how the leaf apex of the latter had been modified into an insect trap, Jared studied her smooth skin and golden, braided hair, and thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"I don't think I like flowers so much as trees," he confided presently, as they sat together on a little stone bench backed by a prickly box hedge. "They're pretty, but they don't last long, while the trees are like the mountains—old, like God."

"Do you think of God very much?" Greta asked with a smile, as she pressed his hand.

"Sometimes. When I try to think of what he's like, I think of the stars, but then, last night for the first time, I sat in a forest where a lot of big pines were, and they seemed like God, too. Did you know they talk together, the big ones? I call them, to myself, the tree people."

"*Do* you? And what do they say?"

"You can't put it into words, really, except that it gives you a funny feeling that scares you at first, because their language is not like ours. They talk about how they like people, or don't like them."

"And they liked you?"

"They said I could be one of them, if I wanted to. They didn't like Mom or Dad, or Timmy."

"I wonder why?"

"They're *different*. They could never understand the tree language, no matter how hard they tried."

"The woods really made an impression on you, then."

"It's so peaceful, and full of beautiful things. And you know one of the most beautiful? The bark on the trees, like pieces of a puzzle I've got at home, all different sizes and shapes, and all in the color I love best—like cinnamon toast!"

Greta laughed gaily, and they walked hand in hand in the garden in the sunshine, and Jared felt he'd never been so happy, except in the woods in the moonlight.

That night, when he went to bed in a room which Greta had given

him for himself, his heart sang, so that it was a long time before he could get to sleep.

The sunshine was bright at the windows when he awakened, and he rose and washed and put on his clothes. Then he went downstairs where he heard in the kitchen the voices of his mother and—his heart leaped—Greta. But he stopped dead in his tracks when he heard what his mother was saying.

"You really think, Greta, that Jared has something seriously wrong with him?"

"I explained it all last night." Greta's voice sounded different this morning—stiffly accented and censorious. "It is what a psychiatrist would call paranoia resulting from maladjusted attitudes toward his parents, marked by a severe departure from reality, a living in a dream world that could eventually become more real than reality itself. The woods, for instance, have taken on for Jared the characteristics of people."

"You mean he's nuts?" his father's voice spoke up. "A son of mine is nuts?"

"Nuts is not the word to use."

"Crazy, then."

"You think he should be—put away?" His mother was weeping.

"I think he should be put under observation. A good psychiatrist, perhaps . . ."

Like one in a dream, Jared walked away from the kitchen and out the front door, and went to sit in the back of his father's car.

He was sitting there an hour later when his father came out the front door and saw him.

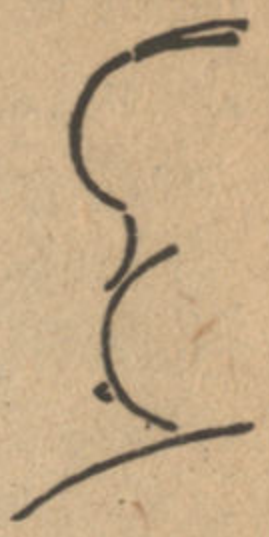
"Come in and get breakfast," he growled, "and then we're going back to the city."

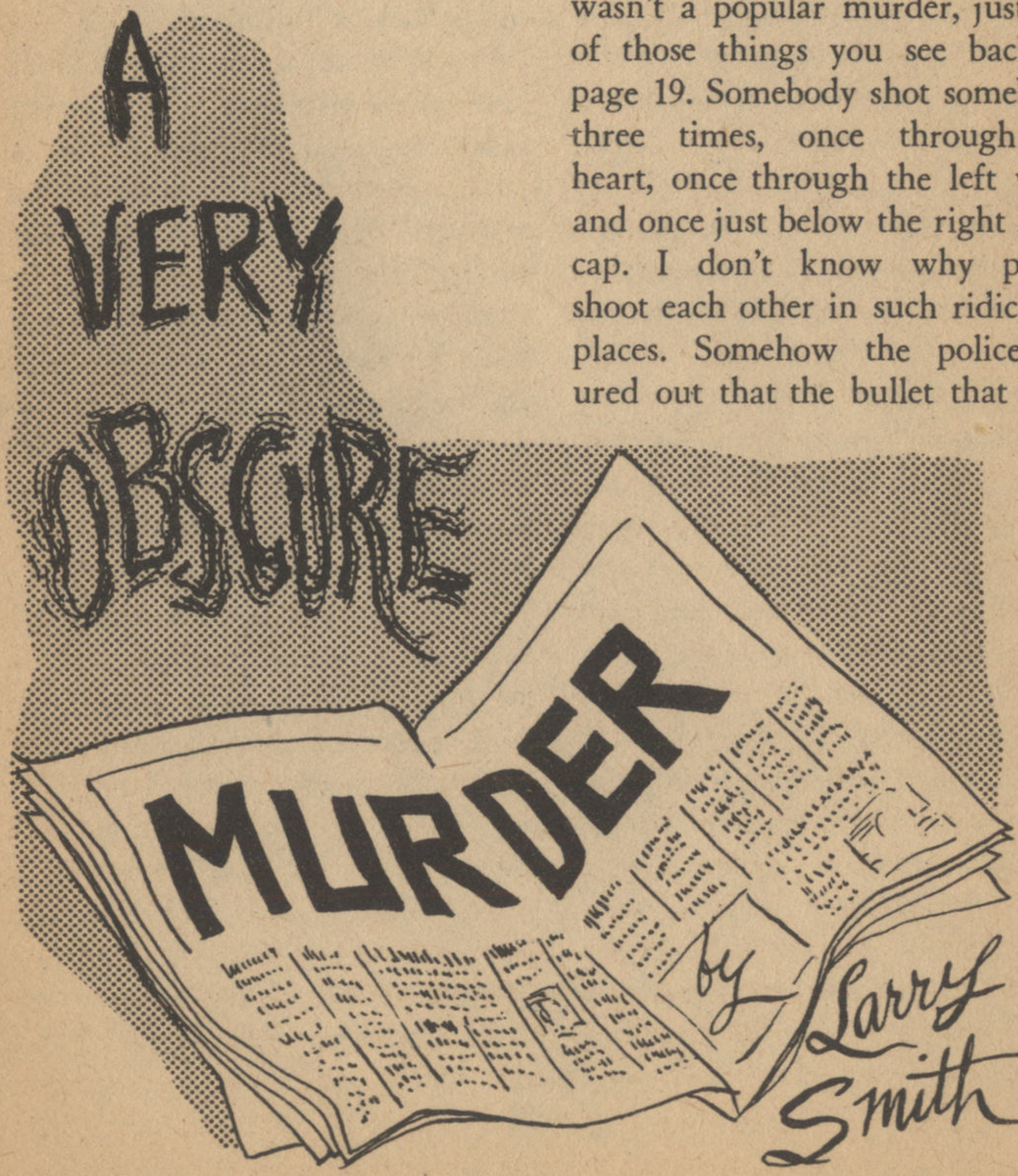
Where you're going to try to have me put away, Jared thought. But he smiled as he got out of the car.

"What's so funny?" his father demanded. "Why are you holding your hand like that?"

"I hurt it getting into the car," Jared said, covering the back of his left hand with his right; but it was really because he didn't want them to see the brittle jigsaw bark that was forming on his skin. Not yet . . .

Appearances, according to Epictetus, either are what they appear to be; or they neither are, nor appear to be; or they are, and do not appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be.





YOU MIGHT HAVE SEEN IT in the paper but probably you didn't. It wasn't a popular murder, just one of those things you see back on page 19. Somebody shot somebody, three times, once through the heart, once through the left wrist, and once just below the right kneecap. I don't know why people shoot each other in such ridiculous places. Somehow the police figured out that the bullet that went

through the heart had been fired first. I was always a little curious about how they deduced that. I don't know much about that kind of thing, but the paper said something about "ballistics experts."

That's not the point, anyway. This is no mystery. I don't know who killed the guy. I don't even know if the police ever found out. It was a very obscure murder. I mean it's the kind of thing that happens all the time in a big city like L.A. The papers use it to fill half a column or so in the back pages. Maybe ten or eleven people happen to read about it in the morning edition and that's it. The only thing was, I was a witness, sort of. I didn't see anything though, really. I was just walking down the street and I heard the shots inside this hotel. Then someone ran out the front door. It was one of those old concrete hotels that you usually walk right by without even noticing. A faded old maroon canopy hung over the door. I saw the guy, just inside the door, jostle past a couple of people who had come out of their rooms, I guess to see what the noise was. He jostled them pretty hard. I think he went so far as to grab one and throw him out of the way against the wall. Then the guy came busting out through the door under the frayed canopy and ran down the street. That's all I saw, really. That's how I told it to the police. I couldn't even describe the guy. He wasn't wearing a suit and I think he had on a Windbreaker and he was about medium height. That's all I could say. They never even called me back about it.

The only reason they asked me at all was that there was this policeman standing by the door, the rest of them were inside, and this officer by the door didn't really have much to do. Once in a while he told somebody to stand back or move along, but there were a lot of people standing around anyway and no one paid much attention. He gave me the impression that he didn't think he looked as important as he thought he was. I notice things like that about people. People are funny.

So I was standing there, too. I'm not one of these ambulance chasers —don't get me wrong—but I wasn't supposed to be at my girl's house for a half hour, so instead of waiting around at her place, I thought I'd wait around this hotel. So this officer looks at me and says, "Move along, buddy. What are you hanging around here for anyway? Did you see anything?"

So I told him. He fumbled out this notebook and took it all down but, like I said, they never even called me back about it.

I probably would have forgotten all about it except that the next morning after breakfast I was sitting at the table looking through the paper and I came across this article on page 19. Tom was splashing around in the shower getting ready for work. Tom was my roommate. That's what this whole thing is getting around to, really—I mean, Tom—but I'll tell you about that.

He was in the shower. He used the shower first because I didn't go to work until later. I was doing sales work then, selling cameras. Whenever somebody bought one, we developed the pictures free for a year, and gave away a photo album also. It was a pretty good deal. A lot of kids were working on the thing and that was the company's mistake. These kids—well, they made enough for dates and kid stuff—but someone like me, a little more mature and having a way with people, I did all right. I don't mean to sound conceited, but I do have a way with people. I think it goes along with noticing things about them like I do.

So I was looking through the paper, waiting for Tom to get out of the shower, and I happened across this article. When he came in, I showed it to him. I laid it out on the breakfast bar so he could see it.

Yeah, we had a breakfast bar. It was a pretty nice little place we had. The walls were a little thin, but I didn't mind that. There was a built-in oven and it was a pretty new place. You know how new apartments look. It was done up in nice soft colors and had some of those bright pictures, with the thin, plastic frames that look like wood, on the wall. You can get those pictures down at what used to be the five-and-dime stores for a pretty good price and they're not bad. We had a TV that came with the place and I had a portable stereo also. I had some records—none of this loud stuff—that were nice to put on when you were just sitting around reading the paper or making a sandwich. Tom didn't like them much, though, and he said that the apartment looked like a cardboard box. This Tom, I don't like to say it because I take people pretty much as they are, but sometimes he was almost a little thick, you know. He didn't appreciate things. As it turned out, I was right. He was a lot more than a little thick. I'd only known him a couple of months, but I'll have to tell you about him.

You see, I showed him the article.

"You were there?" he said.

"Well, I was just walking by. I saw this guy run out, wearing a

Windbreaker. That's all I know."

"Yeah, sure. A Windbreaker." He looked at me strangely. Like I said, Tom was a little strange. "Did you try to stop him?"

"It wasn't like that. I was clear across the street. I hardly even saw him."

"You didn't even make a try at him?"

"What do you mean?"

He took the paper and crushed it up in his hand and threw it into the wastebasket beneath the bar. Then he sat on one of the bar stools and glared at me. He was a kind of big fellow, with big round shoulders and a beer belly. I guess it wasn't really a beer belly—I never saw him drink beer—but it was a big loose stomach that wobbled around quite a bit so he never really looked tightly put together. You know what I mean? Sharp. He always looked a little sloppy with that belly sliding around. On top of that, he was always out of breath. He was just out of the shower and already he was panting a little and looking like he'd just put in eight hours washing dishes at Jacob's cafeteria. That's where he worked. Of course he hadn't combed his hair yet, either. He had lots of black hair that hung out over his ears and forehead. He wore glasses, too. They didn't look right on him because his face was too fat. Nothing would look right.

"What were you doing around there anyway?" he asked.

"I was going over to my girl's place."

He leaned back on his elbow against the bar and stared even harder at me. "I thought Jean was in San Diego this week."

"Oh, I don't mean Jean. I mean this girl I took out last night."

He shook his head slowly and solemnly. "You crumb." His glasses fell down a little on one side so they hung crookedly across his nose.

"What do you mean, crumb?"

"You'd never get away with that stuff with Linda," he said. Linda was his girl. "That's a dirty trick to try to pull on a girl like Linda."

"Look," I said. "I don't even know Linda. You never bring her around."

"Damn right, boy. And don't you worry about it." Then he slid off the stool and walked out without combing his hair.

Now, I've got to tell you about this. I'd only known him a couple of months, and I had needed a roommate. See, I already had the apartment, but Ken, my old roommate, got drafted. They probably won't take me because I've got something wrong with my hip, some kind of fissure or something in my hipbone. But when Ken left

I needed a roommate and I didn't know anybody who was looking for a place, so I put an ad in the paper. A lot of people came around, but Tom was the first, so we decided to get together. Tom seemed like a pretty nice guy. I hope I haven't been giving the wrong impression. We got along pretty well, really. If it seems like I've been talking him down a little, well, you'll see why and you won't blame me; but I've got to admit I never even suspected what was going to happen.

We'd been living together about two months when I showed him this article in the paper. That was my big mistake. I'd say that was like the turning point in the whole thing.

Before that, we'd been getting along fine. Like we had this system worked out in the morning. He'd use the bathroom first and while he was in there I'd put on some bacon and boil a couple of eggs for him. Then when he got out, I'd take a shower and shave, and he'd put on some more bacon and fry a couple of eggs for me. You see, I'm not much of a cook. I'll admit it. I like my eggs fried, but somehow I can't fry an egg without putting this brown crust on the bottom. I can boil them perfectly well, and Tom could fry them, so we worked out our system, satisfactory to both of us.

Just once in a while, though, he'd do something a little strange. It might have bothered someone else, but I'm pretty easygoing and don't get too excited.

Like one night he came back to the apartment after work and he was complaining about his boss. He washed dishes all day and that's a pretty sloppy job to do every day—I know because I washed dishes when I was going to college—so I didn't blame him. I went to college for a year, by the way, but it wasn't all it's cracked up to be, believe me.

Anyway, we were eating dinner and he was going on about how stupid the manager of the cafeteria was. Tom just charged in and started eating without taking a shower first, so he was pretty sweaty still, sitting at the table. His face was always a little red when he got home, I guess from all the steam and heat in the dish room, and he was almost gasping for breath. He had on this T-shirt, also, that hung out over his belly, and right on the bulge of his stomach there was a big spot of dried ketchup.

"I don't know why he comes after me," he said. "Out of all the bums that work there, he comes after me."

I told him it was tough job.

"Damned right it's a tough job."

He was pretty worked up and he took it out on this baked potato. He put it on his plate and mashed it to powder with his fork, then he just stared at it. Suddenly he looked up at me like he was figuring me out.

"Some people don't realize," he said. "A whole lot of people don't realize," and he shook his fork at me like he'd mash me with it, too, "that one good man on a job can keep a whole crew of lazy bums doing pretty good work."

I told him that was right. I knew that myself.

"Sure, why can't you get it through your thick head? Why do you give me a bad time?"

Now, do you see what I mean? I told him that I agreed with him completely and that I wasn't giving him a bad time.

He just grunted and started eating the potato. I got up and turned on the television, but every once in a while he'd look up at me and shake his head like I was being stupid about something. Then he'd grunt and go back to eating. I've got to admit it was a little distracting, watching TV with him grunting over his dinner.

There was another thing he'd do. Something like this happened several times. Once we were sitting around watching a show on TV —it was *The Fugitive*, I think— and about halfway through, a commercial came on. It seems like they always have an extra long one halfway through. Anyway, Tom starts telling me how he thinks the rest of the show is going to come out, but what he did was, he started mixing in people that had been in another show we'd seen earlier. He started working things they'd done into the plot of *The Fugitive*, and he got the whole thing messed up.

I told him I thought he had the shows mixed up and that stopped him cold.

"Like hell," he said, and went into the kitchen to make a sandwich. Then he took a book and went back to the bedroom to read, but if he had seen the rest of the show he would have realized, of course, that I was right.

That was another thing about Tom. He liked to read. I don't mean there's anything wrong with that. I'm just telling you about Tom. He used to read a lot of books by Jack London and Ernest Hemingway.

"These are really good books," he'd tell me. "These are better than all the James Bond stuff."

Maybe it was because he liked books (I'm not sure; Tom was a hard one to figure out), but sometimes he took on this superior sort

of attitude. Like with his girl. He'd never bring her around the apartment. I brought Jean around quite a bit to listen to records or watch TV. Once in a while she'd even cook us dinner. When I asked him why he didn't bring Linda over, he'd say something like, "Yeah, sure," or "You'd like that," in a sarcastic manner. He told me I wouldn't like her. No, that wasn't it. Wouldn't "understand" her; that was his idea.

So now that I've given you a little background on Tom, let me tell you what happened after I showed him the story.

I'd had a pretty good day. I sold a camera. That doesn't sound like much, but I was making $50 a sale so that's a pretty good day's work. Of course you don't sell one every day.

When I got back to the apartment it was about 7:30 and Tom was just leaving. He was wearing a sport coat and tie, which is about as dressed up as I've ever seen him. His hair was all combed down, too, and he didn't look half as sloppy as usual. He told me he was going to see Linda. He didn't usually dress up to go to Linda's. Sometimes he went straight over there from the dish room.

"You're looking pretty sharp."

"Why shouldn't I? You know," he talked like he was letting me in on something, "women are funny. You've got to play along with them sometimes."

Then I told him about this movie that was playing just down the street, in case they wanted to go somewhere later on. He said it sounded okay and maybe they'd go see it.

Well, it seemed like a normal evening. After he left, I watched TV for a while and went to bed around 11:30. I don't think I'd been asleep long when all of a sudden the bedroom light snaps on. Well, I woke up right away. It gave me a pretty good start. Try being asleep in a dark room sometime and have someone flip on the light. See how you feel. Right away I had a headache. Things were kind of blurry at first, but I saw Tom standing in the doorway by the light switch, just standing there looking at me. He wasn't wearing his coat. His tie was undone and slung over his shoulder.

"Hey, Tom, I was asleep."

He leaned back against the doorjamb, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He wore these old slacks, the real baggy kind. He wasn't much of a dresser.

"I bought a gun today," he said.

"A gun? What did you do that for?"

"Oh, you never know." He pulled a hand out of one of his

pockets and there it was, sure enough. He stared at it, turning it over, back and forth. "You never know when something will happen."

"What's going to happen around here?" I don't know anything about guns. It was a little gun, that's about all I can say about it. I didn't like it, though. I'm usually

pretty cool, but I've got to admit I didn't like it.

"What do you mean, what's going to happen?"

I didn't like the way he was pointing the thing around. He had a tendency to point it in the direction he was looking, and he was looking straight at me.

"You saw a murder yourself just last night, didn't you?" Tom said.

"I didn't really see anything."

"You were there, weren't you?"

"Well, I was—"

"Weren't you?"

"That was clear on the other side of town."

"Yeah. But where are you?"

"Hey, put it away, would you? You shouldn't carry that thing around."

He gave a little snort. I guess it was supposed to be a laugh, but it sounded like a snort. Then he walked over and laid the gun on the dresser and started to get undressed. Our beds were parallel to each other, against opposite walls. There was a dresser between them, at the foot of the beds, against the wall. He started yanking out drawers in the dresser and throwing things in. He threw his tie in one drawer and his shirt in another. He even threw his socks in somewhere.

I could tell he was upset about something. I didn't like him going to bed that way with that gun around. Actually, I was beginning to feel a little uneasy. You won't blame me either, when you hear what happened. Anyway, I thought I'd try to get him thinking about something else.

"How was Linda?" I asked.

"Who?"

"How was Linda?"

"She wasn't home."

So I thought he was mad because he'd been stood up.

"She's been busy lately. Busy." He picked up his pillow and slammed it down on the bed. He squinted at me sharply because he'd thrown his glasses in a drawer somewhere. "Hasn't she?" he said.

I didn't sleep too well that night, I've got to tell you. Once I woke up but I kept my eyes squinted so they'd look like they were closed; so I couldn't see too well, but I got the distinct impression that he was lying there on his side staring at me.

The next morning I woke up early and was pretty relieved for some reason to get out of the room before Tom did. I took a shower, and when I finished shaving I went into the kitchen and there was a plate of fried eggs and bacon on the table. Tom was standing there holding the gun.

"I fixed you some breakfast," he said.

I waited by the door, not know-

ing what I should do, facing a gun.

"Sit down," he said.

I sat down at the table across from him and the eggs. I thanked him for the breakfast and reached over to take it. The gun jerked right down over the plate, pointing straight at me. It hung there just above the fried eggs, backed up by his sloppy belly.

Maybe you've read those stories in the detective magazines where they always say the gun is "evil looking" or "deadly looking." Well, I don't know anything about guns, nothing at all, like I told you, but that's the way it was, just like the magazines. I don't know what else to say about it, except that I couldn't believe it. The livingroom window was wide open and anybody who walked by could have seen us. I was hoping somebody would, but it would have been pretty embarrassing. I'm not kidding. I've never felt so silly and scared at the same time. I felt like we were playing cops and robbers like a couple of kids.

"I've been wondering about you," he said.

I tried to be casual, you know. I thought that was the best thing. I asked what he was doing with the gun.

"I've been wondering," he repeated. "I wonder what you were doing at that murder the other night. Seems suspicious to me."

"Oh, I was just walking by."

"What were you doing there?"

"I told you, Tom. I was going to pick up my—"

"Don't give me that. I don't want to hear that. I don't want to hear it." He put a hand on the table and leaned forward on it. The gun snuck up closer. It quivered a little in his hand. "Understand?" he said.

"Listen, Tom, I was just walking by. I heard shots. It's not really important."

"Ha!" he yelled. "I thought so. Cold as a fish, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Like a fish." He stood straight up against the wall now, full of confidence. "Somebody's dead and you don't think it's important."

"Of course I do. Tom, this is pretty silly."

"Sure. You'd like me to think so. That's the way you guys work. You make everybody feel silly so they don't bother you."

He switched the gun to his other hand and, leaning against the wall, took a piece of bacon from my plate.

"Now," he said with his mouth full, "suppose you tell me what really happened. Why'd you kill this guy?"

"What?" I was so surprised I guess I jumped up out of the chair

a little. His gun hand shot out across the table right into my face. In the corner of my eye I saw bits of bacon and foam fly from his mouth. I thought I was dead for sure that time, but I sat down so quick that he didn't do anything.

"Do that one more time and I'll shoot."

I think he liked the idea.

"Tom, what are you going to do?"

"Well, now, what usually happens to murderers? What would you do to a murderer?"

I've got to admit I was pretty scared. It was a ridiculous situation and you can see how a person would be scared, but I kept my head and figured I'd better go along with him.

"Tom, why don't you take me to the police?"

"I'm not ready yet."

"I'll tell them everything, Tom. Everything."

A frantic look came over his face. "You did do it then. I knew it."

"No, Tom, really."

"I knew there was something going on. All along I knew."

"Tom, you'd better calm down. Tom?"

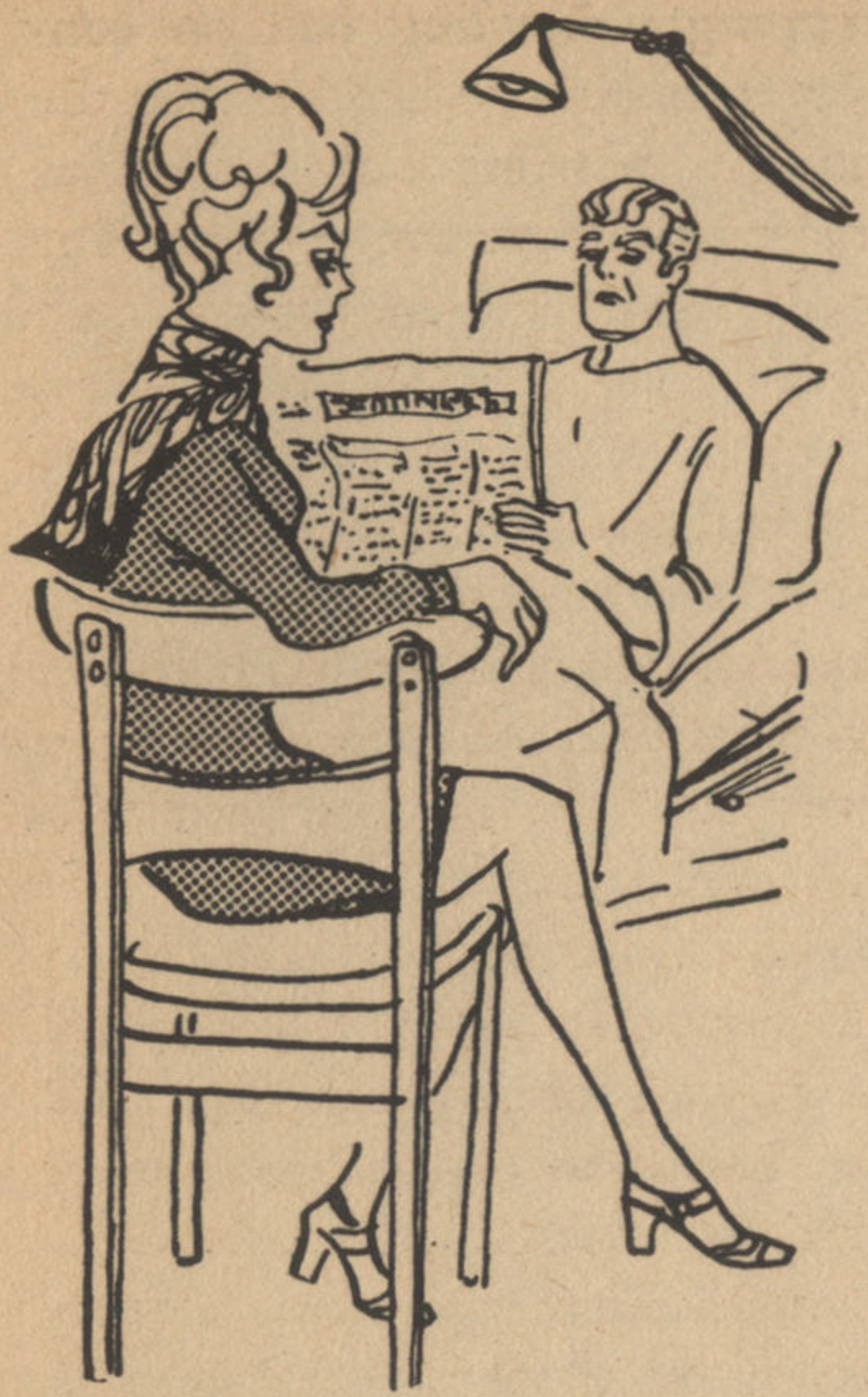
"To get at Linda. You little cheat. You did it to get at Linda."

The gun quivered wildly. Then I heard a loud thud, like someone dropping a bowling ball on concrete from about a hundred feet up, and this bowling ball, it landed square just above my stomach. The whole room flew forward around me.

Tom shot me pretty good. I didn't know what was happening for several days. The bullet went right through me—that's what the doctor said—but it didn't hit anything important. It just slid right through under my rib cage and left a big hole. It did take a chip off the bottom of my rib cage, and that's another reason they won't draft me. I get a backache once in a while because of it, but actually I came out all right otherwise.

I was laid up for a while, though, but it wasn't bad in the hospital. Jean came to see me quite a bit. She brought me a newspaper clipping that told about me and Tom. I've still got it. I thought it was quite a coincidence, though, because it was one of those short articles in the back pages, just like the one that started it all.

A detective came to see me, too, and a psychiatrist. I had to tell them both what happened and the psychiatrist asked me a lot of questions about Tom that I couldn't answer. The detective told me I probably wouldn't have to go to court or anything, because Tom



was in an asylum where they keep all mental cases. I was sorry to hear that. I guess that was better than him being in jail for attempted murder, but what I mean is, I was sorry that he'd gone off his nut. That's why it all happened, you see. He'd gone off his nut, and you can't hold that against a guy. That can happen to anybody, like getting the measles. A lot of people don't understand that, but myself, I try not to be too hard on people. I take them pretty much as they are; but I was sorry to hear that Tom was having trouble.

So, after I got up and around, I went to see him. I mean, it worked out worse for him than for me and it wasn't his fault, so why shouldn't I? Jean didn't want me to, but he was permitted to have visitors and he didn't know too many people, so I thought maybe it would cheer him up to see somebody.

The visitor's room at the asylum was painted off-white and had creaky wooden chairs. There was a wall that ran through the middle of the room, and there was a big strip cut out of the middle of this wall lengthwise where the visitor sits on one side and the person you are visiting sits on the other. Then you could see each other and talk through the wire mesh stretched across this strip. It was kind of a jail, too, I guess. That's why they had it fixed up that way.

When Tom came out, I was glad to see that he looked just about the same except for being pretty pale. He acted kind of quiet.

I asked him how he was. He said fine, how was I?

"Pretty good. You didn't shoot me any place important," I said, trying to make a joke out of it.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. That's true."

I told him I had another apartment and that Jean was fine. He nodded slowly every time I told him something.

"How are your treatments?" I finally asked.

"Real good," he said. "They say I'm getting better already. I keep telling them things that happened when I was a kid and they keep saying I'm getting better. I'll be out before too long."

He talked some more about his treatments, which he seemed to enjoy. He was smiling all the time he told me about them.

Pretty soon the visiting time was up and I got up to go. I told him to be sure and get in touch with me when he got out.

"Oh, don't worry, George," he said. "I haven't forgotten old Georgie boy. I'll be seeing you first thing."

I left then. Somehow I felt a little nervous.

It wasn't too long after that when I decided to move. When I told Jean, I thought she was going to go crazy, too. People surprise you.

We were having a cup of coffee in this little restaurant. We weren't doing anything that night, just walking, so we'd stopped to have coffee by the big window facing the street and watch the cars go by.

"Hey," I said. "Did I tell you I'm going to move?"

"Oh? Where to?"

"Oh, I thought I'd move up to San Francisco."

She almost dropped her coffee. As it was, she just set the cup down hard on her saucer and spilled about half of it. Jean was a pretty nice-looking girl with a good figure, but she had this long, funny mouth that bent and opened in unusual places. When she got upset, her mouth sort of tottered back and forth beneath her nose.

"You don't mean you're leaving?"

"Well, I mean I'm going to Frisco."

"Just like that?" Her mouth slithered up under one nostril as she said it, then fell down again.

"Sure. Why not?"

She looked down into her cup and daubed her finger into the coffee she'd spilled into the saucer.

"I didn't ever think you'd just leave," she said.

I told her I'd been in L.A. five years and I just felt like it was time to see something new.

"When are you going?"

"I've got a ticket for day after tomorrow," I said. "Train."

She kept daubing her finger into her spilled coffee.

"So, look, Jean, I'd like to get home early tonight. I want to start packing."

"George, you don't mean it."

"Look, Jean, why don't we go? I've really got to get in."

She stared down at her cup again.

"I think I'll have some more coffee," she said.

"Well, okay. But I've got to leave pretty soon."

"No. You go ahead."

We sat for a moment.

"Oh, George. Go ahead."

Her place was just around the corner, so I thought it would be all right. When I stood up to go, she started crying a little but what could I do? I didn't know she'd act that way. She never acted like that before. I told her I'd write, and said good-bye. I did, too. Right after I got settled and everything, she was the first person I wrote to.

So that's when I moved up here. I like San Francisco. It's got kind of a bad reputation lately because of all the topless bars and hippies, but it's a nice place, really. I'm selling used cars now, too. That's a good job.

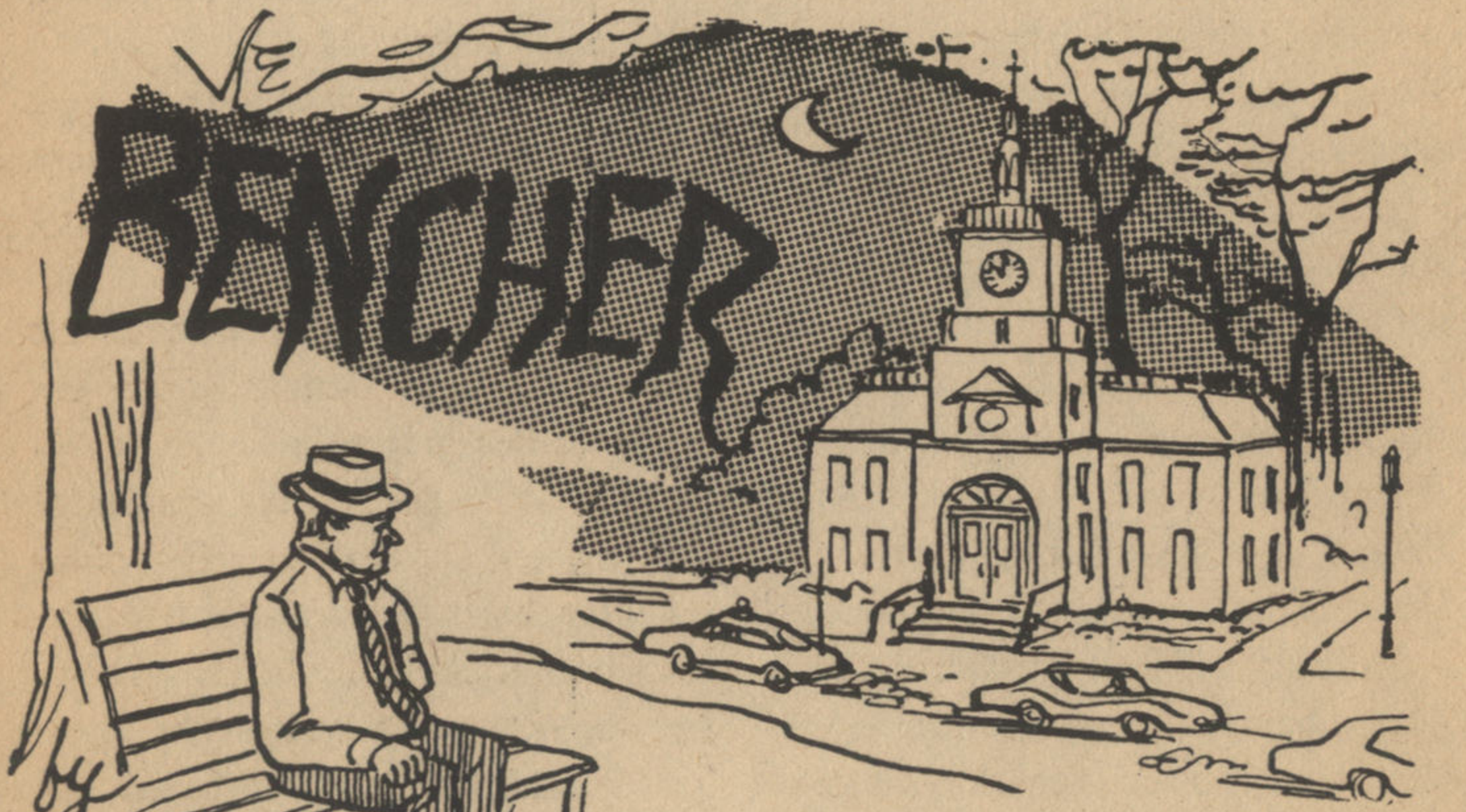
Jean never answered any of my letters so I guess she wasn't so upset after all, but I did get a letter yesterday from Tom. It's funny but I wish I hadn't. I don't know how he got my address. I sure didn't give it to him. Maybe Jean did. That sure would be a stupid thing to do. But maybe she didn't. I had to leave a forwarding address with my landlord because I had a check coming in the mail. Maybe Tom got it there. He wrote he'd be seeing me soon. They let him out this month.

When I read that letter I felt pretty strange. I started thinking about moving again but I realized that would be pretty ridiculous. I've only been here a little over a year and I like it here. I've got a good job, too. I thought about it all day.

This morning I bought a gun. I really felt silly. I had to ask the guy at the counter to show me how to load it and how to work the safety mechanism.

You know, it's funny. You see all these stories in the back pages of the papers, all the short ones about some guy getting shot in a bar, or a kid getting knifed in a parking lot, or two old men killing each other over a checker game. You know, it's funny. It's really funny the way you get into something like that.

A question unasked is a question unanswered, and logically so.



SITTING ON MY BENCH, I watched heat lightning flickering in the hills to the south. The thought of my small room on a night like this held me long past my usual departure hour of midnight, hoping for a break in the hot, muggy weather that had blanketed the valley for weeks. I should have known better.

About one I sat up, the heat forgotten as Leroy Hetz charged out of his office and took off in his sheriff's car, red dome light flashing. I settled back.

Hampden Salter, ten years younger, far more curious and next in line to take over my bench once I passed on, left his room in the hotel when he saw the sheriff leave, camped on the courthouse steps until he returned and somehow garnered the details.

He shuffled over to me. "Sheriff found the bodies," he said.

"What bodies?"

"Joan Briggs and Ed Greiner. Parked along River Road a mile

out of town. Both shot. Just like Jay Rand and Wendy Welles last year."

I sighed. Sordid violence in my small town always sickens me even though it seems as if it is necessary sometimes to restore things to an even keel. The town would pull up short now and examine itself, to become for a while what I hoped it would be.

"Guess the sheriff picked up Clark Briggs," I said.

"He did. Talking to him now."

"You mean questioning him."

"I suppose."

"Look like Clark did it?"

"Who else?"

I shrugged. That was the sheriff's problem. I stood up and dabbed at my forehead. "Guess that's enough for one night."

"Leroy said he wanted to see you."

"What for?" I couldn't keep the belligerent tone out of my voice.

"You always know what goes on in town, Bencher."

"I don't strain to look."

"He probably wants you as a witness."

"Don't they always?" I asked testily.

"Yeah, guess they do. Sometimes I think you're the town's conscience. Do you realize if something happened and you weren't in on it, people probably wouldn't believe it? We kinda rely on you."

"I would think that is entirely possible," I said drily.

"One thing wrong, though."

I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Questioning you can be like opening Pandora's box. Anything is liable to pop out."

I chuckled. Hampden became a little literary sometimes. "You were here all evening, too. Maybe they should question you."

"Not me. You're the dean of the courthouse bench sitters. You going to see Leroy now?"

I glanced across the square at the brightly lighted sheriff's office and stretched. It was still hot, the lightning flickering to the south. "He has enough to do tonight."

Sleep came slowly, the air in my room heavy and motionless. I thought of Clark Briggs and the trouble he was in. No one in town believed he could forgivingly pat his wife Joan and Ed Greiner on the head, once he discovered they were seeing each other. Clark's temper was too violent for that. People would arrive at only one conclusion. Clark had done it.

That was the reputation Clark had. Earned it the hard way while growing up as one of the meanest, toughest kids in town, that temper of his behind many an incident that kept the sheriff hopping.

If Ed Greiner had been a local

boy, he would have known it, but he and his wife Emily had been in town for only six months, living at the hotel.

From the bench on the square in front of the courthouse, I'd seen it all develop. Not that it was unique or unusual, except that Joan and Ed were a little more brazen about it than other couples had been. I'd been watching that sort of thing disapprovingly for twenty years, ever since the Army had sent me home, two years short of retirement, with one arm missing because a grenade had exploded accidentally.

There wasn't much a one-armed, middle-aged man could do in that nice, clean, small town of ours. Money was no problem for me. Finding a job was. I began to spend a great deal of time on the bench, enjoying the sun, until I woke up one morning to realize that finding a job didn't matter anymore.

If someone had said that Sergeant James Louis Munroe would end up as a somewhat stout, elderly, semi-bald bench sitter, I'd have said he was crazy, but the fact remained that's exactly what I'd become, and a whole generation had grown up knowing me as Bencher Munroe.

Spending as many hours on that bench as I did meant the town held few secrets. The square was in the center, and to get from one end to the other you had to pass my bench, whether you drove or walked.

I'll admit I enjoyed it a great deal more than stagnating in my small room. At least there was movement and action around the square all hours of the day and night, particularly in the hotel across from the sheriff's office in the courthouse. People came, people went, people sat on the porch and rocked away. The bus dropped passengers off and picked up others. There was plenty of action all right, if you kept your eyes open.

When I awoke, something more than heat hung over the town, a pall that slowed things down and caused people to look at each other with sidelong glances as if wondering, if Clark hadn't done it, who did?

I found Leroy in his office, his straight black hair over his forehead, his thin face worried. He mopped his brow. "Hot day, Bencher."

I agreed.

"There's something you may have seen last night, Bencher."

"Like what?"

"Clark's office is on the west side of town. River Road is on the east. To get there he would have to go

right by the square. Did you see him?"

I lifted my cane and studied the tip. I never lied. "I saw him."

Leroy cleared his throat. "What time, Bencher?"

"Twice. Once at eight and once at ten."

His face grew a little harder. "You sure about ten o'clock?"

"Is it important?"

"It's important. You just ruined any chance Clark had for an alibi. Doc says Joan and Ed were killed sometime between ten-thirty and eleven. That leaves just enough time for Clark to drive home, find his wife gone and then go looking for her, to find her with Ed. I guess you saw Clark's wife and Ed, too?"

"They went by shortly before Clark at ten o'clock."

Leroy's thin face became more worried. "I was afraid of that."

"Anything else you want to know?"

"Not right now. You'll be subpoenaed as a witness, I guess."

"Nels Young doing the prosecuting?"

Leroy snorted. "He wouldn't miss adding what looks like a sure thing to his record."

"Sounds like you've convicted Clark before the trial," I said mildly.

"He had the opportunity, the motive and the weapon, you know."

"It was his gun?"

Leroy stood up and reached for his hat. "Haven't found it yet but it was a forty-five and Clark's is missing. He claims he doesn't know what happened to it. I'm going to where we found the car and look around. Maybe it will turn up."

"Mind if I come along? I'll stay out of the way."

He grinned. "Too hot to sit on the bench today?"

"Might be cooler out along the river," I admitted.

The car had been parked in a clearing off the road, some fifty feet from the bank of the river. The grass was thick in spots, sparse in others, the marks of the tires still in the red dust of the bare spots.

Leroy pointed. "The dust was all over Clark's shoes."

"Coincidence. Could have happened elsewhere."

"Maybe, but it's another point against him." He began walking slowly in widening circles, staring at the ground. He picked up a small brown paper sack, examined it and tossed it away.

I walked over to the bank of the river and idly tossed in a stone, watching the ripples widen and disappear. It wasn't much cooler here, what little wind there was

picking up only a slight bit of moisture from the river. Leroy wasn't going to find the gun, no matter how hard he looked, not with the river so handy. All anyone had to do was toss the gun as far as he could. Even with experienced divers, it would be hard to find it in the soft mud of the river bottom.

I wondered what could be going on in Nels Young's mind. Without that gun, getting a conviction might be rather difficult, unless he had some other solid evidence about which I knew nothing.

I shrugged and turned away. That was Nels' business. He was the county prosecutor and far better able to judge than I if the evidence was sufficient.

"How long before the trial?" I asked Leroy.

"As soon as it can be arranged. There's very little on the docket."

"Looking for that gun is a waste of time," I told him. "I'll walk back to town."

He lifted a hand in acknowledgment.

I kicked at the dust in the road. It seemed a weak point that Clark's shoes should be covered with it. Many people's were. Would I be suspected if someone had seen my shoes coated with it the night before? Was that all it took?

I wondered if there were anything I could do to help Clark. We always got along fairly well even when he was a boy, and it certainly looked like he could use a friend now. If things ran true to form, everyone would simply assume he'd done it and the town would split into two segments—those who felt he was entitled, and those who didn't.

Maybe it was the heat, but food seemed tasteless, and sitting on the bench held no pleasure as the days passed.

As I thought, conversation was limited to two topics—Clark Briggs and the weather—and though everyone was sure Clark was guilty; I saw no couples heading for the River Road these nights.

Leroy sat down alongside me one day and handed me a folded paper. "Here's your subpoena, Bencher. Trial starts tomorrow."

I nodded. "Nels told me he wanted me as a witness. You'd think that what I have to say was important."

"Nels probably feels he needs all the help he can get."

"He'll need it against Davis Renner. If anyone can get Clark off, he can."

"Forget Clark's imported lawyer. If Clark gets off, it won't have anything to do with the trial. A lot of people think he was justified, Bencher. Some of them may end

up on the jury, I'm pretty sure."

Several years ago, the county had found the money to air-condition the courtroom, so it was difficult to tell if the crowd that showed up was looking for sensationalism or a breath of cool air. They not only filled the seats but lined the walls and sat in the aisles. Even at that, many stood outside and baked in the sun.

Nels presented his case carefully, overlooking nothing. By the time he called me, I'm sure everyone thought the thing cut-and-dried, the only question being what sentence Clark would get.

From the witness stand, I looked over the crowd; Clark, his square-jawed face impassive; Leroy sitting in back of him with his usual worried look; Davis Renner alongside Clark, white-haired and stout, almost as old as I. Then there was Nels, half-smiling, probably thinking how well everything was going, and behind him, Emily Greiner sitting ramrod-straight and white-faced.

Nels led me through the preliminaries quickly and popped the question. Yes, I'd seen Clark go by at ten. He waved at Renner.

"Cross-examine," he said.

Renner looked at me and grinned. I had the feeling I could afford no mistakes with him.

"You're called Bencher because you spend all your time in the courthouse square?"

I admitted I was.

"You don't miss much of what goes on, do you?"

"I don't go out of my way."

"I hear you've been known to doze on that bench occasionally."

"There may be times when my eyes get tired," I said.

The courtroom chuckled.

"Perhaps you were dozing that night and made a mistake as to the time."

"Not with the courthouse clock staring down at me," I told him.

He smiled. "If you were that alert, suppose you tell us what else you saw."

Nels stood up. "Objection."

The judge turned to Renner. "Rephrase your question."

Renner gave me another smile. "Mr. Munroe, did you see anyone else at about ten that night?"

I hadn't wanted it to be this way but I had no choice. I'd been wishing someone else would come out with it, not wanting to be responsible, but telling a lie was beyond me.

Renner sensed he had something. "Well?" he snapped.

I sighed. "At ten?"

"At ten."

"Emily Greiner, for one."

Nels jumped to his feet. "Mrs. Greiner lives in the hotel on the

square. Seeing her would be perfectly natural."

Renner knew I wouldn't have mentioned it if it had been perfectly natural. "Is that so, Bencher? Was what Mrs. Greiner doing perfectly natural?"

"Depends on how you look at it," I said.

"How did you look at it?"

"It seemed to me she didn't want to be noticed. She came out the back door of the hotel and drove off in her car."

"In which direction?"

"East."

"Toward the River Road?"

"That's where it is."

"Would you say she was following her husband and Mrs. Briggs?"

"Objection!" screamed Nels. "He's asking for an opinion."

"Sustained," said the judge.

The whole courtroom was murmuring.

"But she did drive off after them," said Renner.

"She went the same way," I said.

Nels was objecting again. "Mrs. Greiner isn't on trial."

Renner murmured, "Perhaps she should be." He looked at me and grinned. "Did you see her return?"

I shook my head. "I did not."

"No more questions," said Renner.

I let out a deep breath and stepped down.

Nels stood up, yelling over the suddenly noisy courtroom and the pounding gavel, asking for a recess.

The sun was hot on the bench. I closed my eyes. Someone sat alongside.

"You sleeping, Bencher?" Hampden Salter sounded out of breath.

"Not yet," I muttered.

"You threw a monkey wrench into Nels' case."

"He had all the chance in the world to ask me himself," I said. "You know I never volunteer information. I'm no gossip. But he was so sure, he didn't bother."

"Think she did it?"

"Wouldn't know."

"Clark will get off now. Reasonable doubt."

"Not many wanted him convicted, anyway."

Hampden chuckled. "Leave it to you, Bencher. I said you were the conscience of the town. Leroy and Nels were so interested in finding Clark guilty they never for a minute tried to prove him innocent. If they had asked, you would have told them."

"Go away and let me sleep," I growled.

As I said, sitting on that bench made you part of the action, which was the way I liked it.

There would be more questions

when the trial resumed. They'd ask Emily Greiner where she'd gone. I doubted that she would tell them.

She'd been carrying on with Leroy Hetz practically from the day she came to town and she and Leroy wouldn't want it to get around.

I told myself I'd have to do something about that eventually.

People always managed to get things so tangled I had difficulty straightening them out. Sometimes I had to make an anonymous phone call or write an anonymous note, sometimes spread a carefully planted story.

Once in a great while things got out of hand. Joan Briggs and Ed Greiner kept on in spite of everything, so I had to do a great deal of planning and maneuvering just to punish them, hoping the town would learn from it.

I doubted that I would ever get caught. No one thought to ask me where I was that night, or any other night for that matter, which made it easy to steal Clark's gun, bury it, then wait for the opportunity to walk the mile to the River Road after them and find them parked brazenly along the river like a pair of school kids, my own forty-five carried in a brown paper sack under what remained of my missing arm.

I hadn't expected or wanted to make trouble for Clark. With such a weak case and the gun missing, I thought that fool Nels would question Clark, not bring him to trial. It had been a problem trying to get him out of it and still play the game within my rules. Luckily, Davis Renner had asked the right questions.

I sighed. The town would forget. It always did. Sooner or later I'd have to punish someone else. I always did. How many now? The heat made it difficult to remember.

I loosened my perspiration-soaked shirt.

I was just Bencher, a somewhat stout, lazy old man sitting on a bench and keeping an eye on the town. That wasn't the job I'd selected for myself a long time ago, but it hadn't taken me long to find out what my town needed.

Hampden had said it jokingly, not knowing how right he was. Without me, this nice, clean, little town would have no conscience.

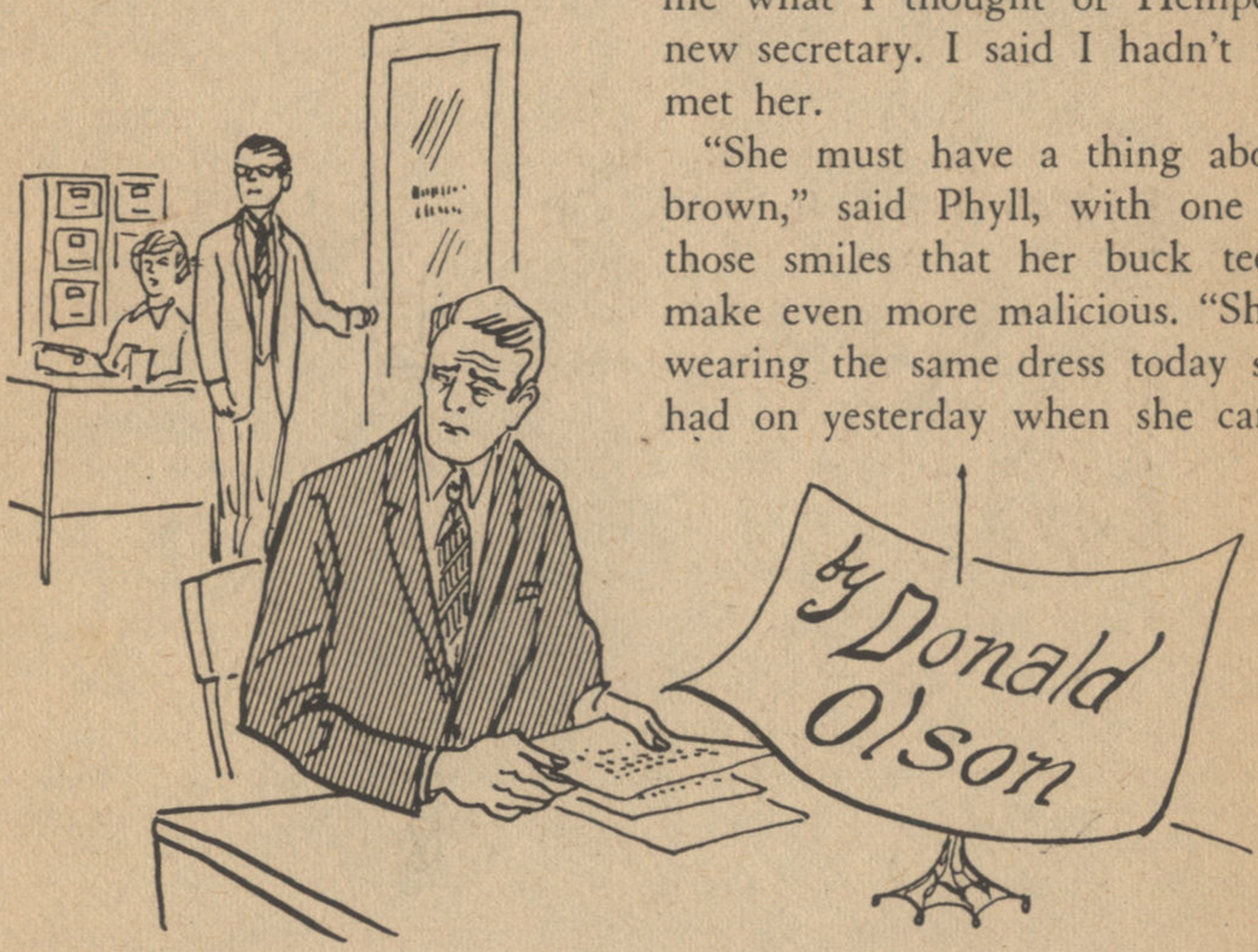
I leaned back on my bench, eyes heavy. I wouldn't miss much. Nothing unusual happens on hot afternoons.

A long-smoldering fire is frequently more destructive than a bright flame.

ADRIAN KELLY shot himself in the head, but I wonder how many other fingers you might truthfully say were on that trigger.

Both Ade and Esther worked here in the Sales Department, Ade having started about a month before Esther. There is a constant turnover of girls in a big office like this, but I remember the day Esther came in for her interview. She looked straight ahead as Joe Vincent led her past the long row of desks toward Mr. Hempel's office. Perhaps she was too busy arranging her thoughts for the interview to pay any attention to the dozens of pairs of eyes, male and female, that gave her the usual curious scrutiny, so discomposing to most of the new arrivals. She was tall and slim, close to thirty,

I should say, with fine dark eyes and chestnut hair. Her looks were pleasant but not exceptional, although as she passed me I decided she might be rather pretty if she were to crack a smile, but she did not smile then and she was not smiling when she went by again on her way out.



Apart from noticing that she was well dressed—maybe a shade too well dressed for applying for a secretary's job—I didn't then pay much attention to what she was wearing. It really wouldn't have mattered, since she happened to be wearing exactly the same thing the next day when she came to work. Phyllis Regan called this to my attention at the coffee machine where I ran into her and Betty Pringle sipping hot chocolate and fanning the dreary embers of some recent office scandal. They ostentatiously changed the subject when they saw me coming. Phyll asked me what I thought of Hempel's new secretary. I said I hadn't yet met her.

"She must have a thing about brown," said Phyll, with one of those smiles that her buck teeth make even more malicious. "She's wearing the same dress today she had on yesterday when she came in to be interviewed for the job."

"Same dress," added Betty, "same shoes, same rosebud corsage, same little thingamajig in her hair."

A bitchy but hardly memorable remark, or so I thought at the time, but then the following morning Tom Ogilvie draped himself over my desk and started rubbing my shoulder in that irritating way of his. He used to be a minor

league ball player and still retains the mannerisms of the diamond. "Hey, skipper, she's wearing it again today."

"Who's wearing what again today?"

"Hempel's new girl. Esther March. These cats around here are all worked up because she's wearing the same dress today she wore yesterday and the day before."

"So what?"

"The way they talk you'd think there was a law against it."

Later that afternoon I took some inventory run-offs into Hempel's office and got a good look at Esther March. All I can say is, Phyllis Regan should be the last one to talk. At least Esther's dress wasn't loud. Phyllis always wears these psychedelic muu-muus because she thinks they make her look glamorous. Maybe they would, if you put a bag over her head; but I did see what the girls meant about Esther's dress. ("Oh, it's darling, but just too fussy for an office—unless the boss is taking you out to lunch or something.")

The details of the dress, some of which had to be defined for me later by one of the girls, might be described like this: the color was topaz; the material, taffeta. It had a full skirt, long sleeves, a panel of lace set in the bodice, and a corsage of yellow rosebuds was pinned to the shoulder. Her shoes looked new and expensive: dark brown suede spikes. The "thingamajig" in her hair was a wide flat velvet bow perched on top of her head.

It must have been the day after this that Esther's dress became the number one topic along the grapevine. I suppose people were weary of hashing over what Mr. Swallow said to Patty about Gloria's bra, and I doubt Swallow ever made that crack anyway, he's such an old stick. Esther's dress was now *the* conversation piece. I mean, no matter where you went, even down in Cost, there was somebody to give you that arch smile and you knew what was coming. When I went down to give Jimmy Tilbridge yesterday's production schedule, that little blonde next to him leaned over and said, "Hey, what do you think about Mr. Hempel's new girl and that *dress*?"

"I like it."

"I know, it's darling, but every *day*?"

"What is this?" said Jimmy. "Is it really true she's worn the same dress every day since she started?"

Like a record I was already sick of hearing, the girl chimed in, "Same dress, same shoes, same rosebud corsage, same doohickey in her hair. Did you ever hear of anything so funny? I mean, the dress is *adorable*, but . . ."

Now, to us guys there was nothing so outrageous in all this. Odd, yes; amusing, of course, but nothing to get all steamed up about. But then, unlike the girls, we didn't have this silly mystique about clothes. We didn't go uptown at noon and shop for shoes and blouses and hats and sweaters and come back and put on a fashion show at each other's desk with coos and clucks of admiration and envy. We might joke about our ties now and then, but we weren't all hung up on the subject. Not that any of those women were what you would call a fashion plate, and even some of them wore the same dress, out of necessity, more frequently than they would have preferred, but this was entirely natural. Esther March's wearing the identical ensemble day after day was not natural. The clotheshorses interpreted it as a subtly ironical affront. Esther's dress caused their finery to go unnoticed, and hers wasn't even a new dress. The cattiest of the group insisted it must be at least ten years old; it was not only fussy, it was tacky. Pinning a fresh corsage of rosebuds on it every day only made it more ridiculous.

What rankled most, however, was that Esther herself could not be dismissed as a kook, nor reviled as a grouch. Every group must have its mavericks and oddballs, its jokers who serve as touchstones upon which the group as a whole is wont to express its normalcy and its superiority. The idiosyncratic behavior of the jokers poses no threat to the average, but instead strengthens its solidarity; but Esther was not an eccentric. Her behavior was normal and her manner invariably nice.

"If she's not careful," said Phyllis Regan spitefully, "Elaine Jessup is going to lose her title as Miss Goody Two Shoes of 1970 to our dear little Esther."

This was unfair. Esther's was not that cloying sweetness that invites intimacy, but rather the warmly modest, genteel refinement of a saint among women, the kind of sweetness that makes every man a courtier and every woman a friend—but no one a confidant. There were many oblique remarks made in an attempt to unravel the mystery of Esther's dress, though nothing malicious enough, even from Phyllis, to be called a dig. The meanest observation suggested it was no more than a very clever device to attract attention. After all, Esther was no beauty, and even if she were to put every penny she made on her back, she still couldn't compete with some of these glamor pusses, so what could be more shrewd than to do just the opposite: stick with one dress and never

vary the ensemble by so much as a brooch or handkerchief. There was no doubt it did prick the curiosity of some of the bachelors. More than one of them tried to date Esther and were turned down flat, even Todd Delaney, the handsomest man in the office. The fact that she was obviously not out to hook a man did not, however, placate the other girls, though it may have dulled their malice.

Eventually, someone was bound to ask her bluntly why she wore the same outfit every day. By now the girls were nearly insane with curiosity and, naturally, it fell upon Phyll Regan to do the asking.

Esther's answer, uttered in the sweetest of voices and showing no sign of being offended by the question, did not satisfy the curiosity. "The same dress?" she said, innocently surprised. "Oh, but it isn't. It just looks the same."

"It's just the answer you deserved," I told Phyll. "You might as well go in a hospital and ask a nurse why she wears the same dress every day."

"Don't be an idiot. This isn't a hospital—although you sometimes wonder, with nuts like her around. Besides, in a hospital *all* the nurses wear the same thing."

This was, of course, the whole point. If one nurse were allowed to wear a different style and color uniform every day, the morale of her co-workers would deteriorate as rapidly as the morale of the girls around here began to deteriorate. Mrs. Bolton had to give them all a pep talk on efficiency. There was an alarming increase in absenteeism, and it seemed to me the girls were more waspish than usual. That Esther's dress was an unsettling influence had by now been communicated to the powers that be, but it was not the sort of issue with which they had ever been called to deal. It was rumored that Mr. Keeler did suggest to Mr. Hempel that he might adroitly encourage Miss March to wear a different dress at least once a week to appease the wrath and cool the resentment of the other girls. Hempel flatly refused. As far as he was concerned, Esther March could come to work every day in the week stark naked as long as she continued to be such a whiz at taking dictation and turning out such flawless letters.

The situation did not change for some weeks, and then the girls got the ammunition they needed to wage all-out war against Esther March. It was provided by Sue Butterfield, a vacant-faced blonde who had previously worked for Cranford and Leeds, downtown. She got a job here in Sales and, though due to chronic tardiness her

career with us was of short duration, she stayed long enough to spark the conflict that soon began to rage. Sue immediately became a chum of Phyll Regan, and it was Phyll who broadcast the news that Sue had known Esther from downtown. According to Sue, Esther had also worked for Cranford and Leeds—until she was fired.

Phyll was coaxing all this out of Sue, who really didn't need any coaxing. "Now tell him *why* she was fired."

"Well," said Sue, shifting her gum from one side of her mouth to the other and fixing me with a dumb stare, "I said we all *assumed* she was really fired."

"Okay, okay, but tell them why."

"Promise you won't repeat this, but she was having an affair with a married man."

"And tell him who the married man was."

"Adrian Kelly."

My stunned reaction couldn't have pleased them more. I couldn't believe it. *Ade* Kelly?

"That's not all," said Phyllis. "When Esther was at C and L, she wore that same tired dress every day there, too."

"Same dress, same shoes, same corsage, same bow in her hair . . ."

Judicious cross-examination soon produced the fact that this "affair" between Esther March and Ade Kelly was based purely on conjecture. Ade had resigned his position at C and L and Esther quit her job shortly after. But wasn't that indication enough? Why should they both have quit perfectly good jobs practically at the same time and for no good reason? Besides, they had been seen together more than once. In fact, Sue and her boyfriend had seen them in the automat, and they were acting very mysterious, pretending they weren't even together.

"I mean, they weren't even at the same table," said Sue. "That was because they saw Hal and me there, too, and they didn't want us to get suspicious."

"And now they both turn up here," declared Phyllis with a knowing smirk. "Even Goody Two Shoes couldn't claim *that* was just a coincidence."

"Well," said Sue primly, "everyone at C and L knows I'm not the type that goes around making things up, but nobody has to draw me a picture. I'm not *that* dumb."

The damage was done. The malice was no longer veiled, the invective no longer confined to innuendo. Sweet, innocent, hoity-toity Esther March and Adrian Kelly! Esther mixed up in one of those sordid messes with a married man. Phyllis immediately dubbed her Messie Essie. The war was on.

Ade Kelley was in some ways as much a mystery as Esther. He was quiet and not at all self-assertive. He looked like a man with a lot on his mind. Though not over forty, he was something of a nervous wreck. His hair was gray at the temples, he smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, took more trips to the coffee machine than Phyll Regan, and had a nervous tick that made one corner of his eye keep scrunching up. Some of the girls thought this harried air gave him a sexually appealing look. Indeed, his sensitive, lined face must once have been extraordinarily handsome but, though he still had a good build, there were rumors he had been drinking like a fish and the effect was beginning to tell around his waist and under his worried blue eyes.

Now, even if these allegations were true, and I was at first inclined to doubt them, it should not have explained Esther's dress; but it did, at least to the satisfaction of the girls.

"We were right the first time," said Phyllis, with a sneer. "She just does it to attract attention. It's just the sort of cheap trick that kind of home-breaker would resort to. No wonder they were both canned at C and L."

"You don't know that."

"Oh, you're just like all these guys. Now you know what she is, you stick up for her. Wait and see, buster. The same thing will happen here. They'll both wind up getting the ax."

I grinned. "You mean, they will if you have anything to do with it."

Her crocodile eyes widened in outraged innocence. "It's no skin off my nose what they do. But the company won't put up with that kind of hanky-panky for very long."

In fairness to the girls, I should admit that I may have falsely given the impression that the fellows in the office refrained from all this malicious gossiping and rumor spreading, but I'm sure that anyone who has ever worked in a big office would know this isn't true. The men did their share of it, though perhaps with less rancor and waspishness. Some of the fellows whose vanity had been wounded when they were given the cold shoulder by Esther were delighted to learn that it wasn't because she was too pure to play; some of them didn't hesitate to make snide comments to Ade Kelly whenever they had a chance, and the way he played dumb only enforced the general belief in the story's truth. I still wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen what I did with my own eyes.

I had a date with Jane Isaacs, who works in Payroll, to meet for dinner at The Purple Mynah. Knowing she would be late, I stopped in the bar for a drink. The first person I laid eyes on was Ade Kelly. He sat at the bar alone, nursing an old-fashioned. When I greeted him he gave a little nervous recoil. I perched on the next stool and we chatted for a few minutes, but he seemed only vaguely aware of my presence, as if deeply engrossed in his own private thoughts. I kept glancing hopefully at the door, wishing Jane would show up.

From the bar in The Purple Mynah you can look across a bamboo partition to see the upper level of the adjacent dining room. I hadn't done so until then, but now that conversation with Ade was proving impossible I let my gaze wander about the room, and that was how I happened to spot Esther sitting alone at a dimly lit corner table in the dining room. There was a candle burning in the middle of the table and above it her face, pale and mysterious, the eyes mere shadowy pits, was watching us. She was wearing that same dress and on her shoulder, deeper than gold in the candlelight, the usual corsage of yellow rosebuds.

My embarrassment was worse now because I was so conscious of *his*. At the same time I felt a twinge of annoyance. It wasn't my fault I had blundered into their plans and put a hitch in them. If that was their game they should choose less prominent restaurants than The Purple Mynah, although with its dim lighting and exotic decor, I can see why it would appeal to them. No doubt Esther was supposed to meet him in the bar, had seen me and detoured into the dining room, hoping I'd soon get up and leave. I felt sufficiently piqued to toy with the idea of proposing to him that all four of us should have dinner together. That would have shaken him up, and what a tale we could tell next day at the office. Not that we would have, of course. At least I wouldn't, but I don't know about Jane. She's quite a blabbermouth.

Maybe it would serve them right, but to me there was something touchingly sad about an affair between these two. Without knowing anything about the true nature of the situation, one got the feeling of something inherently tragic about it: Ade with his drinking problem, his facial twitch, his rapidly fading but still striking good looks, and Esther with her gentility, her quiet pride, her air of mystery—and her dress. Her notorious, unforgettable, exasperat-

ing, incomprehensible brown *dress*!

At the same time, it would be silly to pretend I hadn't seen Esther. She had seen me looking at her; she would tell him.

"I think I see one of our fellow workers in the dining room," I said casually.

He didn't move his head to look. He must have guessed that she had come in. All he said was, "Oh? Who?" His fingers were wrapped tightly around his glass. His head drooped forward.

"Esther March."

With a swiftness that startled me, he raised the glass to his lips, drained it, then set it down with a force that might easily have shattered it. The bartender gave him a funny look. Ade said nothing.

I laughed. "I'll be damned if she isn't wearing that same dress. Ade, why on earth do you suppose she—"

"Sorry," he cut me off. "I've got to get home. I'm late." He jammed his hand into his pocket for his wallet, scattered some bills on the bar, didn't wait for his change, and barged out of there without even a glance toward the dining room. On the way out he almost collided with a woman coming through the door.

It was Jane. She looked amused, but shaken, as she joined me. "Wasn't that Ade Kelly? Did you see the way he almost knocked me down?"

"He left in a hurry, yes."

Her green eyes glittered. "How come?"

"I'm afraid I threw a monkey wrench into his plans for the evening. Don't look now, but Esther March is sitting alone at a corner table. She must have come in while I was chatting with Ade here at the bar. When I mentioned I'd seen her, he tore out of here like his pants were on fire and it was raining in the street."

"No!" This short word cannot begin to convey the long drawn-out gasping manner in which it was uttered, with all the overtones and undertones of a gossip-loving woman whose most reprehensible instincts have just been supremely gratified. I knew she couldn't wait to get to the office next morning and spread the story.

She didn't disappoint me. Tom Ogilvie brought me coffee at ten o'clock and eyed me as if he were on the pitcher's mound and I were threatening to steal second. "Party pooper!"

"Huh?"

"I heard Esther and Ade Kelly were holding hands at The Purple Mynah last night and you spoiled their fun."

"It wasn't quite like that," I said

dryly, not wishing to elaborate.

"Oh, really? Phyll said they were right in the middle of their dinner when you and Jane came in and they both got all shook up and hightailed it out of there, leaving half a bottle of champagne behind."

"Was Phyll there?"

"No, but she said Jane told Sue and Sue told Phyll."

"And Phyll told you. I'm surprised it's even that accurate."

I told him what had really happened, but afterward I wished I'd kept my mouth shut, since now there would be two versions of the story circulating and nothing fed the flames of gossip better than ambiguity. Not that it really mattered. After this, it was accepted as gospel that Esther and Ade Kelly were having a clandestine love affair. As further confirmation of the already damaging testimony, Jessie Proudfoot submitted that she had been crossing Armory Park Sunday evening and had seen Ade Kelly walking his dog on a nearby path, and when she was leaving the park she saw Esther March, wearing that same dress and corsage, walking slowly toward that very path where Jessie had seen Ade.

Something was bound to happen. The situation was too potentially explosive. Word of it reached the wrong ears, or, as Phyll would have it, the right ears. One Friday afternoon word leaked out that Ade Kelly had been fired. His work had been unsatisfactory, and lately he had been taking too many days off without legitimate reasons.

On the following Monday Phyll was spreading an even more exciting tidbit.

"I was right about Ade, wasn't I? I knew he'd get the ax. And guess what? *Esther March has quit.* Now we won't have to look at that ghastly dress anymore. All I can say is, good riddance!"

In itself, this was enough to keep the gossip mill grinding for another few days, but after that Esther and her dress and Ade Kelly would have become stale news; some fresher scandal would be found to supplant it. But then, three days after being fired, Ade Kelly went into his garage, stuck the barrel of a hunting rifle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

I thought there would be more people from the office at the funeral, but other than the men he had worked for, I was the only one—except, of course, Esther. I suppose that's why they didn't come, and why I very nearly stayed away myself. After all, gossip had helped to guide Ade's finger to that trigger, and we were all guilty of that. I know I sat as far away

from Esther in the chapel as I could. I don't think I'd have had the courage to look her in the eye, but I did sit where I could see her face. Although very pale, she appeared to be as self-contained as she always was. Not once did I see her eye glisten or her lip tremble. When it was over I stayed in my seat, not wishing to run into her outside; but she, too, remained where she was until there were only she and I and Ade left in the chapel.

Finally she stood up, walked slowly to the casket and stood gazing down into that cold, waxen face, restored by death and the mortician's art to at least a mask of its former beauty. As I watched, she did something I thought extraordinarily touching: unpinned that familiar corsage of yellow rosebuds from her shoulder and gently laid it upon his breast. Then she quickly turned and walked out.

I followed, overcome by emotion. Outside on the steps, in a cold drizzle, I saw an elderly gray-haired man talking to Esther, consoling her, I supposed, although his face was stern and Esther's expression more defiant than bereaved. Suddenly she turned her back on him and walked away down the street. I never saw her again.

As I was hurrying toward my car I passed the old man standing at the bus stop, turning up his coat collar in a vain effort to ward off the rain. On an impulse, I asked him if he wanted a lift downtown. He was quick to accept the offer.

"Ade was my nephew," he said, when we were in the car. "I must say it was a shock to see how greatly he had changed. I live in Florida now. It's been years since I saw him."

I don't know why I said it, but it was a long ride downtown and I was curious. "Did you know about Ade and Esther? I saw you talking to her."

He looked puzzled. "Ade and Esther?"

"She must have loved him very much." I could still see her, placing those yellow rosebuds on his breast.

He looked at me coldly now. "My dear young man, you can't have known either of them very well. Esther March hated and despised my nephew."

"Oh, but—"

"I can't imagine why she came to his funeral. Unless it was to gloat."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

Ordinarily, the man beside me might have been inclined toward reticence, but after a funeral one has an urge to talk, an eagerness

to assert one's place among the living. "Minister's eulogy wasn't bad," he said. "But not very relevant. They seldom are." He paused, stared out the window. "Once upon a time Ade was going to marry Ellen March, Esther's twin sister. Ellen was a sweet, shy little thing. Absolutely mad about Ade. Couldn't blame her, he was a swell-looking fellow in those days. But flighty. It was all arranged. They were going to be married by a justice of the peace. Esther and I were going to stand up with them. Ellen and Esther were waiting when we got there. We could see them through the door from an outer office. Ellen looked radiant. But Ade . . . he just stood there, looking at her through that door. I never saw a face as white as his. Just stood there as if he'd turned to stone. Then he said, 'I can't . . . I can't . . .' And he just bolted. Just turned around and walked right out of there and didn't come back. That poor little girl. I'll never forget the look on her face. A few days later she took an overdose of sleeping pills and died."

I waited. The rain was falling harder now, drumming on the car roof. "And Esther . . .?"

"Oh, Esther took it as hard as her sister. You know how it is with twins sometimes. It was like Ade had done it to her as much as to Ellen. She swore she'd never let Ade forget that he had killed her sister. You know how people will say things at a time like that. I suppose she's never even seen him since then, until today."

I saw no reason to set him straight. It would have been too much like gossiping.

"It really gave me a jolt," he said, "seeing her like that. I said to myself, it's Ellen!"

"They were identical twins?"

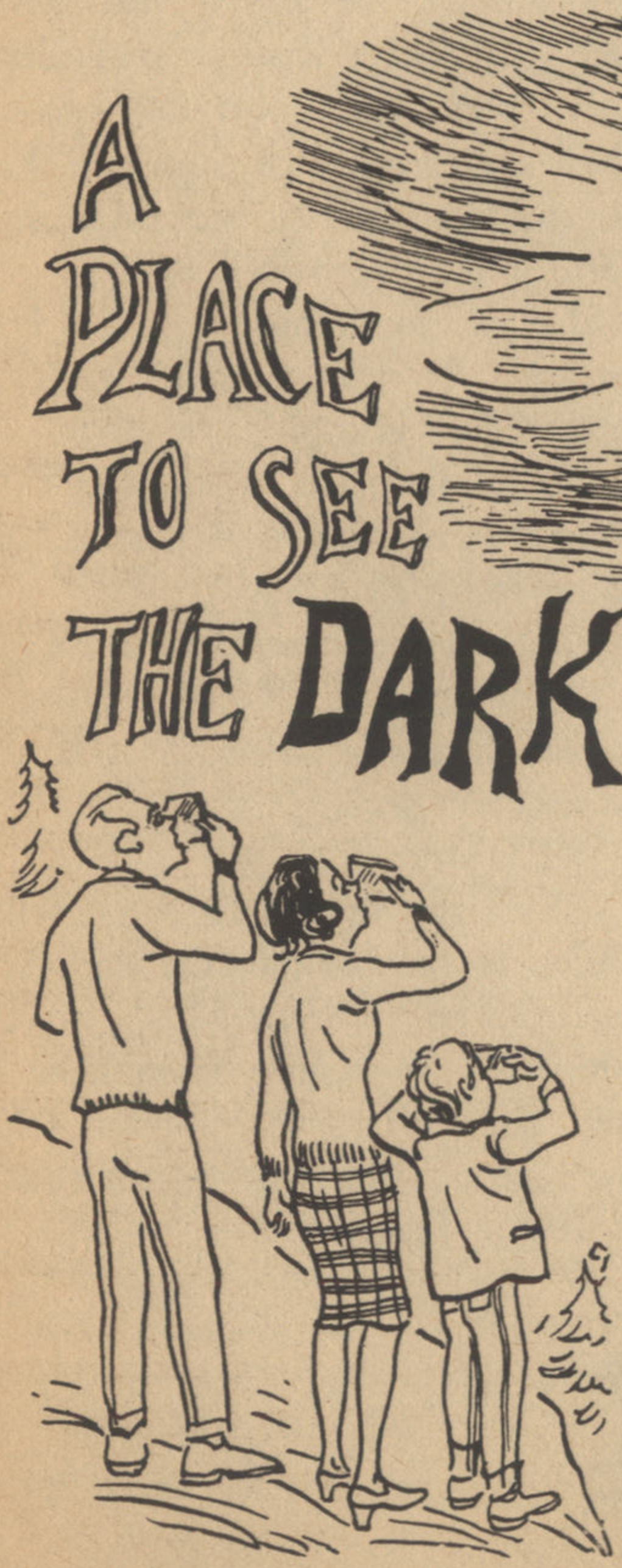
"Oh, no. Didn't look any more alike than any sisters. It was the dress, you see."

"The dress?"

"Esther's dress. It was what Ellen wore that day she and Ade were to be married. That's exactly the way she looked, from head to toe. Same dress, same shoes, same corsage of yellow roses, same little thing in her hair . . ."

If it be true that "eclipses stain both moon and sun," is it possible the glitter of Baily's Beads could bestir an ecliptic greed in man?

A PLACE TO SEE THE DARK



HE SAID GOOD-BYE to Mary and the kids and backed the car out of the garage.

She was standing there by the side of the driveway as she always did, looking pale and worried. "Be careful, George."

"Of what? The women?" She had a way of imagining adultery every time he went on the road.

"I mean the robberies. There have been so many robberies."

"I'm always careful. I always come back, don't I?"

"Phone me tonight from the motel."

"All right," he agreed. It was a simple enough request, and it might keep her off his back for a while.

He drove down to the office

and parked outside long enough to get the pouch from Mr. Briggs. "It's a good lot, George. Nearly $90,000 in diamonds and a few other things besides."

"In such a small package."

"Good things come in small packages, George. Do you have your gun?"

"It's in the glove compartment, but I wouldn't know how to use it if I had to."

"You read the papers. Three jewelry salesmen have been robbed in the past two months, and one of them was killed. I don't want it to happen to you, George. You've got a wife and family to think of."

"Don't worry."

"You have your list of stops, and copies of the orders?"

"Of course," he said. "Stop worrying."

Mr. Briggs rubbed his sweaty palms together. "I always worry about these trips. They're too dangerous, George. Too dangerous."

He left Mr. Briggs standing in the doorway and headed north toward the turnpike. The pouch of carefully sorted jewels was locked in the sample case by his side.

George Hagen was a jewelry salesman, and had been for nearly half of his forty-two years. The early years had consisted mainly of messenger work for the firm that now employed him; transporting a small, uncut stone across Manhattan, picking up payments or trades from the diamond merchants off Fifth or the auction houses below Fourteenth Street. Gradually, as old Mr. Briggs had come to trust him more, he'd joined the ranks of the full-fledged salesmen, flying to San Francisco or driving to Boston with a selection of fine gems.

Often in his hotel rooms at night he'd spread the diamonds and rubies and sapphires out on the dresser top and just gaze at them, watching the twinkle of their

mirrored images, feeling for a short time a sense of beauty and power. He was a man who loved his jewels, and loved even more the things he knew they could buy. For Mary and the children, it was just another job, a job with a certain amount of danger involved, but for George Hagen it was something more.

Perhaps for him it dated back to a summer in the early Thirties when his father had driven the family north into Canada to view a total eclipse of the sun. He was not yet in school at the time, but he still remembered the trip north in the open touring car. It was a long journey for those days, even though they lived quite close to the border. He remembered his mother snorting and saying it was too long to travel to a place just to see it get dark, but the eclipse had impressed him as no other event of his childhood had.

They'd observed its coming through smoked glasses from the top of a hill, facing the sun, and though the period of total darkness had lasted only a minute and a half, it had been worth the two-day journey. George was especially impressed by the minute gleaming points of light as the irregular surface of the moon moved to cover the sun.

"They're called *Baily's Beads* by astronomers," his father explained. "They look just like diamonds."

In truth, they did. George always remembered them, and in his mind always connected the coming of darkness with the glitter of diamonds. Often at sunset, while he was growing up, he would stand in the back yard of their home, trying to see again those gleaming diamonds of the sun. He did not understand for many years that they came only during a total eclipse.

He had told none of this to Mary during their years together, because he was really a private person. He talked little of his job or his day-to-day activities, and what he did say about his frequent trips only served to make her nervous.

"Look, George," she'd say, pointing out yet another item in the evening paper. "Another diamond salesman robbed! That's four this year!"

"Should I quit, dear? Would you be happier without a weekly pay check coming in?"

"But it's *dangerous*, George!"

He supposed it was a bit dangerous these days, even with all the precautions the company took. On this trip, driving into New England, he was carrying $90,000 in diamonds. That was their wholesale price. Retail, they might

bring double the amount. Toss in a few other items in his case and it came to around $200,000, retail, but he knew men in the trade who carried a million on them without a worry. Mr. Briggs himself, nearly seventy years old, had carried two thousand carats of unset diamonds all the way to Los Angeles.

There had been four large robberies in the industry this year, three in the past two months. George had known one of the men slightly, the one who'd come out of it with a broken skull and two bullets in his ribs. When it had happened, he'd sent the man flowers and gone to see him in the hospital—and wondered why afterwards, since he'd never been more than a chance business acquaintance.

George turned off the Connecticut Turnpike a little before noon and began scouting the route for a decent place to lunch. Finally he found one. He locked the car carefully and took a table by the window, where he could watch it while he ate. If all went well, he could still make a stop in Waterbury this afternoon, then drive on to be in Boston the following morning. He'd made the trip through New England before, but never really liked it. The stops made flying impractical, and he wasn't that much on driving in the warm weather.

The rest of the drive into Waterbury was uneventful. It wasn't until he'd left there and headed north into Massachusetts that he noticed the green sedan which seemed to be following.

That evening George Hagen stopped in a motel where he'd stayed before, just outside Boston, and phoned Mary from his room.

"Is everything all right, George?"

"Everything's fine, dear. Perfect weather up here."

"Will you be home tomorrow night?"

"It depends. Might be the day after, if I get hung up in Boston."

"Be careful, George. Really be careful! Do you have the gun in your room?"

"Of course not! I couldn't shoot anybody with it anyway."

"George . . ."

"I know—I'll be careful." He reached for a cigarette but couldn't manage to light it while he held the phone. "How are the kids?"

"Fine. Susan's out on a date with that Jimmy. Just to the movies. Ron's up in his room with some comic books."

"Look, Mary, I'll phone you tomorrow if I'm not coming home."

"All right, George, but be—"

"Good night," he said and hung up. He walked to the window and

looked out at the motel parking lot. It was beginning to get dark, but there was still enough light to see the green sedan he'd noticed earlier on the highway. There was a man inside, smoking a cigarette.

George frowned and glanced at the locked attaché case on the bed. He opened it and weighed the pouch of diamonds carefully in one hand, glancing about the room for some place to hide it, but he did not have the mind for it. Every place looked so obvious. He went through the other things in his sample case: envelopes, letterheads, order forms, stamps, everything he needed to mail the order back to the office, check enclosed, another small triumph; ball-point pens, road maps, address book.

He snapped shut the case, locking it again, and returned to the window. The man still sat behind the wheel of the green sedan. Waiting for dark, perhaps? George looked up at the western sky. The sun had already disappeared from view behind the trees, and even as he watched, the street lights came on.

He thought of phoning the police, but what would he say? That a man looked suspicious? Pacing, lighting another of the cigarettes he'd promised to abandon, he considered the possibilities. Boston was only a half hour away, along a lighted, well-traveled highway. Wouldn't it be better to leave now and seek the relative safety of the city? If the man followed, he'd know the truth for sure, and he could find a policeman much easier on the streets of Boston than out here in the suburbs.

Sighing, George slipped back into his coat. He packed the little overnight bag and carried it, along with his attaché case, out to the car. The room had already been charged to his firm, so there was no need to check out with the desk clerk. He started the motor and wheeled the car out of the parking lot without a backward glance at the green sedan.

He'd driven about a block when he risked a look in the rear-view mirror and saw that the car was, indeed, following. There could be no doubt about it now. The man had picked him up in Waterbury, or perhaps even followed him all the way from New York.

George increased his speed a bit. The other car speeded up, too, but there was no need to worry. Ahead, the lighted highway stretched on toward Boston. Another half hour and he'd be there.

Suddenly a line of flashing red lights, and then a detour sign came into view. He cursed softly and turned left, onto a secondary road that was completely unlighted. The

green sedan followed him closely.

Now, George was beginning to sweat for the first time. The motel room he'd deserted in a panic seemed like an unattainable haven. He'd been foolish to run, to force the man into the open, to take his chances on the road; but he hadn't known of the detour, of the darkness.

His car bumped along the dirt road detour, and he realized suddenly that the green sedan was gaining, perhaps trying to force him off the road. He did the only thing he could—speeded up and looked for a side road where he could lose the man. He saw one ahead in the vanishing twilight, and swerved down it. The green sedan paused for an instant and then followed.

George's headlights followed the road down, and he panicked suddenly as he spotted the reflectorized sign by the side of the road: *Budsury Reservoir—Dead End*. He slammed on the brakes and stared out at the reservoir's calm waters. It was the end of the road.

The driver behind him must have realized it at the same moment. He stopped on the road, perhaps fifty feet back, and doused his headlights. This was it. With trembling hands, George Hagen reached across his locked attaché case and opened the glove compartment, groping in the dark.

The gun was strange in his hand, cold and hard and strange. Overhead, the sky was almost black. The last of the light had nearly disappeared, reminding him somehow of that day his father had driven the family to see the eclipse. He had come here, down this lonely dirt road where the darkness closed around him, to meet his fate.

George opened his car door, watching in the rear-view mirror. The man behind him had got out and was coming forward, his hand in his pocket. For one fleeting mad moment George considered giving him the diamonds and pleading for his life. Then he stepped out of the car and raised the pistol in his trembling hand.

"Wait a minute!" the other man said in the dimness, seeing the flash of the gun by the light from the car's interior. His own hand came out, and George saw the gun in it and fired two quick shots without really thinking.

The man staggered, toppled against the rear fender of George's car, and then rolled over in the dirt.

For a long moment nothing moved in the night air. The gun slipped from George's limp fingers and hit the ground. He hadn't wanted to use it, hadn't meant to

use it, but there'd been no choice. He walked over and stared down at the dim outline of the dead man. He kicked at the man's pistol, sending it a few feet away along the ground. Then, because the man had left his car door open, George walked up to it. The car would have to be moved off the road so he could get by, get back to a phone and call for help.

He started to get into the car and then stopped, thinking still about what he had done. Then he walked back to his car and opened the sample case, looking again at the twinkle and shine of the diamonds. He remembered the way the sun had looked just before the moon blotted it out, and he felt now as if he, too, had entered an eclipse.

George took the dead man's pistol and fired two bullets through the side windows of his car, then dropped it back on the ground, nearer his fingers. He poured the diamonds from their pouch, carefully separated them into three groups, wrapped each group in tissue and placed it in one of the envelopes from his case. He addressed each envelope to himself at home, and stamped it.

He turned the car around and managed to squeeze by the green sedan. Then he drove back the way he had come, slowly, in the dark, trying to think clearly.

Presently he saw a mailbox, and he stopped to deposit the three letters. He drove on a bit longer until he came to a telephone booth at the side of the road. He dropped a dime into the slot and dialed the operator. In a voice verging on panic, he told her, "Get me the police! I've been robbed!"

He waited, listening to the click of connections being made, and wondered what he was doing. Perhaps, it was like the eclipse, the dark shadow of the moon that blotted out all those years of his life. It was an eclipse that came to every man sometime, and this night it had come to George Hagen.

The detective's name was Dawkins, and he was a tall, neat man with piercing blue eyes. He sat across the desk from George, running through the night's events for the third time.

"And you say there were two men, Mr. Hagen?"

George wiped his palms. "That's right." He'd never have guessed he could do it, but then he'd never have guessed he could kill a man, either—even in self-defense. "They'd been following me at least since Waterbury. I tried to lose them by leaving the motel early and taking a back road, but they

forced me off, fired shots at my car."

"How did you end up down by the reservoir?"

"Like I told the officer, they took the diamonds and then one man got in and made me drive down that dirt road, right to the end. I think they were going to kill me and dump my car into the water. But when he got out of the car, I managed to open the glove compartment and reach my gun. I slid out and shot him, and then the second man took off, running across the fields with the diamonds. In the dark, I couldn't find him."

Detective Dawkins grunted. "You're a lucky man to be alive. We've contacted your wife back in New York."

George nodded. "There've been so many robberies lately. She was afraid I might be next, and I was. I only hope my boss understands that I couldn't do anything about it."

"You did quite a bit. You killed one of the men."

"I never thought I could do it."

Dawkins grunted and shuffled through some more papers. A uniformed patrolman came into the office and handed him a message. He read it, leaned back in his chair, and asked, "Has there ever been any trouble between you and your wife, Mr. Hagen?"

"Trouble? No, of course not! We have two fine children."

"Did she ever wonder about all your trips out of town?"

"I suppose any wife wonders. She worries a lot about me."

"Yes." Dawkins was playing with a pencil and now he put it down, focusing his hard blue eyes on George's face.

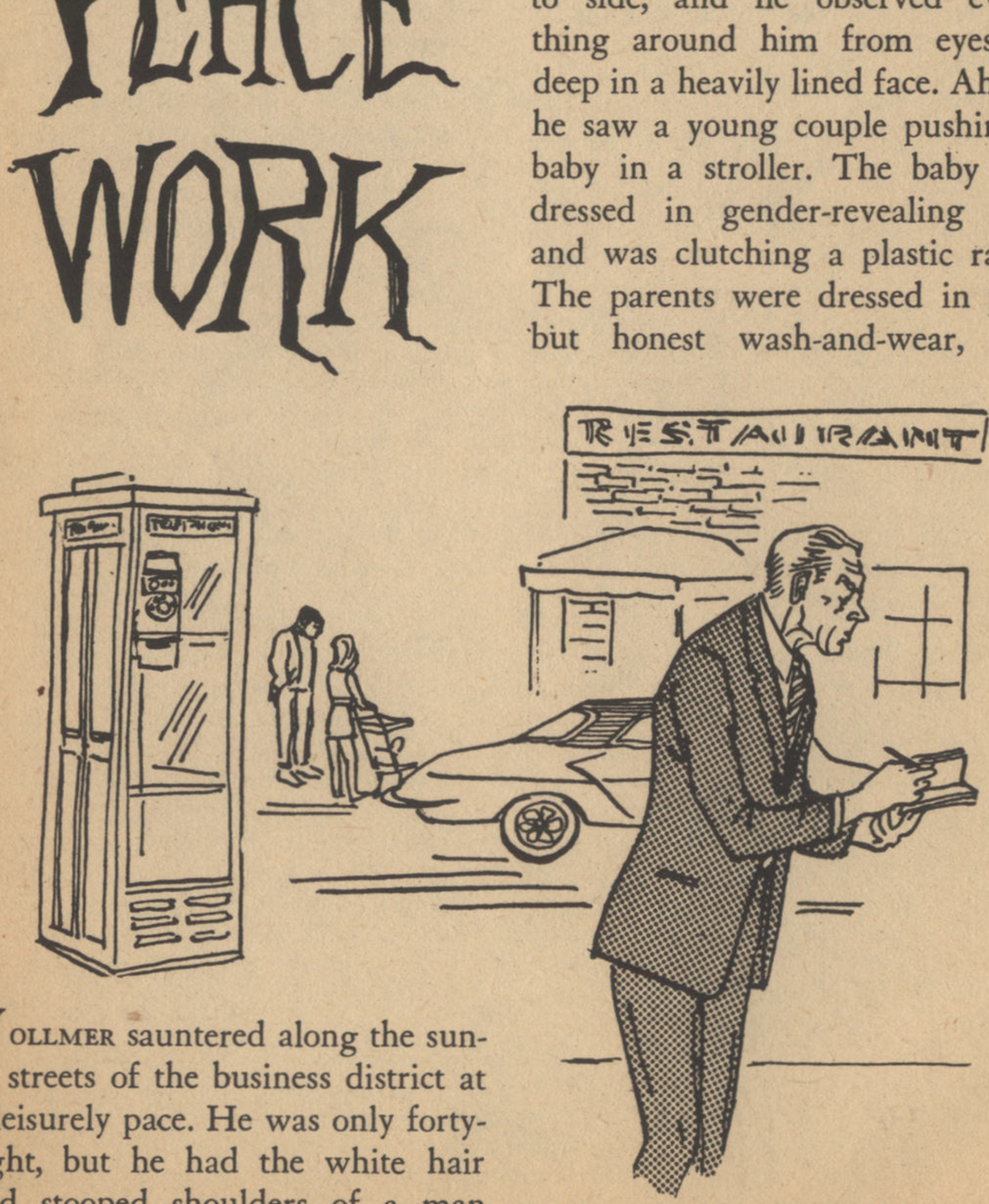
"Why do you ask?" George said, the sweat on his palms beginning again.

"Well, it seems, Mr. Hagen, that the man you shot wasn't a jewel thief at all. He was a private detective hired by your wife to get evidence for a divorce."

The room clouded and began to spin, and George felt a great weight settling over him. From somewhere far away, he heard the detective saying, "Now, do you want to tell us what you really did with those diamonds?"

A day in which nothing goes well may be more fact than fancy.

PEACE WORK



VOLLMER sauntered along the sunlit streets of the business district at a leisurely pace. He was only forty-eight, but he had the white hair and stooped shoulders of a man twenty years older. As he moved, his head turned slowly from side to side, and he observed everything around him from eyes set deep in a heavily lined face. Ahead, he saw a young couple pushing a baby in a stroller. The baby was dressed in gender-revealing blue and was clutching a plastic rattle. The parents were dressed in poor but honest wash-and-wear, and

clutched each other. It was all very touching.

When they paused to look through the window of a furniture store, Vollmer caught up to them and stopped. First, he gave his attention to the baby for a few seconds; then, when the parents noticed him, he turned to the father.

"He doesn't look like you," Vollmer said in a flat tone.

The young man glanced at his wife, then raised his eyebrows quizzically. He wore a short-sleeved shirt, and his well-muscled arms were deeply tanned.

"He doesn't look like you," Vollmer repeated, pointing toward the child who was looking up at them with his head tilted far back and his jaw hanging open. "You and your wife have blue eyes, the baby's eyes are brown. You sure he's yours?"

The woman giggled nervously and hugged her husband's arm. "H-hospitals don't make mistakes," she said.

"But people do," Vollmer said with conviction.

"Look, mister—" the father began.

Vollmer cut him off. "Are you sure he's *yours*?" he said pointedly, and the implication could no longer be missed.

The man grabbed the lapels of Vollmer's suitcoat. Vollmer made no effort to get away. He stared into the younger man's angry face without a sign of fear.

"If you weren't an old man, I'd break you in two!" the father shouted, displaying the lack of imagination Vollmer had noticed in similar situations.

"Are you man enough?" Vollmer asked drily.

The young man straightened his arms, pushing Vollmer away from him. Vollmer stumbled backward a few steps, then turned and strolled away as though nothing had happened. Behind him, he heard the woman ask: "What did he mean, Charlie?" She repeated the question several times with her voice growing increasingly shrill, showing she had long known the answer. Vollmer didn't look back.

A few blocks away Vollmer paused long enough to make a brief entry in a small green notebook. It took only a few seconds, then he was moving again.

Vollmer heard the rumble of twin exhaust pipes as an expensive white sports car coasted to the

by Alberto N. Martin

curb on the far side of the street. A tall man in a blue sport jacket climbed from behind the wheel. He had a yellow silk scarf tied at his throat in an ascot. As he walked around the front of the car, his right hand brushed affectionately over the vehicle's body as though it were a woman's.

Vollmer waited until the man entered a store, then he crossed the street and approached the car. When he reached it, he took a nail file from his pocket and held it close to his leg. While he walked past the car, he tore through twelve coats of hand-rubbed lacquer and into the metal beneath them, making a gouge the length of the sports car.

He kept walking at the same steady pace until he was two blocks away. Then he paused a moment to make another entry in his green notebook. He didn't wait to see the car owner's reaction; he knew what it would be.

It was twelve-thirty in the afternoon. Vollmer wasn't hungry, but this was the best time to visit a restaurant. He looked along the street for signs, then headed for the nearest one. As he would have predicted, all the booths and tables were occupied by secretaries and junior executives from nearby offices, and most of the stools at the counter were taken, too.

Once he was seated, he went into action. First, he polished the silver with his pocket handkerchief and made loud complaints about the restaurant's sanitation. Next, he criticized the food preparation and claimed the meat had been spoiled before being cooked. There followed ten minutes of frenzy during which he met every reasonable word with a shouted accusation or curse. His face grew purple and the veins of his neck stood out like the ribs on a Coke bottle. Then, when the waitress was in tears, several waiting customers had fled and the manager showed signs of being about to telephone the police, Vollmer stalked out of the place and disappeared in the lunch-hour crowd.

When he had put a little distance between himself and the restaurant, he stopped in a doorway to make another entry in his notebook.

In a few moments he was moving again. His last stop had been such a success that he immediately sought another restaurant. Unfortunately, as soon as he stepped inside, almost every employee turned to stare at him. It was obvious he'd been there before.

"You poisoners!" he shouted. "You'll hear from my lawyer, you poisoners!" He shook his fist in the air before making his retreat back to the street.

That rated another entry in the notebook, so he made it while waiting for a traffic light to change. A man standing beside him was tapping his foot impatiently. The man carried a paper bag with the name of a drugstore printed on it. The bones of his face pressed against tightly drawn pale skin, and his lips had a bluish tint that might almost have been a reflection from his suit, but wasn't.

Vollmer touched his shoulder and said, "Excuse me. I couldn't help noticing you. Have you seen a doctor recently?"

The man looked dumbly at Vollmer and his eyes blinked rapidly. They were a washed-out blue and he seemed to be having trouble focusing them.

"You really ought to see a doctor," Vollmer continued. "You remind me of my two cousins, and it's possible a cure has been found."

The man's lips began to twitch, and the traffic light changed. Vollmer stepped from the curb and left him standing there.

It was now time for phone calls. Vollmer always spent the last few hours, prior to making his Friday report, in a succession of phone booths. He entered the first vacant one he saw, propped open his notebook on the small shelf, and broke open a roll of dimes.

He began placing calls, dialing at random. If a man answered, he would breathe heavily into the mouthpiece until he hung up. If he reached a woman, Vollmer would laugh obscenely and make a series of indecent proposals until the line went dead. After each call, he made a check mark beneath a short descriptive passage in his notebook.

When the tenth call was completed, he left that booth and looked for another. He was always careful to make his calls from one exchange to another, never within the same exchange, so tracing a call would be next to impossible; but Vollmer chose to be extra cautious and stayed in no one booth for more than ten calls.

Once he was settled in another booth, he made calls threatening the lives of people whose names he had taken from that morning's newspaper. Then he moved on and made ten bomb threats—half to airlines and half to public buildings. After that, he found another booth from which to ask: "Do you know what your wife (or husband) is doing now?" followed by a knowing laugh. Then he made another series of calls, featuring heavy breathing and filthy remarks.

By the time his dimes were gone, it was nearly time for his weekly report. He had been working his way toward the company's main

office since leaving his apartment that morning, and now he had only a few blocks farther to walk. He covered the distance at a brisker pace than he'd used all day.

The Talbot Company was housed in a modern building of glass, steel, aluminum and plastic. Vollmer was a few minutes early, but he went directly to a fifth-floor waiting room and gave his name to an attractive blonde receptionist who was on duty there. In a short while the room was filled with other men who had arrived carrying small green notebooks identical to his own.

As soon as his name was called, Vollmer went past the receptionist and into a private office. A fat man sat behind a kidney-shaped desk, facing the door. "It's good to see you again, Vollmer," the man said. "I hope you've had a good week."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Talbot, it's been a good week. Waves of tension and anxiety are moving outward from my primary contacts like ripples on a pool." He handed the green notebook across the desk and stood waiting proudly.

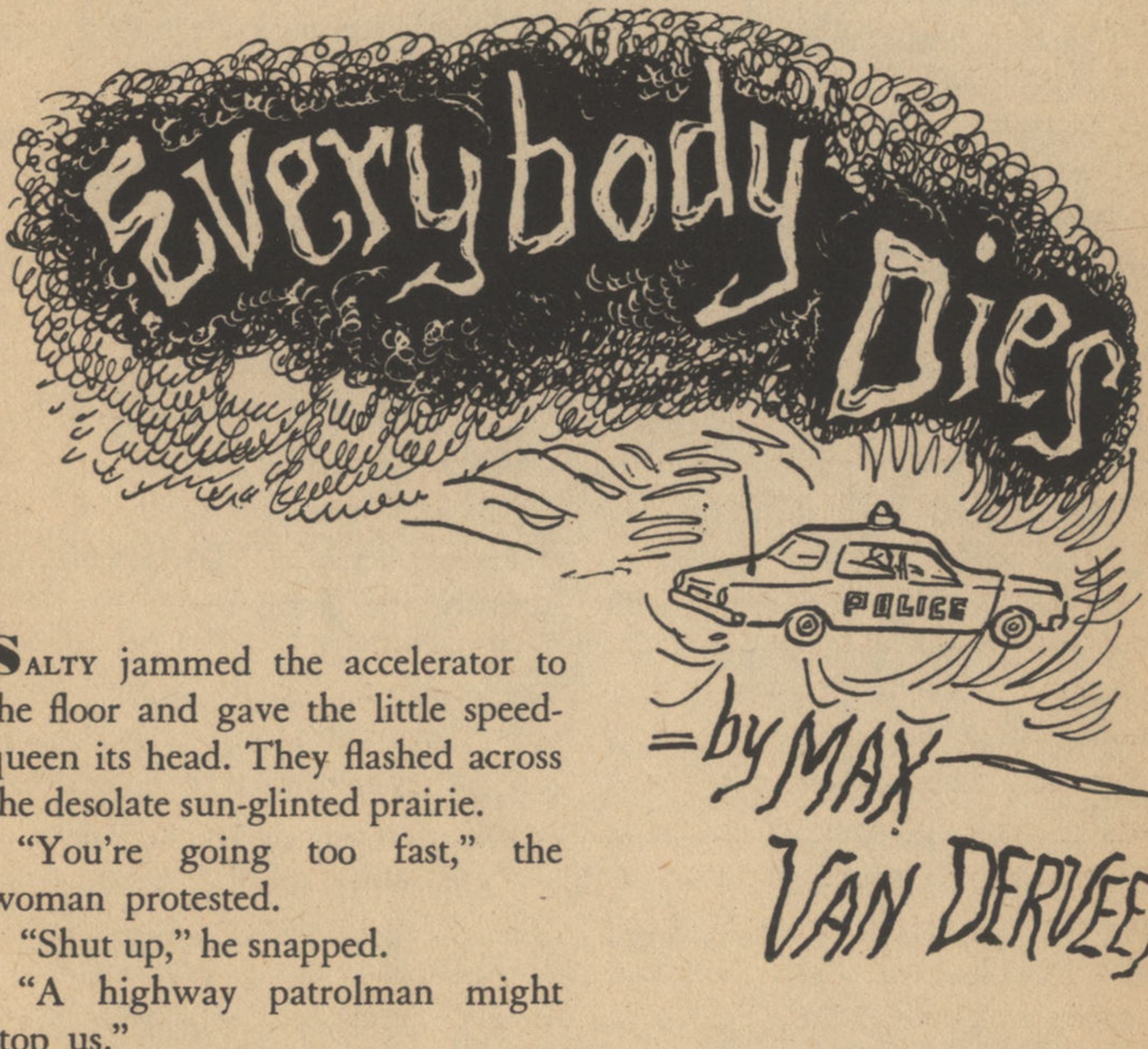
Talbot riffled the pages of the book, stopping several times to read entries. He nodded approval and his heavy jowls shook. Finally, he wrote some figures on a form and initialed it. "Here's your voucher," he said, giving the paper to Vollmer along with a fresh notebook. "Keep up the good work. I'll see you next week."

"Yes, sir," Vollmer said, and left the office. He tucked the notebook into his pocket and exchanged the voucher for a check at the cashier's second-floor office before leaving the building.

There was a bank a block away. Vollmer endorsed the check and presented it along with his identification to one of the paying tellers. The girl stamped the check and began counting out the money. "I see you work for the Talbot Company," she said, making conversation. "They manufacture pills, don't they?"

"Yes, tranquilizers," Vollmer offered with a pleasant smile. Now that he was no longer on duty, he could relax and be himself. "I'm in sales promotion."

One often finds himself unprepared for the shocking news.



SALTY jammed the accelerator to the floor and gave the little speed-queen its head. They flashed across the desolate sun-glinted prairie.

"You're going too fast," the woman protested.

"Shut up," he snapped.

"A highway patrolman might stop us."

"We're in the boondocks, honey. No cops."

"Slow down. Please? I'm afraid."

"Hang on to your girdle. This is livin'!"

"Salty, please. This isn't Indianapolis. You're not on the track anymore."

"Baby, how I know! Hear that wind singin'?"

"Stop! I want out!"

"Listen to that power plant!"

"I want out!"

"You want out, jump."

"Oh, Salty, you're crazy!"

"You didn't think so yesterday.

I wasn't crazy when I took that ex-brother-in-law of yours down to his bank on a Sunday morning, made him open his vault and hand over $72,649 in cold cash."

"But you shouldn't have locked him in the vault. That was crazy. Maybe he suffocated."

"The vault was vented."

"But maybe he died anyway. You don't care, do you? You don't care if Cecil died."

"No skin off my ears, doll."

"You weren't supposed to kill him!"

"I didn't."

"All I wanted you to do was rob him."

"Well, he's a little short of cash today, okay."

"Locking him in the vault wasn't part of it. If I'd known you were going—"

"Baby, you had a beef against Cecil."

"Well, yes. He forced Hubert into divorcing me. But if—"

"What you mean is, Cecil hired a private detective, and the private detective hired a photographer, and the photographer took your picture, several pictures, in—shall we say a compromising situation? —with a young jasper named—"

"All right, I wanted to get back at Cecil where it would hurt him the most. But slow down, please? If a patrolman stops us, he might search the car. He might find the money."

"We're only doin' one-thirty-two, doll. I've *averaged* better at Indy."

"That was years ago, Salty."

His reddish hair bristled. "Only three," he snapped.

"But your reflexes aren't as good as—"

"Razz."

"Your eyes. You said yourself your eyes have been giving you trouble."

"Not on the road, doll."

"You're not a young man anymore, Salty."

"Well, you ain't exactly a boot and leather-skirt cat."

"But I still want to live."

He chuckled. "To spend the seventy-two thou."

"Don't you?"

"Vegas, here we come!"

"Then slow down. Maybe there's a town up ahead. We have to be careful. We can't take chances."

"The wheel is where I live, baby. Speed is tonic. It settles my nerves."

"We might blow a tire."

"I know how to handle a blow-out."

"Something . . . something could go wrong with the motor."

"I've dropped rods all over brick."

"Salty, I'm serious! I don't want to go this fast!"

He eased off on the accelerator

suddenly. Angry, he gripped the steering wheel fiercely with both hands, keeping his brown gaze on the ribbon of highway. A town edged up out of the horizon ahead. He relaxed slowly as the town took shape. There had to be more prairie beyond the town. There had to be a side road, someplace he could dump Myra Druker. She had become a chain around his neck, a deadweight.

Three weeks earlier she had seemed a find. With a sleepy vibrance and a smell of wealth about her, she was fortyish, his age; a grass widow who sat alone at a tiny table in a cocktail lounge. Not a joint; he didn't frequent joints. The Arms had quiet elegance. She had welcomed with demureness his invitation to dance. They had been good together. They had remained good together, he with great expectations for the future, and she—as it turned out—with even greater.

When each came into focus to the other, it was with controlled cool.

"Myra, my dear, I do believe there has been a misunderstanding," Salty said. "I'm quite stony."

"Not even a BankAmericard?" she asked.

"Not even."

"Well, don't look at me, darling."

"You *look* wealthy."

"And you're wearing an expensive suit."

"Left over from the old days. Pampered. Nothing in that beautiful purse of yours, huh?"

"A matchbook."

"Which will not exactly pay a $79.28 tab, much less provide tip."

"And you suggest. . . ?"

"We bolt, casually."

"I think I shall powder my nose."

"How are you at opening and crawling through a window?"

"Before I met my ex-husband, I considered myself an expert."

"Meet you at the car."

"What about our wraps?"

"Will they total $79.28?"

"I doubt it."

"So somebody gets stuck."

Later, in her $350-a-month apartment, she paced, wafting a witching scent, and remarked, "Rent due in four days, and I was going to ask you to pay. Humph!"

"I'm holed up in a $10.50-a-week room, doll."

"Hell, you look and act like you have money."

"You too, cat."

"Well, once I did."

"Me, too."

"I married rich."

"I was drivin' rich."

"Then my dear brother-in-law chopped me down."

"A kid got me."

"I didn't pass any special favors

the brother-in-law's way, so he hired a private detective."

"A kid cried foul. Said I ran him off the track. He got me barred."

"Did you run him off a track?"

"He was clippin' my wings."

"He was better than you?"

"He had a better *car*."

"Maybe he was a better driver, too."

"*He* went off the track, I didn't."

"Was he killed?"

"He couldn't cry foul from a grave, honey. Only from a hospital bed."

"But you wouldn't have cared if he had been killed."

"No skin off my ears."

She gave a little shudder and hugged herself. "Salty, sometimes you frighten me. You can be so cold. So—*brutal* in your talk and attitude. Sometimes you act like a killer."

"What do you know about killers?"

"Well, I've read about them. I've heard about them. I've seen television shows and movies about men who are paid to kill."

"So all of a sudden I'm one of those, huh?"

"No, no. I didn't say that. But you display absolutely no emotion, and . . ."

She let the words trail off, and he peered at her. She suddenly seemed far away, deep in contemplation.

"Ever rob a bank, Salty?"

"Huh?"

"My ex-brother-in-law is the president of a bank."

"Well, la-de-da."

"All you'd have to do is take him down to his bank some Sunday morning and clean out his vault."

"Like pickin' apples from a tree, huh?"

"You could pick him up on his way to the country club. He leaves his place at nine o'clock every Sunday morning—religiously—to go to his country club. He always goes alone."

"Uh-huh."

"You clean out his vault, and we clear out of town."

"Sure."

"We could go out to Vegas or somewhere and get married."

"Yeah."

"Okay, we don't have to get married. We can divide."

"Tell me more, baby."

"You've got a fast car."

"A speedqueen."

"And you're an expert at the wheel."

"The best."

"You're also an amateur bank robber. Amateurs give police fits. No records to check. You don't have a record, do you?"

"It's the one thing I've managed

to miss, for some strange reason."

"So I point out a sucker to you —on his way to his country club."

She had pointed. He had robbed.

He also had intended buzzing straight as an arrow out of town, leaving her screeching and wailing, but she was not stupid or, perhaps, she was not trusting. At any rate, she was seated in the passenger bucket seat of his speedqueen when he burst out of the bank, and she had her seat belt hooked.

Now they rolled gently through the sleepy prairie town and then Salty put the accelerator on the floor again.

"Salty, please, let me drive for a while," Myra whined.

"Razz. Nobody else drives when I'm in a car."

"Just this once? Please?"

"Nobody. It's a vow I made a long time ago."

"We're over a hundred again."

"I smell Vegas."

He saw electrical power lines far ahead, going off at right angles from the highway. It could mean a side road, maybe a place to dump the excess baggage. He shot a glance into the rear-view mirror. The patrol car with its whirling dome light surprised him. He eased up on the accelerator. The wail of the siren reached him.

Myra whirled in the seat. "Oh, rats!" she rattled.

Salty allowed the patrol car to ease up beside him. The uniformed driver was alone. He stabbed air with a finger, pointing to the side of the highway.

Salty glanced up and down the highway. No other cars were in sight. He nodded to the patrolman, and then he fed gas to the speedqueen and shot half a car length out in front of the patrol sedan. Carefully, he eased toward the sedan.

With the sound of scraping metal, the patrolman whipped his car away from the speedqueen, and suddenly it shot off the highway. Salty watched in the rear-view mirror. He saw the sedan climb into the air—it seemed like a slow-motion version of a stunt driver going off a ramp—and then the sedan nosed down. It flipped, caromed off its top and landed on wheels. A huge ball of fire erupted, engulfing the sedan instantly.

"Oh, Salty . . ." Myra moaned.

Salty put his head down and rolled. He knew a special tenseness now, a special exhilaration. He was winning again. Soon there would be the roaring cheers of the frenzied crowd . . .

Soon they were high in the mountains. The air was thin and cool, and fragrant with pine. It seemed another world, a vast, empty world, but the highway re-

mained good. Salty tooled expertly, up and around, down and around, up again. They were on a peak when he wheeled into a pulloff area.

"Why are we stopping here?" Myra wanted to know.

"Leg stretch."

"How far is it to Vegas?"

"Who knows?"

"I wish we were there."

They stood side by side on the rim of a sharp drop. Huge boulders and deep gashes in the earth were heavily shadowed below them now. The late afternoon seemed enveloped in silence. They might be standing on the edge of a grave, Salty reflected. He lit a cigarette. Myra took it from his fingers. He lit another cigarette.

"We gonna split when we hit the bright lights, baby?" he asked.

"Down the middle," she said flatly. "You go your way, I'll go mine. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"You're too cold-blooded for me, Salty."

"You mean that road cop? He shouldn't have pushed."

"I told you not to speed. Maybe the man had a family."

"Maybe."

"You didn't have to kill him."

"All I did was run him off the road. He killed himself by not knowing how to handle a heap."

"Do you think he might have radioed in a description of your car before—"

"Naw."

"Maybe he radioed your license number."

"The cops would have us by now. They'd have set up roadblocks."

"Well, I'm worried. The sooner we get to Vegas, the better."

"You really mean the sooner you're rid of me the better, don't-cha, honey?"

She remained silent.

"Let's go," he bristled.

They turned toward each other, glowering. Then she twisted to fire the cigarette butt over the cliff edge. Salty took that instant to tune his ears. There was no sound of approaching cars. He lashed out with his left arm. The back edge of his stiff-fingered hand slashed viciously against Myra Druker's Adam's apple. Her yelp was cut off, and then she was gone from sight. He looked over the rim of the cliff. She was about thirty yards below him, sprawled and unmoving. He scrambled and leaped and slid down to her. She was unconscious, but she was breathing. Blood leaked from under her right ear.

He looked up at the cliff edge; no one there. He caught her armpits and pulled her down to a gash

in the ground. He rolled her into the gash and pitched and pushed boulders. Finally, she was covered. He dared to look up at the cliff rim again; nothing. He was perspiring profusely and breathing harshly as he clawed back up to level ground. He raced to the speedqueen, hooked the seat belt. The motor caught and purred.

A station wagon loaded with a family rolled in behind him. "Hey!" yelled the driver.

Salty grimaced. Everything inside him screamed, *Go! Get out!*

"You got any idea how far it is to the next town?" asked the wagon driver.

"No idea," Salty managed.

"My radiator is heatin' up."

"Sit and cool it," Salty advised.

He eased out onto the highway. It was one of the toughest pieces of driving he had ever faced. Every nerve screamed, *Zoom!* but he rolled smoothly, picking up speed at a slow pace until he was sure he was out of hearing range of the

family man with the heating problem.

Salty tromped suddenly, the speedqueen settled. He meshed gears beautifully, tires screeched their freedom. He rolled, up and over the mountain apex, then he was going down. It felt just like he was heading into the final lap with a comfortable lead. He sat back in the seat, both hands firm on the wheel, and laughed aloud. He kept the pressure on the accelerator. The crowd had paid good money to watch him. They deserved a whiz-bang final lap.

What the hell, first place prize was $72,649, and that wasn't peanuts.

Salty zeroed in on Vegas like the astronauts had zeroed in on the moon. He went first-class, and he was having a ball. He had a suite at fifty a day, the open gambling intrigued him, and the heavy population of free-flying women was a delight. One woman was a battery charger, had him clicking his teeth and whistling low under his breath each time he saw her. She easily was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Long and graceful in body and leg, straight black, black hair with bangs, black eyes, she was thirtyish, quiet, alert. Yet there was an air of carelessness about her, too, or maybe even a little restlessness and recklessness. Her bathing suit was two torrid strips of cloth, with large white polka dots on a sky-blue background. The suit looked new.

The woman returned his gaze every time he encountered her, but they did not speak. She always was accompanied by a tall, athletic man.

Salty lived high and easy and relaxed in that first week, but in the back of his mind there persisted a nagging. Sometimes he went to sleep remembering a cop sedan going up in a ball of fire. Other times he envisioned a tattered and torn Myra Druker somehow gathering superhuman strength to push aside boulders and work herself up out of a crevice grave.

He slept fitfully when alone, and he did not understand. Death was not new to him. He had tampered with death for as long as he could remember. Every time he went out onto the track, there always was the remote possibility he might die. A rookie driver might make a mistake ahead of him. Someone could misjudge from the rear, or a veteran might have uncontrollable car trouble. He had seen men die on the track, in war, at peace, so why should the death of a cop and a woman bug him? Death was a part of living. Death was down the track for everyone, somewhere . . .

He lounged in a web chair at

poolside. The sun was hot and the beer had made him drowsy. He kept an eye out for the woman in the white polka dots but she did not appear that afternoon. He knew a tinge of disappointment. On the other hand, it was time to forget the woman, time to move on, vacate this sun and neon-tinted heaven. There was a stirring in his bones, a twitch in his muscles. It was a feeling all drivers got twenty minutes before the call.

But move on to where? West to San Francisco? Back east to New York? Maybe down to Miami Beach, or there always was Mexico. He had a little more than $80,000 now. He had done all right on the tables and at the machines. "Fly, Salty," he said to himself, "before the unexpected swoops down on you."

"Say!" exclaimed a brassy voice. "Aren't you Salty . . . Salty . . ."

The stocky, pink-skinned man in yellow boxer bathing trunks and a green terry-cloth jacket stood snapping chubby fingers as he searched his memory.

Salty said nothing.

"The racetrack driver," prodded the stocky man, seeking help. "Salty . . . ah . . . ah . . . Just a minute, I'll get it. I know all you boys."

"Try Spain," said Salty coldly.

"Spain! Yeah, Salty Spain! Knew I'd get it! I know all you boys. I follow the tracks. Well, well, imagine meetin' Salty Spain in Vegas! And how many years have I been goin' to the ovals? How many years have I hit Indy?"

"I haven't run in thirty-five months."

The stocky man shoved out a hand. "Foster here," he beamed. "Sergeant Ren Foster."

"Ah . . . Sergeant? Army? Marines?"

"Detective Division, 204th Precinct. Chicago."

Salty didn't flinch—visibly.

"Well," wheezed the stocky man. He dropped heavily into the chair beside Salty. "Mind if I sit here? You with anybody, Salty?"

"I'm alone, Mr. Foster."

"Wait'll the boys back in the division hear 'bout this."

"They're all track nuts, huh?"

"No, not really, but they know your name, of course. You're big."

"Was big, Mr. Foster. I'm barred, remember?"

"Hell, I always figured that was a hokey deal. You're gonna be back on the track soon, ain't cha?"

"Maybe."

"You should be. You're the best. Jeez, imagine meetin' Salty Spain in Vegas! Boy, this has *made* my vacation!"

"You out here with your family, Mr. Foster?"

"Yep. Me'n the missus and four kids. We've been savin' six years for this trip."

"I thought it might be business. I thought maybe you might be lookin' for someone."

"No, man! Me stayin' in this place while on duty? My super'd have a stroke!"

"Well, I gotta shove, Mr. Foster."

"So soon? I wanted my son to meetcha. He'll be out here in five minutes. He's a racin' fan, too."

"Sorry. Gotta meet a guy. It's important."

"Well, okay."

"See ya round."

"Yeah. Say, maybe we could have a drink together at the lounge bar tonight?"

"I'm tied up, Mr. Foster."

"Business, huh?"

"I'm tryin' to get back on the track."

"This guy you're meetin', he's got the say-so?"

"He can help."

"Well, good luck, Salty!"

He moved out steadily. He felt eyes on his back all the way but he did not look over his shoulder. Foster was a cop, huh? And he was on vacation, huh? He just *happened* to recognize a barred driver, a man who hadn't had his mug in the papers or on television for more than two years?

It was time to track.

Salty rounded a corner of one of the motel's units and crashed into the woman in the blue and white polka dot swimsuit.

She backed off, startled. "Hey!"

"Sorry."

She was alone. She smiled suddenly, and perfect white teeth flashed against pale pink lips and tanned skin. "You were speeding," she chided, "and not paying attention to traffic."

"Sorry," he repeated. He stepped around her and moved on down to his unit. When he looked over his shoulder while he inserted the door key, she was nowhere in sight.

He pulled out his suitcase and flipped it open on the large bed. He looked at himself in the mirror. Damn! Why hadn't he shaved before going to the pool? He did so now, carefully and quickly. The knock on his door came as he was toweling his face.

She stood confidently in the doorway with an elbow bent, a palm high, and a bucket of ice balanced on the palm beside her ear. "Room service," she said, grinning.

He stood caught between sudden intrigue and the ancient sense of self-preservation.

"Oh, come on," she chuckled. "Let me in. I know you don't have a wife somewhere behind you. A girlfriend, maybe, but not a wife. I

asked at the desk to make sure."

She rippled past him and he followed her with his eyes, enchanted by the polka dot motion. She put the bucket on a lamp table, turned, smiled. "What kind of booze you got?"

"Rum, gin, bourbon," he said without thinking.

"Bourbon over ice, with a touch of water. You pour while I find the ladies' room. Hey, this unit is neat. Suite, isn't it? We're in a large room. Comfortable, but not a suite. Point me to the ladies' room."

He pointed through the bedroom doorway. Six seconds later he was not sure why he had pointed. She closed the door behind her. He found glasses, poured bourbon over ice, and added the touch of water.

When she returned, she asked, "You going someplace? I see suitcases on the bed."

"I'm checking out," he admitted.

"At this hour of the day?" She took a glass from his hand and sipped. "Hmmm. Tasty." Then she asked again, "How come you're checking out at this hour of the day?"

"Got business down the road," he lied.

"It can't wait till tomorrow?"

"You know how those things go," he shrugged.

"Sorry, I don't," she said flatly. "I always figure when the sun is going down . . ." She cut off the words, contemplated briefly, then laughed again. "Never mind what I think about the sun going down. Mind if I sit? I brought the ice. That should entitle me to sit for a minute or two."

"Sit," he invited, waving his glass absently.

She folded into a deep chair, sat back, crossed long legs, looked at him steadily from the black eyes. "My name is Doris Jones," she said. "We've been eyeing each other for five days now, and I figured it was time we met."

"Salty Spain."

She lifted penciled eyebrows. "Salty?"

"Jerome on the birth certificate, I guess," he said reluctantly.

"You're not sure?" She seemed surprised.

"I've been Salty for as long as I can remember."

"You rich?"

Her frankness bothered and taunted him. He took a long drink, and then he said, "I have money, yes."

"Figures," she nodded. She looked around the room. "I guess this suite costs a little more than twenty-seven dollars a day for three, huh?"

"A little more."

"I'm from Cedar Rapids, Iowa,"

she said. "Did you ever hear of it?"

"I've heard of Iowa, yes."

"I'm out here with friends, another couple. He's the guy you've seen with me. Bill and Marcie Putney, they're darn nice people. Marcie is in a wheelchair, has been most of her life, that's the reason you don't see much of her. I'm living through the first two weeks after a divorce, emotionally and physically. Bill was my attorney. He suggested this kind of therapy. He and Marcie were coming out here anyway."

An attorney? Living in a $27-a-day-unit-for-three? Salty didn't believe it.

Doris Jones seemed to read his mind. "He's a *young* attorney, just out of school. Anyway, I'm picking up the tab. It's part of my fee. We agreed before he ever filed the papers."

"I thought husbands paid."

"Not mine. He couldn't buy his way out of a discount store, but there were savings bonds, and I got those. So the trip. You going to fix me another drink, or are you going to scram?"

He mixed bourbon and water again, for two.

"My divorce wasn't one of those messy things," she continued. "Strictly incompatibility. You ever heard of such an animal? I found most judges haven't, especially in Iowa. Two people can't goof, according to Iowa judges. You've got to whip up some asinine thing like one party is causing extreme mental anguish to the other party, or one or both parties enjoy adultery, or one or both parties is a drunk. Me and mine—we were ripped asunder by mental anguish. Hell, the only thing we were ripped apart by was that we couldn't live together. All that anguish jazz makes a person want to go out and shack up for a couple of years before even *thinking* about vows."

"Doris," Salty admitted soberly, "you've had the course."

"How 'bout you? Any problems?"

"No."

"Money takes care of all problems, I guess."

"Would you believe I just came into a fortune?"

"I wouldn't. You don't act it. You act like a bloke who was born with greenbacks bloating his chops."

"An uncle died."

"Ho-ho. I think I've read 'bout that course."

"Truth, so help me. Uncle had Oklahoma oil wells."

"In his back yard."

"He had one there, yes."

"And forty outside city limits."

Salty shrugged, enjoying her wit. "Tell you what I'm gonna do,

Doris. I'm gonna drive you back to Cedar Rapids, Iowa."

"What about your business down the road?"

"Do you want a ride back to Cedar Rapids?"

"No. I've been proven incompatible in Cedar Rapids. I think I'd rather try Rome, someplace like that."

"How 'bout Guadalajara?"

"Oh, you're a nut, Salty Spain!"

"Go pack a bag. Tell your pals bye-bye. How much do you owe this Bill? Here—if I can get my wallet out of my back pocket we'll just pay the man and—"

"Salty, you have to be kidding!"

"You willing to go to Mexico with me?"

"Oh, brother!"

"Okay, we'll get married here, and then go to Mexico."

"I do believe you are intoxicated, Salty."

"Booze on top of beer has its merits, but I'm not drunk. I just want to get trackin', doll. How much is your friend Bill gonna cost us?"

"Five hundred."

"Pittance. Here." He peeled off five bills.

"Salty, you *are* drunk!"

"I really like you in polka dots, that's all."

"Well, I can't take the money."

"Listen, baby, you'll take it if you want to go to Guadalajara! I'm leavin' in thirty minutes!"

"Yowie!"

"I don't want to marry you. Nothing crazy like that. I didn't mean that part 'bout gettin' married."

"Okay."

"We'll pretend, that's all."

"Man, *who* in Cedar Rapids will believe this?" she quipped, taking the bills.

"Probably nobody," he admitted.

She was gone. He kissed five bills adios. Tomorrow he'd kick his posterior, but at the moment everything was rosy.

He packed, then marched up to the lobby desk and paid in cash. They wanted him back. He said, "Someday," and returned to the speedqueen. Doris Jones was there, in all her beauty, with two suitcases and a Thermos. She wore a bright pink minidress, but he could see polka dots underneath.

"I didn't take time to change," she explained. "Bill and Marcie are out somewhere. I left them a note and the money. The note is easier than explaining."

"You said in the note?"

"That I was on my way to San Francisco. On my own. That I'd decided against going back to Cedar Rapids."

"Doris, you have brains, too."

"Somehow I'm under the impres-

sion, Salty, that this trip is supposed to be *our* secret. Do you want me to drive?"

"I'll drive, doll."

"You have a real classy car."

"It moves."

"Good. I love speed. It excites me." She waved the Thermos. "In case we get dust in our throats. I poured from Bill's bottle—and left an extra two bucks."

They rolled south into the dusk and shared the bottle. Night settled on them, and Doris finally hunched down in the bucket seat, dropped her head against the window and napped. Salty wheeled with one eye on the highway and the other eye on long, shapely, tanned legs.

He put the accelerator on the floor and tensed with the climbing pitch of the motor. Both hands were on the wheel now, and he had shoved the long legs from his mind. This was his life: the purr of the motor, the shrill of the wind, the whine of the tires.

"Hey!" She startled him as she sat up suddenly in the bucket seat. "Wow," she breathed, "look at us!"

"You said you liked speed, doll."

"I love it. Let me drive."

"Nix."

"Come on!"

"I *never* let anyone else drive when I'm in a car."

"I won't wreck us!"

"No dice." He shook his head. "I do the wheelin'."

"Well, can we stop pretty soon?"

"What for?"

"I want to get out of my swimsuit. It's beginning to itch."

"How come you didn't do that before—"

"I told you. I didn't want to explain to Bill and Marcie. Come on, stop. It's dark. It won't take me a sec, and there are no other cars. We're out here on the desert all by our lonesomes."

"Damn, we've only gone about a hundred miles."

"Stop, please? This suit is driving me crazy."

He slowed reluctantly and wheeled off onto the shoulder of the highway.

She vacated the bucket seat and said, "I need the trunk key."

He got out and opened the trunk for her. She opened a suitcase and fished out frills. Then she disappeared into the darkness. He stood staring down at the "special" suitcase for a moment before he slammed shut the trunk lid.

Doris Jones might easily be a bad deal. He could drive off now. He returned to the steering wheel, shoved the key into the ignition switch.

"Hey, wait for me!" Her voice came out of blackness. "Don't leave me!"

He was tempted, but then he saw headlights in his rear-view mirror. They came on swiftly. Suddenly the headlights dipped and wavered, and then they were off the highway and rolling up behind the speedqueen.

Was the driver a road cop? Salty's heart fluttered as he left the bucket seat again. He saw a shadow leave the other car, behind the headlights. The shadow moved toward him, stepped into the beam of light. The man was tall and athletic. He held a gun in his right hand.

Salty felt Doris dart behind him. "I thought you'd never catch up with us, Billy-boy," she said. "This monkey was really tooling."

"You got his keys?" the man snapped.

"They're in here," Doris said from the speedqueen. "In the switch."

"Cut out."

Doris Jones drove off into the night.

"Okay," growled Billy, "your wallet."

"Aw, come on . . ."

"Your wallet!"

Salty passed the wallet.

"Now start walkin' off into the desert."

"What for?" Salty bleated.

Billy wiggled the gun threateningly. "Move!"

"Hey, now, look! You got my heap. You got —"

"Cut a trail!"

"What are you gonna do?"

"Kill you."

Salty moved on stumbling steps. "You can't just shoot me—in cold blood!"

"Why not? Everybody dies."

"Billy, look, there's money in the trunk of my car! A lot of money! If Doris should find it before you catch up with her . . ."

"She'll be waiting," Billy said confidently.

The first shot spun Salty. He did not believe it, nor did he feel pain. He turned, facing Billy, and then he lunged.

The second shot splayed pain all across his chest.

Salty staggered, went down on his knees, hung on gasping. "No . . ." he managed. "This isn't . . . human!"

"Die, you creep!"

The snarl reached him as he pitched forward on his face. He sucked sand into his throat, gagged.

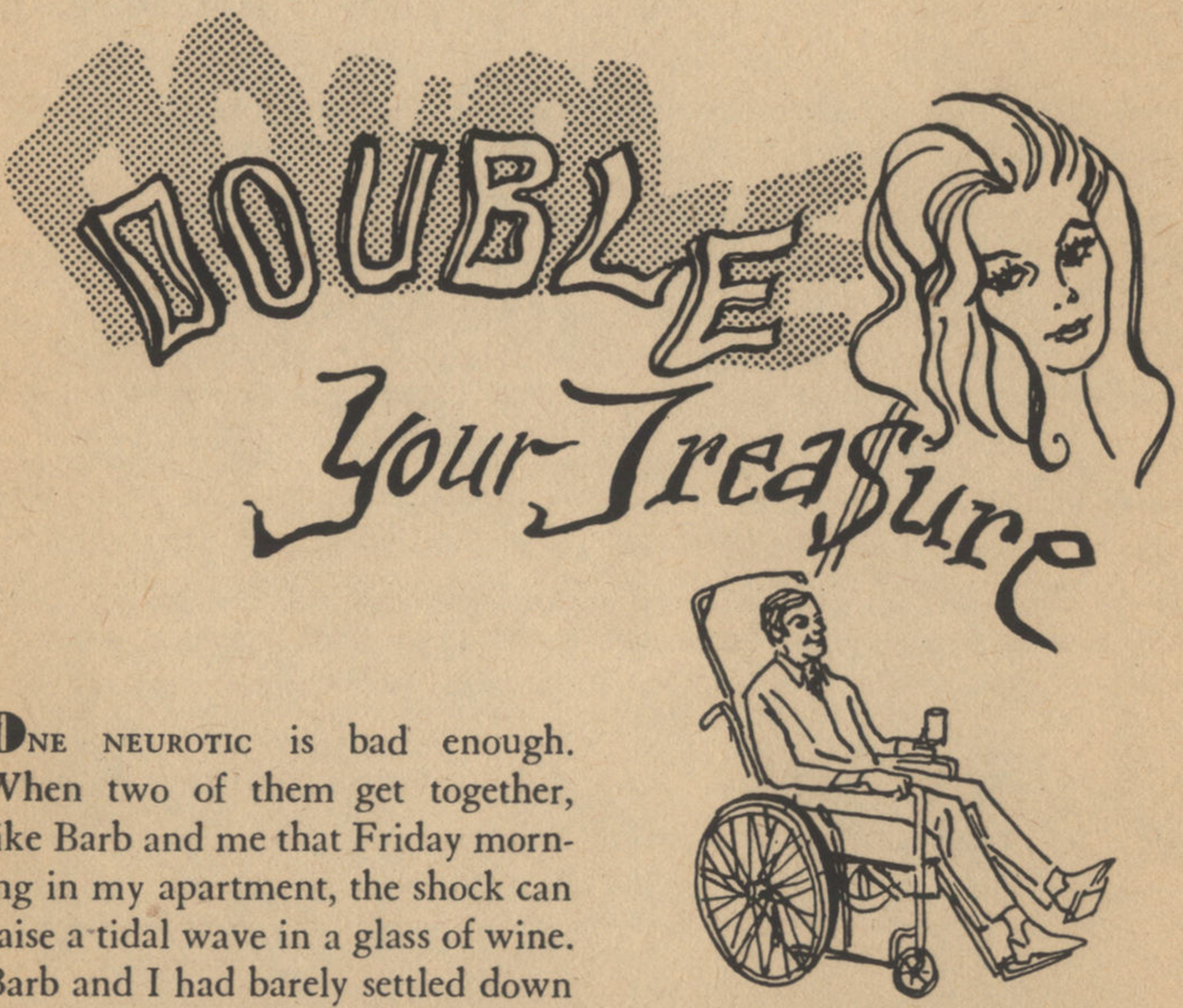
Then, from somewhere out in the desert night, he heard laughter.

Myra Druker was laughing.

A road cop was laughing.

Everybody dies . . .

'Tis said that those who palter in a double sense are often met with recompense.



ONE NEUROTIC is bad enough. When two of them get together, like Barb and me that Friday morning in my apartment, the shock can raise a tidal wave in a glass of wine. Barb and I had barely settled down in the hay, drinks in hand, when she brought up the subject of Art. What she said made me spill Scotch and water all over the electric blanket.

"If I heard you right," I said, hoping she was kidding, "this could mean the end of Art."

"Cut it out, Chad. I'm serious."

We were not talking of art in any lofty sense, but of Art—short for Arthur—in a very limited sense indeed: as Barb's husband, and my ex-friend.

"One hundred and twenty-five thousand," Barb said, her words slow, and honeyed with the sound of cash.

"Art? Good old Art is worth all that?"

My voice sounded funny even to me; I don't usually squeak like a

pubescent schoolboy. I sat watching the Scotch seeping into the fibers of my electric blanket. What if I switched it on? Would we both be electrocuted? The thought made me uncomfortable.

This girl beside me in bed, coolly sipping a drink, twin to the one I just spilled, was now a stranger despite our intimacy. Neurotic? Ten times neurotic. She actually expected me to help her. In California they still put you in a gas chamber for doing what she had in mind.

Psychopathic would fit her better. I'm the neurotic around here; neurotics almost pass for normal these days. At least I'm no psychopath—like Barb—because I have in-

by William von Reese

sight into my condition. I know right from wrong. As everyone knows, right is when you get away with it; wrong is when you get caught. Barb fails to see this fine distinction in moral values, which shows she is a psychopath. The psycho path she was leading me down proved it.

"Not that Art is any longer my old buddy of yore," I began, picking up my thoughts like shards of splintered glass. "But we've already got one thing going for us. It's rich enough for all."

"It's going, all right. Going on and on. Forever."

She was right about that. The dragging feet of time was one reason Art and I weren't friends anymore. At the start, we had only pretended to break up but, with time, pretense has a funny way of turning into the real thing.

"How long has it been now, Barb?" I mused, trying to shuffle off her mortal coil kick.

"Since you cracked your little coccyx?" She slipped a teasing hand onto my allegedly injured back and massaged it, looking up at me with eyes like two chocolate chips edged with licorice. "Let's see," she went on. "It was the third of July, a year ago. That makes a year and a half next month, December."

Time would never erode my memory of that day. The bit had gone exactly the way we staged it. Choice of time was perfect, too. Statistically, the Fourth of July is a time when vacation accidents hit the pegs.

"You're scared to help me, then." Barb's voice prodded me, all unwilling, back to her nasty proposal.

"I don't like it. It's too . . . too final."

"Think about it."

My glass was empty, so I took a sip from hers.

"Look," I said, all sweet and perky, "the lawyer says Institutional will pay off this time. They haven't got a chance of winning, and they can ask for only one more postponement."

"One more!" Barbara exploded. "There's a nine-month lag in the court calendar. That's long enough to have a baby."

I could empathize with her there. It seemed like nine *years* since that hot and smoggy day in Art's Lakewood garage. He had really set the scene. His engine, the one he used on his fiber-glass boat, was scattered all over the garage. Outboard oil covered the concrete like maple syrup on a hot cake.

I had shown up at exactly ten-thirty a.m. and taken a nasty, noisy fall in front of Art and Barb and a couple of open-mouthed neighbors, who turned out to be excellent witnesses for the plaintiff, yours truly . . .

"Like the Bard says," I said, intending to dazzle her with erudition, "'. . . the law's delay, The insolence of office and the spurns That patient merit of the unworthy takes . . .'"

"Another Barb? The hell you say."

"No, *Bard*. Shakespeare."

"He faked a broken back, too?"

"No, but he did know the law."

Her eyes congealed, like cooling saucers of cocoa, into a hardness you shouldn't glimpse in brown eyes, but her voice was still smooth enough.

"Let me freshen these," she suggested, taking both our glasses. "We'll have another drink, a little more lovin', then—"

"There's more?"

"Yes. I need to borrow your car, honey. Just for an hour."

"Oh."

"Art took mine today. His is being fixed. It was leaking oil."

She had some shopping to do. Tomorrow, Saturday, was Art's birthday. Barb, the thoughtful psychopath, wanted to buy him a present. How's that for frosty feelings? My own birthday, about a month ago, she had completely ignored.

She pinched the little roll of fat under my waistline, slipped out of bed, and picked up our glasses again.

"Better ease up on that goose liver."

"Miss Lo-Cal of 1970," I sneered in rebuttal.

I watched her swing toward the kitchen, picking up her purse on the way. I wondered why at the time, but who knows what feminine secrets lurk in those dark, plastic caverns?

Short and kind of chunky, Barb

was maybe not beautiful, but her naughty panda-bear face went well with her luscious curves. She was one of those girls who simply ooze promises, and Barb paid off those IOU's in full.

Without having her lovin' to look forward to—during all this time—I would have, by now, worn paths up the walls from too frequent climbing of them. That Institutional Insurance outfit, the one carrying Art's home-owner policy, had a real Rip van Winkle legal department. Those sleepy shysters, working with a heavy-footed investigator named Sneed, had my case slowed down like a watch dipped in glue.

Art, Barb and I kept telling ourselves that the just-under-a-million ($995,000) we were suing for made our waiting worthwhile. Was it?

I and my wheelchair were sick of each other's seat. If it weren't for Barb, and my cooking—yes, cooking—I would have tossed my toupee long ago. Gourmet cooking gave me something to do. It also gave me an extra thirty pounds.

Barbara came back from the kitchen, biting her lower lip to keep from spilling our new drinks. She made it to the headboard and put them down.

"What about it, invalid? You going to help Barbie?"

"Haven't the backbone for it. It's broken." I deserved her disdain.

We were back on serious talk about Art again. Now, Barb was bearing down on him personally. She just couldn't stand the touch of the little worm any more. All Art wanted to do—besides *that*—was watch color TV, make his shift at the boat factory, and every Friday evening go sky diving. Can you imagine? Sky diving.

Barb was right about one thing: the waiting was a financial drag for all. Of course my doctor and therapy were paid for, and I got a hundred a week from Disability. Big deal. I had to dip into savings to pay for the pad and the fancy groceries.

Art wasn't sympathetic. He just laughed and said to regard my plundered savings as an investment in our project. After all, he said, he had been paying the premium on the policy all these years. That was *his* investment.

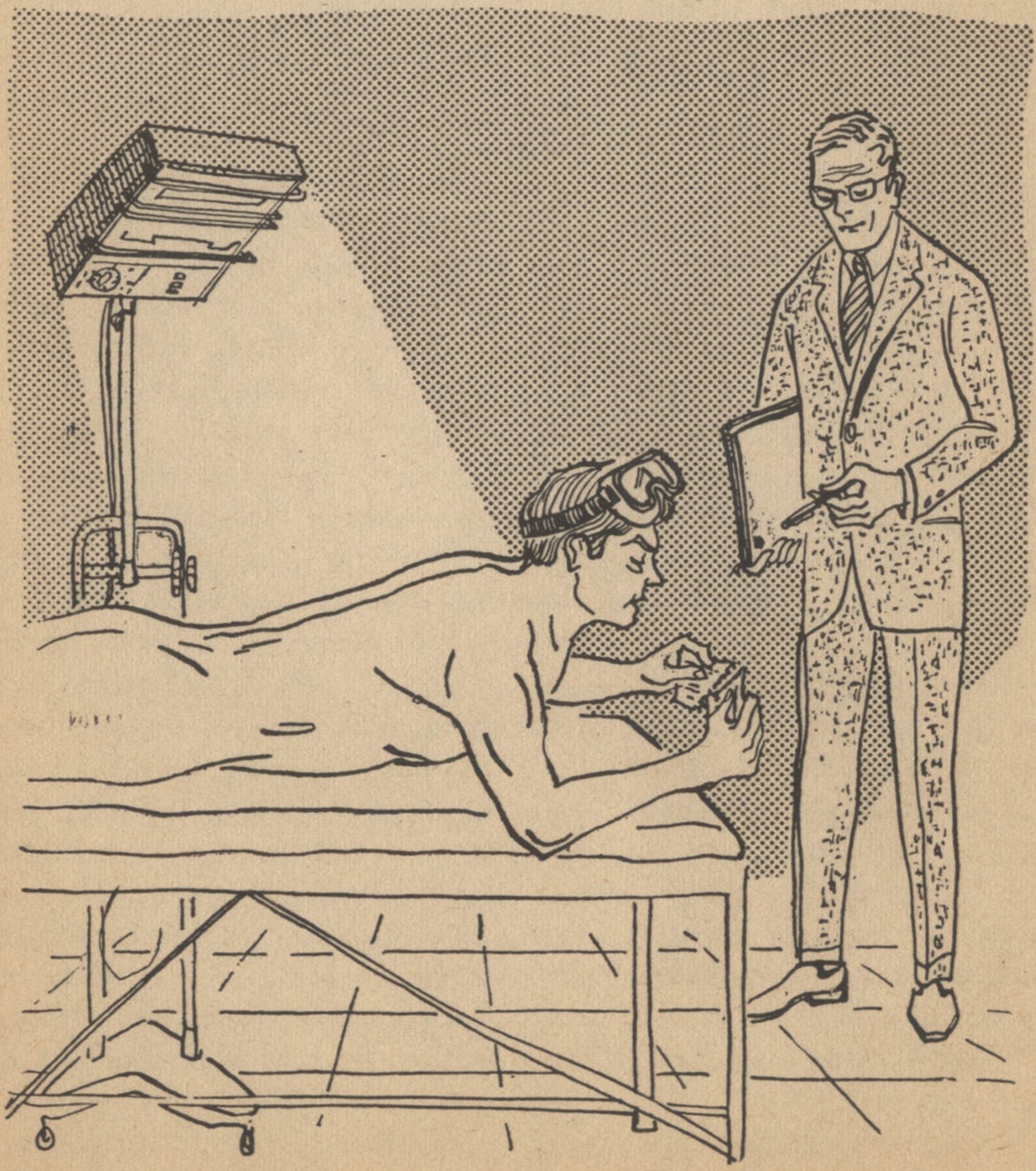
With all this stew of resentment bubbling inside me, I was still a long way from doing what Barb suggested, but I didn't actually tell her so—until afterward—after she had made good on her promises again; but, you know, she seemed different, somehow, that Friday.

About noon Barb took off in my car, which had my extra wheelchair in it. I told her to get back before three so I could get to ther-

apy. Wouldn't look good to miss those sessions, although they were a joke, really.

I fixed myself a pastrami on rye, bitingly good with cold beer, and took a nap. Barb came back and woke me at a quarter of three. I called her a cab to take her home. Then I called Marty, my pusher, who lives in the same building. Marty, with his shaven head, is a teen-age reject of his generation. He's mute. I pay him by the hour to drive my car and wheel me around in public.

Sneed caught me dozing under the heat-ray machine. I was wear-



ing special glasses to protect my eyes from the glare, but I didn't need to see him. I knew that voice by now.

"Make any good movies lately?" I asked. I knew he was dying to catch me on film, lifting barbells or a broad in each arm—anything to goof up my claim.

"All right, Chad," Sneed said, drawing up a chair. "Out of a hundred guys who try it, one gets away with it. I hate to say it, but it looks like you are the one."

"I reject the inference, but accept the cash."

"We figured you might."

Sneed's cough exploded like a blowout in the tiny room. I heard him scoot his chair closer to the table where I lay, bare bottom gleaming rosily in the heat rays. He unzipped his attaché case with a sound like a sheet being torn in half.

"Take off those welding goggles and look at this," Sneed said, holding a dark oblong before my eyes.

I slipped them up on my forehead, like a World War I ace climbing out of his cockpit. I squinted in the glare at the check. I zoomed in on the amount: $100,000. One hundred thou. It sure looked good, but I didn't let it show, of course.

"What's that?" I asked. "Ten percent down?"

Sneed shook his head and snorted. "Just take the check. Sign the release. After a decent interval, you can leap out of that hospital dragster and waltz through the rest of your life."

I hesitated. I shouldn't have, but I did. I couldn't help it. My thoughts tumbled around me like a toppled stack of supermarket marshmallows.

Sneed dug the pause and the faraway glaze in my eyes. He was pushing the release form and his trusty ball-point at me. In that little fatal hiatus I was already aboard a super deluxe, first-class, overseas flight to, say, Rio. I was working on the steak and lobster combo, washing it down with crackling cold champagne. Then I decided on Cointreau with the dessert, and was lighting a cigarette—the best of the day—with that first sip of after-dinner coffee. On top of that, the blonde stewardess had just slipped me her Rio phone number.

Art, the sky-diving worm, and murderous Barb, of the hot chocolate pools, were far behind and below me, writhing in the acidic juices of frustration. If that suburban Lady MacBeth were really serious about collecting Art's insurance, so much the better. She stood to collect even more than I had—an annoying thought. No one but his boss at the boat factory, and possibly the sky-diving supply store,

would ever miss good old Art.

Sneed thought he had me, and he almost did. I held his check in my hand, staring at it, through it, beyond it—clear to Copacabana Beach. He was holding out the release and his pen, hoping to get my signature.

I tore the check in half. Frankly, my insides turned over as I did it.

"Chicken—" I bluffed, cut off in mid-obscenity by the appearance in my room of the cutie-pie therapist. "Chicken feed. Your company wasted more money than this on exposed film."

I covered my pale agitation by pulling down my goggles and resting my cheek on the table. Sneed covered his by carefully tearing out the signature corner of the ruined check. He stapled it together, wrote "void" across the face, and put it back in a pocket of his case. I saw all this by peeking around the edge of my goggles.

Sneed took a deep hissing breath, reared his chair up on its hind legs, and leaned back against the wall.

"Chad," he said, in a tone that was almost fraternal, "be sensible. All right, you've got us. I admit it. The company admits it. You'll win in court. But how much will you get? Net, I mean?"

I pretended to snore.

"I've seen a lot of these cases. You'll get four, if you're lucky. Nowhere near the nine ninety-five you're asking for."

"We'll see."

Sneed snorted like a collapsed balloon. "Assume you get four. What about your attorney? He'll come in for a third, at least."

"So?"

"That leaves you . . ." Sneed squinted like an eagle at the sun, calculating in his head, ". . . about two sixty-five. Now, how many ways do you have to split that? Two? Three?"

I did a quick push-up on my heat-ray table, glaring at him through monster goggles.

"With Arthur Morseby, for sure. How about the neighbors, your handy witnesses? Surely they're good for a share."

"Get out of here, Sneed!" I yelled.

My little therapist came to the door, looking sexier in white than most girls in cocktail dresses. "You're disturbing our patient, Mr. Sneed," she said, darkly.

"I'll be good." Sneed sent a thin, sweet smile across the room.

I collapsed on my table again, feeling a pang of regret that was like hunger. I should have taken that check.

"Ten more minutes," said the therapist to me and left.

"We got our postponement today, Chad," Sneed whispered. "Nine more months, at least, before you get to court. Nine more months as wheelchair cripple. Think you can take it, Chad?"

I looked up again. He was holding another check. I could see it purple-red through my goggles.

"I'm prepared to make one more offer, just to close your case. This is absolute tops. You'll be stupid to turn it down."

I could make out the amount through a swarm of fireflies: $125,000. With a flaming ball of excitement growing inside me, I knew this was it. I bought it.

Inside of ten minutes I had signed the release, folded the check tenderly into my wallet, given Sneed a sarcastic good-bye, got dressed, and had Marty paged on the PA.

As Marty wheeled me through the glass doors of the clinic toward my car idling in the drive, I said, "Today's Friday, right?"

Marty rolled protruding eyes heavenward, then nodded agreement.

"The bank's open late. I'll go to the ticket office first. Trans-Ocean Airlines."

Marty nodded mutely as he bundled me into the back seat.

The jet ticket to Tahiti was for 9:40 a.m. the next morning, Saturday. That was the earliest flight, the girl said. Luckily I had no passport problem. Art, Barb and I had taken care of passports months ago. Mine was waiting in my top dresser drawer.

The bank was tough, even though the assistant manager knew me, knew the case and, of course, one of his big depositors, Institutional Insurance. I waited half an hour while phone calls were made and account balances checked. It was all very discreet, but the bank wanted verification before they counted out all those bills into my moist little palm.

The delay tightened me up with excitement, or maybe anxiety. That 9:40 flight seemed ages away. I knew I wouldn't get any sleep that night. I was prepared to burn up a carton of king-size cigarettes before Saturday dawned.

Things brightened a lot—especially the assistant manager's face—when I got an idea that cut my wait by at least an hour. I told them I didn't need it all in cash right now. I would take fifty thou in traveler's checks, ten in my modest checking account, and the rest in mutual funds which the bank could administer as trustee.

A unanimous sigh of relief almost blew open the doors. Half an hour later I left the bank with a

fat sheaf of traveler's checks in my jacket pocket.

Marty waited outside, listening to the car radio. I told him to leave it on as we headed for home. The five-thirty news was dragging toward its daily anticlimax: the local scene.

I was only half there when the announcer said a certain local yokel had "plummeted to his death" when his chutes failed to open. I did a cerebral double take when the name came: Arthur Morseby. His wife—his widow—Barbara Morseby had witnessed the whole thing. She was taken home "in a state of shock." Instead of an ambulance, I suppose . . .

Barb had done it. That it could have been an accident didn't even buzz my mind. The chances for two chutes failing to open can be engraved on a pinpoint.

Art's plunge into the unknown tightened the screws on my own nerves. I began to reassure myself that nothing would go wrong between now and takeoff time. What could go wrong? I had the dough where no one else could get at it. Sneed and the attorneys were busy tying up folders and stashing them in dead file, too busy to be following and photographing me any longer.

Art was gone, Sneed was silenced—I had only Barb to worry about. Why should I worry about her? She would want half—or two-thirds—of my check, that's why. It was supposed to be a three-way split. But now Barb stood to collect $125,000 on her own. Why should I split with her?

Soon as I paid off Marty, I started packing. Something told me not to spend the night here. I left my car keys on the dresser. I wouldn't see that heap again, and there was no time to dispose of it.

After I finished packing, I called a cab.

The Astropad Motel was right across the highway from the airport. I ate a highly indigestible hamburger at the coffee shop, bought a pint of cognac at a corner liquor store, went to my room and headed for bed.

Every time a jet passed over on final approach, the TV picture went wild for a few seconds. The noise wasn't bad because the engines were pretty well shut down for the landing, but the planes made a vast sucking sound as they went over, followed by a wail like a vacuum cleaner when you switch it off.

I didn't mind. One of those lovely monsters was going to whisk me away at nine-forty tomorrow morning to Everyman's dream: Tahiti.

I sipped cognac over ice till the

pint was gone, puffed cigarettes, and watched Merv Griffin to the end. I began dozing, awoke during a Western, then a dubbed Italian cheapie, then an old George Raft picture. By the time they led George off to the pen, the sun was tingeing the runways with rose. Time to get airborne.

I showered, ate a queasy breakfast, and headed for the ramp at Gate 4. I was early. As I waited by the chained-off gate, making a sort of one-man queue, I noticed this mousy, balding businessman leaning against a pillar. He had an attaché case under one armpit and the morning paper under the other. Both hands were busy clicking a balky lighter a few inches from his nose.

He saw me. Bright green eyes crinkled in relief. He smiled as he came toward me to ask for a match —only he didn't ask for a light. He spoke my name with a question mark. "Chadbourne Ross?"

I just stood there fingering my cardboard ticket to paradise as the cuffs clicked around my wrist. Paradise Lost. In a matter of seconds I had more fuzz around me than a peach stone.

Why, do you think? Fraud perpetrated against dear old Institutional Insurance Co.? I only wish it were. No, the charge was, like murder in the first degree.

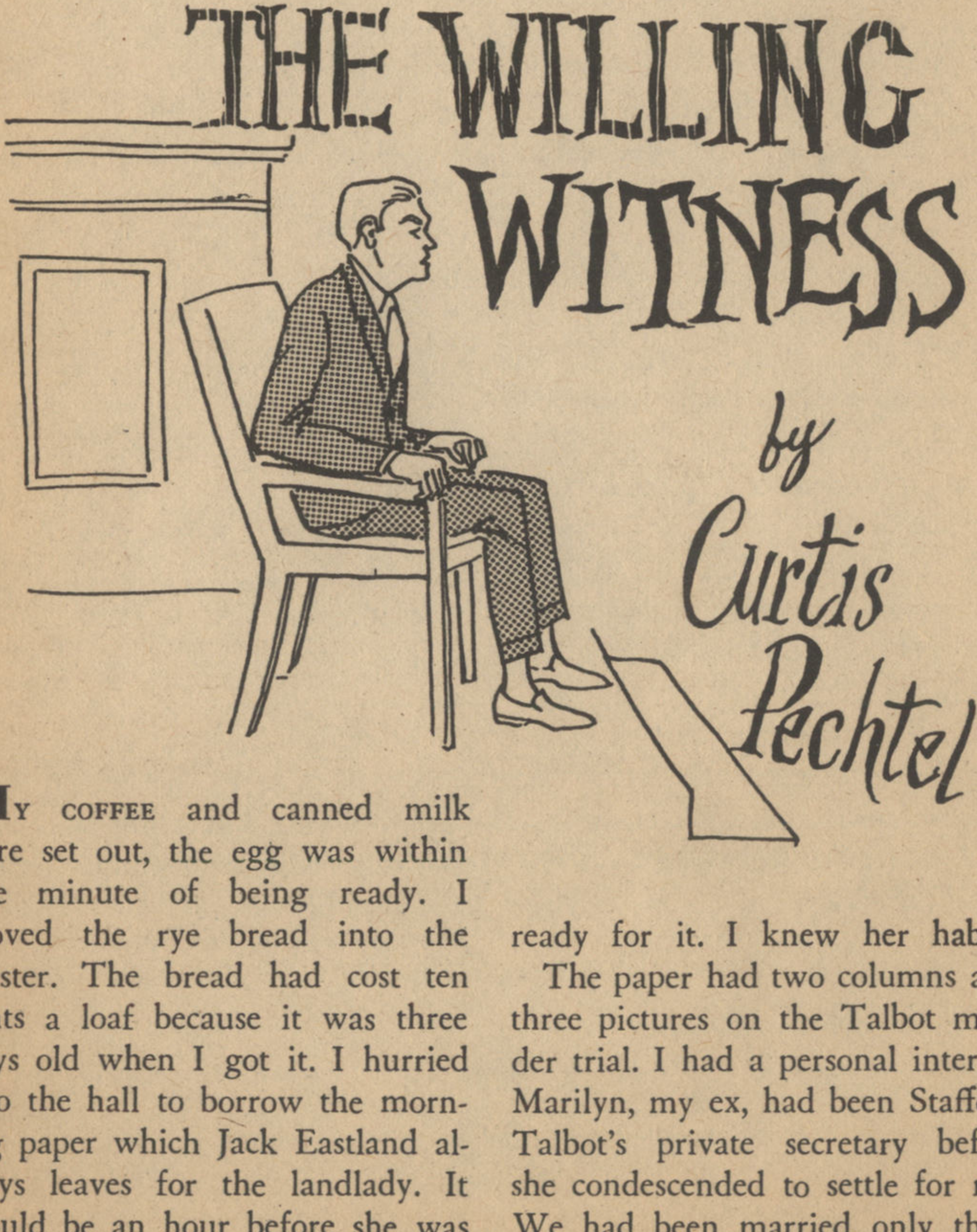
Barb had done it up brown, brown for those chocolate eyes of hers. My car's treadmarks were all over Art's oil-puddled garage, likewise the thin treadmarks of my wheelchair. While fixing our drinks in the kitchen that Friday morning, she had sneaked my rubber basting bulb into her purse.

With acid from my own battery she doused the shroud lines of both of Art's chutes—just enough acid so the burn wouldn't eat through the canvas covers. The bulb turned up in my trunk, wrapped in an old pair of Art's shorts.

To make it look extra good, Barb had gone to the airport with him, to watch. I'm telling you, psychopaths have no feelings—except maybe in bed.

There may be some substance to the idea that a 'friendly enemy' can, indeed, be a logical incongruity.

THE WILLING WITNESS



by Curtis Pechtel

MY COFFEE and canned milk were set out, the egg was within one minute of being ready. I shoved the rye bread into the toaster. The bread had cost ten cents a loaf because it was three days old when I got it. I hurried into the hall to borrow the morning paper which Jack Eastland always leaves for the landlady. It would be an hour before she was ready for it. I knew her habits.

The paper had two columns and three pictures on the Talbot murder trial. I had a personal interest. Marilyn, my ex, had been Stafford Talbot's private secretary before she condescended to settle for me. We had been married only three

and a half weeks when she perfected the phrase, "Oh, when I think how I could have married that man instead of . . ." Marilyn was a first-class manipulator. I believe she could have—but she hadn't wanted this playboy; emphasis on the boy.

I read eagerly. Jan Talbot, ex-second wife of Stafford Talbot, had been strangled purple in her apartment one April evening. She and Stafford had put on a scene in a nightclub on Thursday which had overwhelmed the floor show. On Friday, two people had seen a man of Staff's general build—early potbelly—go into her apartment near the fateful hour. It had been too dark for a positive identification. Next, a woman had noticed that the last three numbers of a parked convertible were the same as on her license. They also happened to be the same as the last three numbers on Staff's convertible. His fingerprints were plentiful in Jan's apartment but he claimed that he had been there the day before. Staff was also known for his violent temper.

His defense was that he had been home alone. I believed him. His lawyer would have come up with a better story if Staff had done it, but Staff was stubborn enough to stick to the truth even if it was going to salt him away for what could well be the most profligate years of his life.

The State's case wasn't very strong, legally. The papers, though, had tried him, found him guilty, and were already pleading that the judge shouldn't go soft because of Talbot's wealth and social prominence. It was reasonably certain that the jury, which was now chosen, would see it the same way.

I was determined he was not going to be found guilty.

I ran a rag over my shoes to renew the shine and started on the three-mile walk to my office. I needed the exercise and the thirty cents the bus would cost.

If I sound like a dime-pincher, I have been lately. Money was the biggest thing that split Marilyn and me asunder. I am a lawyer and make about twelve, thirteen honest thousand a year. Marilyn felt deprived spending a mere $15,000 a year. It was obvious that I would never be the thick-billfolded boy who was essential to her happiness.

Then Marilyn and a witness surprised me and my secretary *in flagrante delicto*. It had been *flagrante*, too. She got the house and the station wagon. I got to pay off both. She got Bobby and Bobbie. I got to support them. She got a handsome chunk of alimony though she screamed it wouldn't

let her live in decency. And, oh yes, I had to pay her lawyer's bill and he was a crook.

Supposedly I was left $450 a month, part of which went promptly to my bookmaker. Add taxes, unavoidables, inflation and the little I was spending on Lorraine—secretary—and you see why I ate three-day-old bread, walked, and used only the office phone.

I called Louis Bergler. "Irv Garnett, Louis. How does it look?"

"It looks good. They haven't got a case. I can't talk right now, Irv." He didn't sound as if it looked that good.

"Could you use another witness, Louis?"

"Another witness! What lawyer can't? You know that, Irv. Who?"

"Me."

Louis couldn't hide the excitement in his voice. "Irv, can we get together for lunch?"

Louis had put on weight. He had a salad and tea for lunch but ate only half of it in his eagerness to find out about my testimony. I had a steak and ate all of it, and finished off the basket of rolls on the table. When the waiter headed for our table with the bill, I looked at my watch. "Excuse me a minute, Lou. I've got to call my office."

I went to the phone, held the hook down while I dialed, checked the return slot while killing a minute, and went back to the table. Louis had settled the bill.

The State did a slick job of presenting its case. The D.A. even brought in Jan's first husband to testify that she was a master—really that should have been mistress—in bringing out the raging wrath of a man.

Louis had Staff take the stand. Talbot admitted his wrath had been brought out. He admitted he might have said something like he'd break Nita's neck. He had said things like that before and they both knew it didn't mean anything. He couldn't even remember what the quarrel was all about or if he said, "If you do, I'll . . ." After all, that didn't mean anything either. Friday he was home. Alone. All evening. Watching TV; some movie but he couldn't remember what. He had fallen asleep for the last part of it.

The D.A. made the error of working him over for fifty minutes; but he could break neither Talbot's calm nor his story.

As I read it, though, with the jury it was still State 11, Talbot 1. Up to this point he was an incarcerated duck.

Then Louis called his other witness—me. My story was simple. Talbot had asked me if I would

do some income-tax work for him. My ex-wife had introduced me a few months back when we had accidentally met him on the street. He had asked me to stop off at his house sometime, anytime; that's where the records were. I was on the drive just two blocks from Talbot's home. I knew he was a night owl, and I had put off the visit too long, so I decided to see if he was available.

I saw him through the living-room window. He was slumped in a chair across from the TV but he looked so tired I didn't think I should bother him. Yes, it was about 11:15.

The D.A. worked on me. Why hadn't I come forward earlier? (He shouldn't have asked.) Because it was so obvious to me that Talbot was innocent, that my testimony didn't seem needed. (It didn't help him a bit to get my comment stricken from the record.) The D.A. was good when he was prepared. When he wasn't, he tore his case to shreds with his teeth. I knew what his best questions could be and I had the answers. He couldn't prove what I said wasn't so. I, too, had been alone that evening so nobody could prove anything about me.

The jury was out exactly twenty-nine minutes.

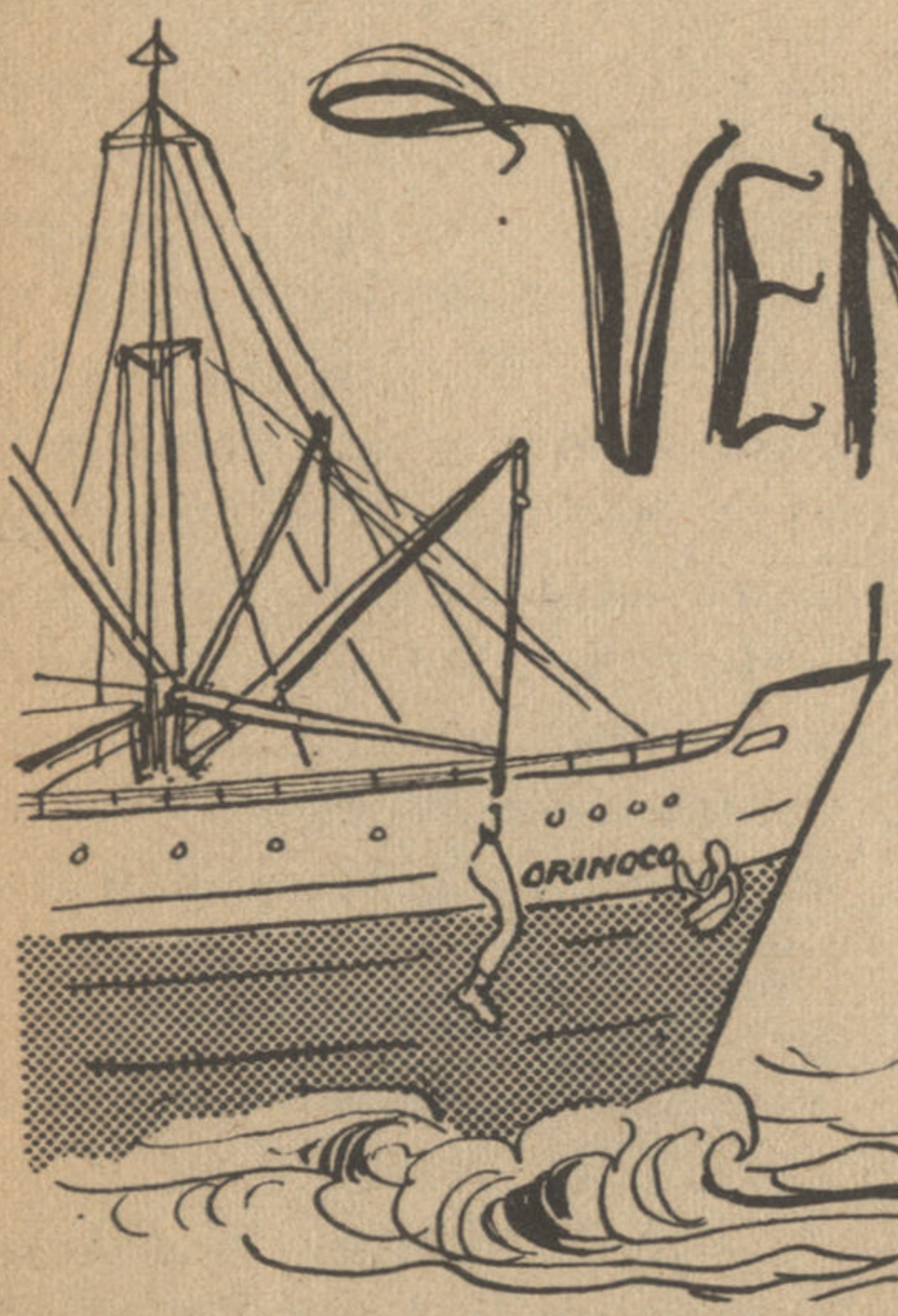
Stafford Talbot shook his lawyer's hand. He shook mine, slapped me on the shoulder and said, "If there's anything I can ever do . . ." He pushed past people and hands before I could tell him that I was willing to do his income-tax work, but there'd be opportunity to tell him that later.

He plowed his way to the rear of the courtroom and Marilyn was waiting for him there with the biggest smile since she had walked out of another court with most of my worldly wealth.

Best wishes for a happy honeymoon, I thought, *and soon.*

I sighed. This was one Talbot romance which I didn't want broken up by a ten-to-twenty sentence. I thought how nice it would be for Marilyn to get off my income . . . not to have to pay any more alimony . . . and how much they deserved each other.

There is no sweeter vengeance than that which flaunts detection.



VENGEANCE on the Subway

WHENEVER I READ that someone was killed by an oncoming train in a New York subway station and the death is reported as either accident or suicide, I always wonder whether it wasn't something else.

My mind will invariably go back to the *Orinoco*, on which I was the young bosun on her last and fatal voyage. She sailed from Philadelphia, with general cargo for Caribbean ports, under Costa Rican registry, but was American owned and operated and paying close to the American scale. I was not long out of the Marine Hospital after two months with an ulcerated leg, caused when I got foul of a wire hawser, and I was broke, so I took the first job to come up, regardless of flag.

The first assistant engineer, Polanski, was a sadistic brute from the Pittsburgh steel area. The only good thing said about him was that he knew marine engines from

cylinder tops to tail-end shaft, perhaps the only reason the chief engineer carried him. There was no taking it easy below for the gang on that ship. During his watch, and sometimes when off watch, Polanski prowled in and out of the engine room and fire room and along the shaft alley, just to be mean. He worked the day men like coolies. He made life miserable for his little Greek wiper, keeping him busy every minute of the watch and giving him the slushiest bilge-cleaning jobs. Everyone expected that some day the little wiper would drop a heavy wrench from a grating onto Polanski's head.

One or two of the gang muttered about getting even with Polanski ashore up some dark alley, but they didn't get a chance. He never stepped off the ship. He was too tight-fisted. He'd brought a

by Patrick O'Keeffe

bundle of true-crime magazines to sea with him, bought in some secondhand store, you can guess, and all he did in his time off was lie in his bunk, reading them. Anything he ran out of, like razor blades and shaving soap, he'd get someone to bring back from shore and then forget to pay him. More than one man said Polanski was going to get what was coming to him someday, and hoped to be around to see it.

In Barranquilla we signed on a new engineers' mess man. We'd called there to load a few thousand bags of coffee, and an hour or so before we were due to sail, the engineers' mess man was rushed to a hospital with a kidney stone. The captain came back from the agent's with word that no replacement was available, and he had a beachcomber in tow.

I was having a word with the chief engineer by the gangway at the time, while watching my deck gang topping up number three derricks. The captain told the chief that the beachcomber claimed he'd sailed as mess man, and if the chief wanted to take him on, then to bring him along to the bridge to sign the articles.

The chief looked the beachcomber over. I didn't like the looks of him. He was rigged out in dirty whites, broken shoes, and grass hat, almost black from sunburn, and looked as though he hadn't shaved or eaten for a month.

"Any discharges?" the chief asked him.

"No papers, Chief," the beach-

comber replied. He said he'd been mess man on a ship out of Liverpool, and had been given knockout drops and rolled in a *cantina*. When he came to in an alley, his ship had sailed, with his belongings and papers. He'd been bumming around the waterfront ever since, hoping to get another ship.

The chief, who ate in the saloon with the captain, hadn't much choice but to swallow the yarn if his assistant engineers were to have a mess man for the remaining eight days or so of the voyage. The beachcomber gave his name as Evans, and spoke with a Welsh accent. The chief was Welsh, so that's probably why he took him on.

The assistant engineers learned at their next meal that the new mess man was a complete dud. He couldn't get an order right, or remember more than half an order at a time. When he made up the engineers' cabins during the forenoon, the bunks looked as though a gale-force wind had swept over them.

The juniors did little more than grumble, but Polanski flew into a rage at every meal. He'd make the mess man go back to the galley with each wrong order. Each day the man made up his bunk, Polanski would tell him to do it all over again, and if he had him below for five minutes, he'd make him sorry he ever picked the *Orinoco* for a free ride to the States.

The mess man sometimes looked pretty grim, and seemed to be working up a slow burn. He had rigged himself out in khakis and cleaned himself up, so he looked better to me than at first. He was going bald in front, and with a black scrub mustache, he had a professional appearance about him. From his manner and speech, we figured he was someone who'd come down in the world. When asking the chief engineer for the job, he had spoken more like the average seafarer, to give the chief the right impression, of course. If anyone tried to get a line on him, he'd say it was none of his business what he'd been.

It wasn't until the night he hit the bottle that he let out anything about his past. He had come aboard broke, but one of the sailors sprang him to a fifth on the strength of his payoff at the end of the voyage. It looked as though Polanski was finally getting him down.

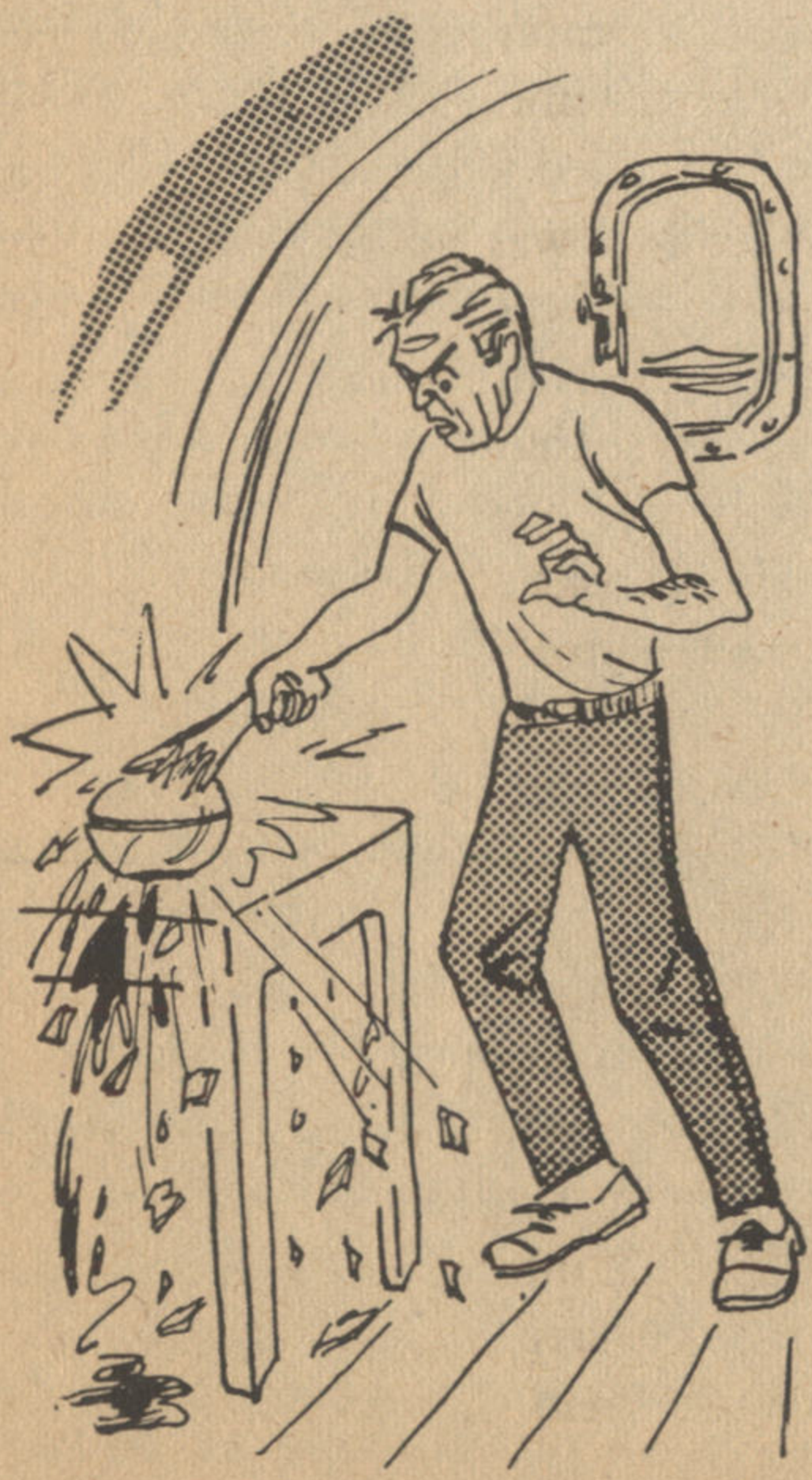
That liquor was local stuff—like firewater—and the new mess man was well away after a few snorters. He came staggering out of the glory hole into the crew mess room with a glass and the bottle, and banged them down on the nearest table.

"Come on, lads," he shouted. "Drink to a rising young surgeon."

A couple of the gang playing cards at another table laughed and said, "Hi, Sawbones!"

The mess man turned to them, swaying drunkenly. "That's what they called me—a rising young surgeon. Now what do you see? I'll tell you what you see—a flunky for that hounding swine of a first assistant. Damn his black sadistic soul!"

A wild look came into his face and suddenly he grabbed up the bottle and brought it smashing



down on a sugar bowl as if it might have been Polanski's head, and then he fell across a chair.

The little Greek wiper helped me carry him back to the glory hole, while others cleaned up the liquor and broken glass. The mess man passed out, mumbling that a man who made life hell for others should himself be sent straight to hell.

The wiper said to me in his broken English, "I say same t'ing. He make life for me all time hell. Someday, he go too far, mebbe."

No one sprang the new man to another bottle after that. It was around the ship the next day that he was a doctor, and we started calling him "Doc," and "Sawbones." He didn't like it. He apologized for smashing the bottle in the mess room, and said it was only the liquor that had been talking. He said he'd sailed as a sick-bay steward in a hospital ship, and it gave him big ideas when he'd had a drink or two.

One man who wouldn't let him forget he'd claimed to be a doctor was Polanski. The new mess man was improving at serving meals, giving Polanski less cause to fly into a fury, so the first assistant took to calling him "Doc" every time he spoke to him, and it seemed to have a maddening effect on the mess man.

We had clear summer weather all the way northbound until near Hatteras, and then we ran into dense fog about midnight. Toward seven-thirty the next morning, with ship fog whistles sounding from all directions, there was a terrific crash. I was sent flying across the fore well deck. A big Swedish freighter had stuck her nose into our starboard side. Her engines were going full astern when she hit; otherwise, she'd have sliced us in two. She backed away into the fog.

The chief mate yelled down from the bridge to the carpenter to take soundings, then ran down the ladder and aft along the boat deck to look at the damage. I made for the nearest ladder to the boat deck and followed him.

We could see there was no need to take soundings. Water was pouring into the engine room and the after hold. The Swede had cut into us by several feet. She had hit abreast the engine room bulkhead, gashing the hull from the upper deck right down below the waterline.

All hands were running up from below. The captain ordered the ship abandoned. The *Orinoco* was only a three-compartment ship, and with two of them filling, she wouldn't stay afloat long. The sea was smooth, and the Swede was stopped and blowing nearby; we knew we'd soon be picked up.

The first boat load, with the chief and second mates and the chief engineer, got off without any delay. The third mate, after having made a quick round of living quarters to make sure no one was being left behind, was checking the rest of us into number three lifeboat, which was alongside the engine-room skylight. All of a sudden we heard someone shouting for help. The voice was coming up through the skylight, wide open in that summer weather.

"It's my wiper," said Polanski, and he charged aft to the well-deck ladder and down to the alleyway leading to the engine-room door.

He was back almost within seconds. "He's trapped on the top grating. His leg's caught. He's over by the bulkhead. It would take a cutting torch to get him free."

There wasn't time for that. We could feel the ship settling by the stern and listing. Those of us not yet in the lifeboat looked at the captain. He was a gray-haired Norwegian of long experience, but had never been faced with anything like this before. The little Greek was now calling piteously to Polanski not to leave him. It was awful to hear him.

"I don't know what he was doing over by the bulkhead," said

Polanski angrily. "I sent him up to call the watch just before we got hit."

"No chance of jacking him loose?" the captain asked.

"Not a hope of doing it in time. We'll just have to leave him."

"We could cut his leg off," said the captain.

That made me shudder, yet it was that, against leaving the little wiper to drown.

"Okay, if you want to let him bleed to death instead of drown," said Polanski callously.

One of the men not yet in the boat was Doc. He moved up to the captain, and said, "Sir, it's true I'm a doctor. I'll perform an amputation, if there's no alternative and there's time. How much would you say there is?"

The captain turned to him as to a godsend. "Anything from fifteen to thirty minutes. Maybe less."

"I'll need all the surgical supplies from the medicine chest. And a volunteer or two."

There were more volunteers than needed.

Polanski held back, said, "If you guys want to drown with that little runt, okay. He wouldn't have got trapped if he'd come straight up to call the watch. He was probably looking for a place to hide stuff from the customs. I'm sticking by the boat, ready to pull clear the minute the ship starts to go under."

He looked around for support. A few men murmured in agreement, but the rest of us ignored him. I ran along with the captain to his cabin for the medicine chest. Doc told the captain to give the wiper a shot of morphine. The second assistant engineer and the third mate started for the engine room.

"Get him calmed down," Doc said to them, "and just say we'll soon have him loose." He then headed for the galley.

By the time the captain and I reached the engine room, the wiper was pretty well calmed down. He was lying on the grating, moaning with pain. He was badly frightened, as who wouldn't be, with one leg fast and the sight of the water beneath him almost up to the middle grating?

While the captain was getting the morphine out, he told the little Greek that the mess man was a real doctor and was coming down to get his leg loose so it wouldn't hurt. The dynamos had stopped, but plenty of daylight was coming through the skylight, and the second assistant had grabbed up a flashlight from his cabin on the way down.

The little wiper told us in broken English that when going up

to call the watch, he had stopped on the top grating to look at a motor which sounded as though it were having brush trouble. As he was bending over it, the Swede crashed in and he was knocked flat. His head hit hard against the grating bars. When he came to, he found his leg was caught.

We could see why. One of the bulkhead steel plates had curled in on the wiper's right shin, like the jaw of a trap. The buckled grating was a tangle of metal around it, forming the other jaw.

Doc came hurrying down with a cloth-wrapped bundle. He opened it beside the medicine chest, out of sight of the trapped man. It contained a galley knife and a meat saw.

Doc went to work fast. We still had our cumbersome life jackets on, but he threw his off. With the medicine-chest scissors, he cut the dungarees away from the wiper's leg and swabbed it with alcohol. There were few surgical supplies in that old freighter's medicine chest, barely enough for the emergency—tourniquet, forceps, procaine, sutures, dressings.

As Doc injected the procaine local anesthetic, he told the wiper it was more pain killer, and he wouldn't feel a thing when he began to work his leg loose. On Doc's instructions, I bathed the wiper's forehead with an alcohol-soaked wad, to keep his head down so that he couldn't see what Doc was doing.

Doc was as cool as though he were in an operating room ashore. I was far from being cool, feeling I should be bathing my forehead too. The sea was rushing in through that big hole nearby, and I tried to stop looking at the rising water below. I kept glancing toward the few steps leading to the engine-room doorway and safety beyond, and I noticed the others doing it, too, making sure just where it was in case we had to make a sudden dash for it.

Doc did a swift job with knife and saw. The anesthetic was either weak or wearing off toward the end, and the little Greek began to scream. We had to hold him down. By the time Doc had finished, the wiper had passed out again.

He was lifted onto my back and I carried him all the way up to the boat, with Doc right behind me, keeping an eye on the bandaged stump.

Polanski had already ordered the boat lowered, and he was sitting by the tiller, ready to give the word to cast off.

"I wasn't going to wait much longer," he bawled.

We lowered the little wiper quickly but gently into the boat

and soon were being pulled toward the sound of the Swede's siren. We had got away barely in time. We heard the racket through the fog as the *Orinoco* upended and sank.

The Swede began creeping through the fog, northbound for New York. Her bows had been stove in, but she was in no danger. She was a new motor ship with a well-stocked hospital, and Doc made full use of it looking after the wiper. He wanted him kept quiet—no visitors—but he did let those of us who had helped with the amputation drop in for a moment to say hello to the little Greek. He was taking the loss of half his leg in good spirit. He grinned up at me from the cot.

"Mebbe I be like old-time pirate wi' peg leg."

"No peg legs these days," I told him. "You'll get an artificial one and you'll like it better, because it won't grow corns."

He grinned at that. Then he looked over at Doc, who was preparing a dressing at a table. "I lucky Doc on ship. Cap'n he say Polanski tell him best t'ing do leave me go down wi' ship. Doc save me. I no forget."

Polanski didn't ask to look in on his little wiper, and when someone was praising Doc, he said, "Okay! So he saved the little runt's life. But doctors don't always save lives. Depends on the incentive."

I didn't see what was behind that remark until we docked in New York. The fog cleared during our first afternoon aboard the Swede, and the Coast Guard sent a seaplane out to fly the patient to a hospital in Norfolk. The Coast Guard gave word to the press about the amputation, and as soon as we'd been cleared by the immigration inspectors in New York, some waterfront reporters and photographers came aboard. Our captain met them on deck with a group of us, including Doc and Polanski, and gave them the story. The photographers then called upon Doc to pose for pictures.

He didn't move. "I don't want any publicity," he said.

That was when Polanski got in what he was wanting to tell. "And now you might as well know why," he said. "His real name is Thorpe. He's wanted for murder in England."

I never before saw a bunch of men go so quiet and silent. We all stared at Polanski dumbly. He seemed to think it was because we didn't believe him.

"I read about him in a crime magazine," he said. "He murdered his wife and disappeared. When I heard he'd said he was a doctor, I remembered reading something like that and looked it up. He de-

nied it to me. The magazine had his picture, taken before he grew that mustache. The magazine is offering a hundred dollars for information on him. I want all you guys to know I've got first claim on that hundred bucks."

Everybody looked at Doc now. There was little doubt how most of us felt. If Doc had made a dash for the gangway, I don't think a single one of us would have tried to stop him, but he probably knew he wouldn't have escaped for long.

"That man," he said to us in a tight voice, "would sell his soul for a hundred dollars—if he had one."

I don't know whether Polanski collected the hundred dollars or not, but I do know that he never sailed again. There were letters in the newspapers about him, some saying that he had acted like a law-abiding citizen, but ship crews showed how they felt about a man that had sold down the river a shipmate who had risked life and freedom to save another shipmate from death. The Line had to let him go, and he took a job in the machine shop of a Brooklyn shipyard.

Meanwhile, I'd shipped out under the American flag to get my time in for a license. The ship went around to the West Coast, but I corresponded with the third mate of the *Orinoco* who had helped me with my studies for a license; in fact, I might not have been a captain now if he hadn't encouraged me. While I was sailing out of the West Coast, he was on short trips to the West Indies from New York, and he kept me posted on New York waterfront news. It was he who wrote me that Doc had been hanged in England, an appeal for clemency having been denied. With his next letter he enclosed a clipping and told me to draw my own conclusions.

The clipping was from a New York daily, reporting that a man had been killed when he fell or jumped to the tracks into the path of an oncoming subway train. The man had been identified by a shipyard pass found in his pockets and was evidently on his way from work to his r nted room. A woman said she had noticed the victim at the edge of the platform and leaning forward to see if a train were coming. She thought a little man stumbled against him. It might have been because—well, she couldn't be sure, for when all the excitement was over, she didn't see him again, but he walked as though he had an artificial leg.

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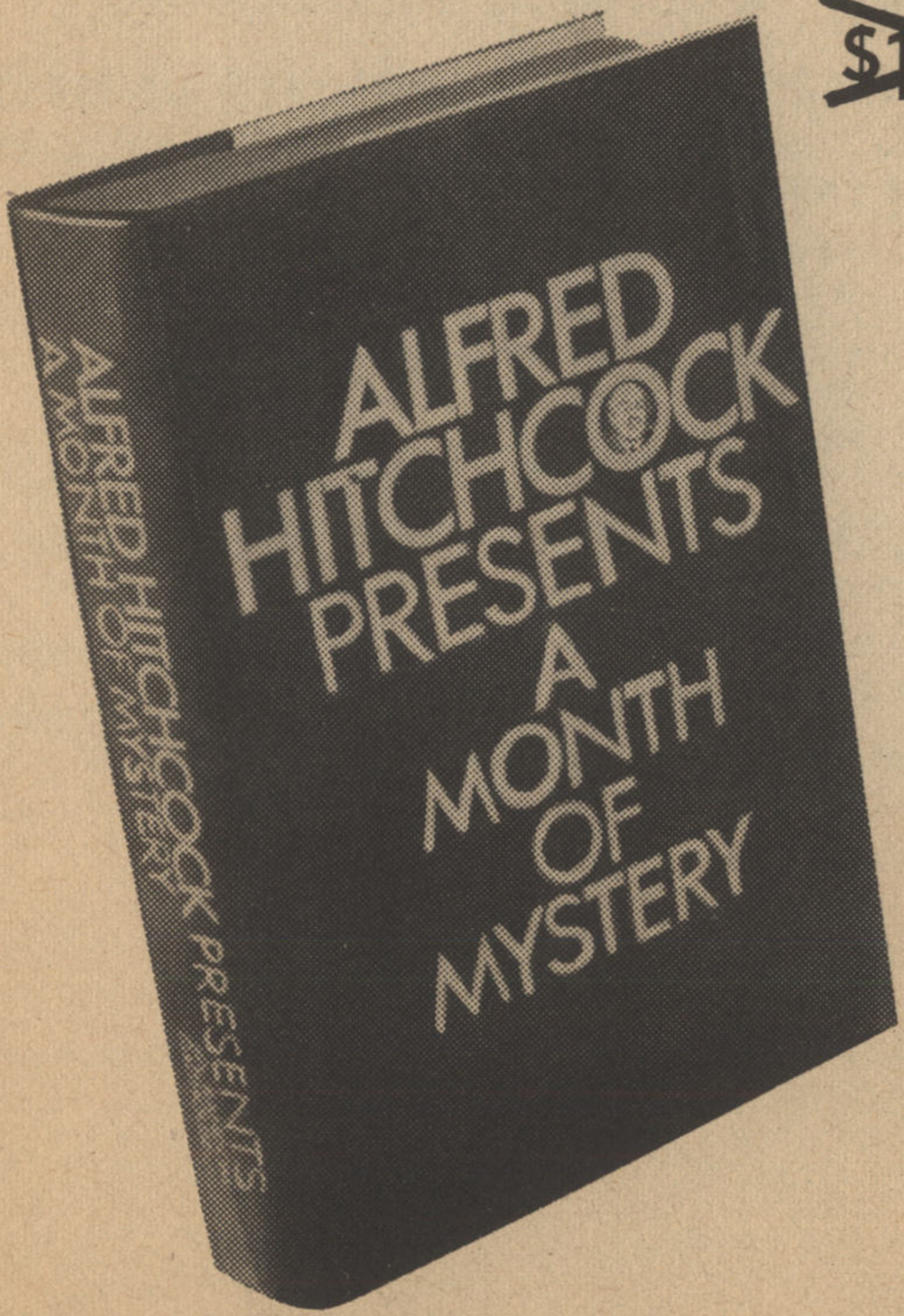


For details please see other side

There may be some substance, in truth, to the concept that one can be honest to no purpose.

STORE POLICY

By Richard M. Ellis

THE MAN, flourishing a fistful of greenbacks, elbowed his way to the front of the line at the check-cashing booth.

"Hey, you people made a mistake. I cashed my pay check here a minute ago, and—"

"Sorry, sir," John Farnsworth broke in. He gestured curtly to the sign on the booth's counter: Absolutely no adjustments made after leaving counter.

The man, frowning at Farnsworth, said, "It wasn't you that cashed it. There she is, the lady there."

He pointed a shaky forefinger toward Miss Nora Kent, who sat

at a desk at the rear of the small, screened enclosure behind the counter.

Miss Kent didn't look up from her work, but her thin shoulders hunched as if to ward off a blow; she had just returned to her desk after spelling Farnsworth for five minutes at the window while he went to the rest room.

Farnsworth shook his head decisively. "I'm sorry, sir. Store policy —please step aside. You're holding up the line."

"But—"

"Please step aside!"

Farnsworth was not usually so arbitrary, but it was late in the afternoon of the first day of the month, and the check-cashing booth, in an alcove just off the huge department store's swarming main floor, had been besieged for two hours by workers from a nearby factory, wanting to cash their pay checks. The uproar was enough to cause even John Farnsworth to lose his cool.

Now, the man facing him across the counter gave a rather odd laugh. "You won't listen, huh?" He turned to include the dozen or so other men waiting in the line. "You guys heard it? The big shot here ain't interested in making any adjustments."

Farnsworth appeared to take a fresh grip on his temper, and said, "Sir, the store's policy is quite clear—"

"Okay, pal," the man said and backed away from the counter. He lifted his voice. "What I was trying to tell you is that dame must've misread my check. Instead of the three hundred it called for, she handed me *thirteen* hundred. How about that?"

An explosion of mirth rocked the waiting line. Farnsworth looked as if he might faint; Miss Kent gave a desperate yelp.

"Wait! You can't—" Farnsworth croaked, but the man was already on his way out, followed by a chorus of cheers and laughter.

Someone in the line chortled, " 'S matter, Mac? Can't you read your own sign? 'Absolutely no—' "

"Thanks, pal," the man called from the door. Then, with a final wave of the wad of greenbacks in his hand, he was gone.

Miss Kent managed to get to her feet. "I — I couldn't have made that much of an error! Not one thousand dollars!"

Farnsworth silenced her with an icy glare. He didn't lose his composure until later, after he'd closed the check-cashing booth and had herded the wailing Nora Kent upstairs to the executive suite and into the office of the general manager, Lemuel Gleason.

"This — this *idiot* made a mistake," he sputtered then, and slammed the heavy cash drawer from the booth down upon the polished expanse of the manager's desk. "The stupid — "

"Now, now," Gleason said quietly, though he felt far from calm. He gestured with a pudgy hand. "Sit down, Miss Kent — before you fall."

Nora Kent subsided into a deep leather chair, sobbing bitterly into a handkerchief.

"I got the word on the store intercom," Gleason went on. "What I don't understand —"

"My fault," Farnsworth gritted. "It was my fault. I took a five minute break, leaving this—this woman alone in the booth. In those few minutes she somehow read 'three hundred' as 'thirteen hundred' dollars, and —"

"Well, after all, a lot of those men from the plant are highly skilled technicians," Gleason put in. "Pay checks for thirteen hundred — or twice that — aren't uncommon among them. Though, of course, that's no excuse," he added.

Farnsworth plunged a distracted hand through the scanty strands of graying hair atop his skull. Then eyeing the cash drawer, he muttered, "I haven't checked —"

"Let's do so, before we take this any further," Gleason said. He pressed a button on his desk and almost at once a man from Accounting entered, followed by a beefy ex-cop from Security. The accountant rapidly totaled the cash in the drawer, then the bundles of checks that had been accepted. He compared the grand total to a slip of paper.

"One thousand short," he said. "Ten one-hundred-dollar bills. That's the story, Mr. Gleason."

The manager nodded. Nora Kent broke into renewed sobs.

"We can always try to trace the man, if we can discover which check is his," Farnsworth said dismally.

Gleason leaned back in his oversized chair and studied the paneled ceiling of his office. "No. Even if we forced him to return the excess payment, the resultant publicity and inevitable bad feeling would cost the store several times a thousand dollars in business . . . Huh uh."

The office door opened again and two more men from Security came in. The office, though spacious, was becoming crowded. Gleason sat forward, blinking toward the newcomers; one of them nodded, and came forward to hand him a note.

"I just don't know what to say," Farnsworth muttered. "That something like this should happen, in an area under my responsibility. But I was away for only five minutes . . ."

"Yes," Gleason said. He went on quietly, "Just long enough to hide the ten hundred-dollar bills you'd taken from the cash drawer. To hide them inside the paper-towel container in the rest room." He placed the note on his desk.

For a long moment John Farnsworth didn't react. Then his face paled suddenly, and as suddenly became brick red. "What did you—? What—"

The manager turned his gaze to Nora Kent. She stared back, tear-blurred eyes widening in sudden hope. Gleason said, "If you'd like to leave, Miss Kent? This may not be pleasant."

"No," she said. And again, emphatically, "No!"

"Very well," said Gleason. His glance returned to John Farnsworth, and hardened into pale gray steel. "Don't bother trying to deny it. Your friend was picked up as he was leaving the store. When certain facts were pointed out to him, he immediately confessed."

"This is insane," Farnsworth cried. "I never saw that man before!"

"Oh? According to him, you were together only last night, having a few drinks at the bar where you and he planned this little caper. He's prepared to swear—"

"He's lying! I never—it was Miss Kent who cashed the check. She's the one—"

Gleason snapped, "I know gallantry is dead, but really, Farnsworth. Trying to implicate this poor girl . . ."

Miss Kent, who would soon be sixty, actually smiled. She said timidly, "But how did they work it?"

"Farnsworth waited until his friend was just about to the head of the line to get his check cashed. Then Farnsworth turned the booth over to you, Miss Kent, and hurried to the rest room where he concealed the money, meaning to retrieve it later this evening, of course, on his way home. Meanwhile, you cashed the friend's check, quite correctly."

"But the—the man actually had the money," Miss Kent said. "Or at least he was waving a bunch of bills."

Gleason nodded. "The three hundred you had given him, plus a padding of other bills from his pocket. Then he and Farnsworth staged the scene at the counter."

John Farnsworth sat down suddenly. His mouth opened, closed, opened again, but no words came out.

"What he didn't know," the manager continued, "what only a very few Security people and myself know, in fact, is that recently we have been treating the larger bills allocated to the check-cashing booth with a certain chemical. This chemical causes a reaction on a small instrument similar to a Geiger counter—"

"Of all the lousy tricks," Farnsworth said wonderingly.

One of the men from Security snorted.

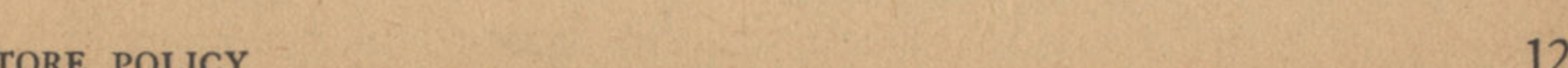
Gleason continued, "Except for the legitimate three hundred dollars, none of the cash Farnsworth's accomplice had on him caused a reaction. But Farnsworth himself started one of the detectors, mounted above the doorway leading out of the booth, working when he went out. That alerted Security."

John Farnsworth cried, "You didn't trust me! After five years—never missing a day of work, never pilfering so much as a candy bar or a five-cent pencil—"

"As a matter of fact, we've had an eye on you for some time," Gleason said. "Afraid something like this would happen."

"But I've always been scrupulously honest in my work—"

"I know, I know," Gleason murmured sadly. "That's why we've had an eye on you for some time."



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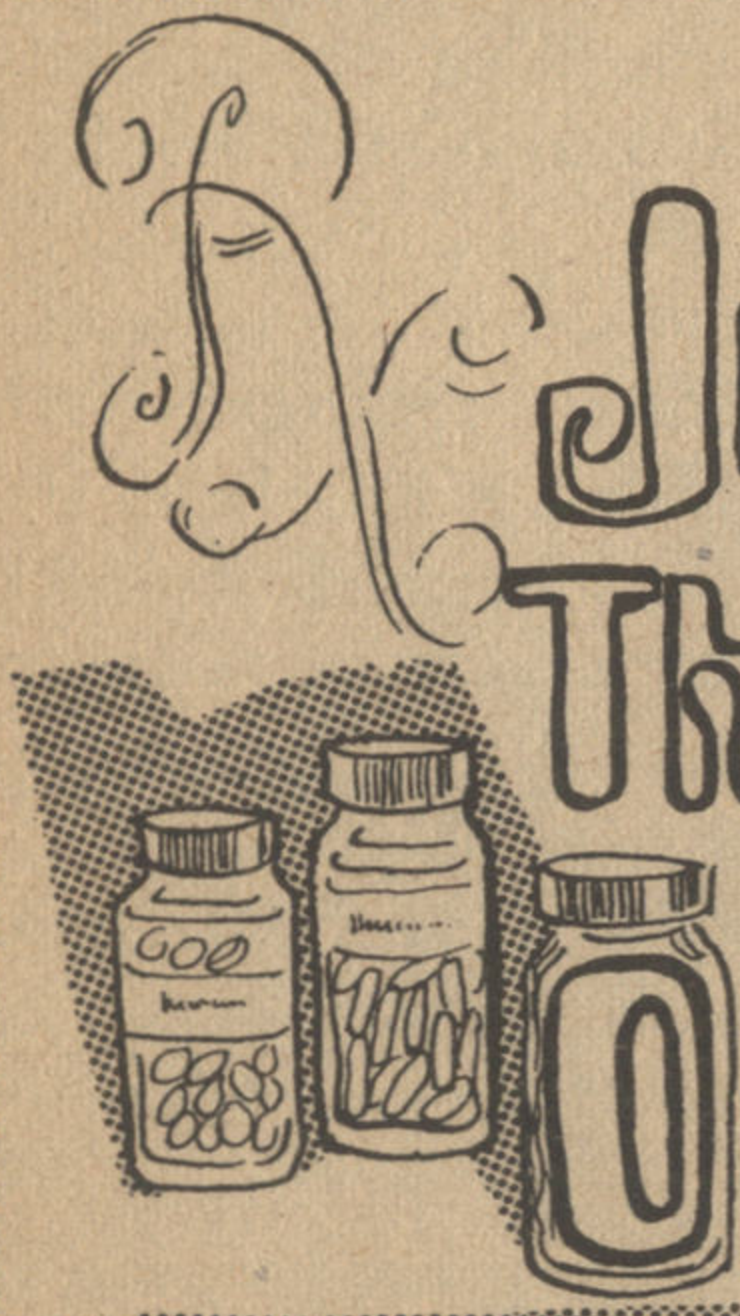


Just What The Doctor Ordered

IT DIDN'T look worth a quarter of a million dollars; more like fifteen cents. It lay on a bed of cotton in a little cardboard box on the desk. The letter "F" in a fancy curlicue script was stamped on the face of it. "F" for Frazer, I assumed.

I looked at it for a minute, then sat down on the other side of the desk from Armstrong Frazer, president of Frazer Pharmaceuticals. He didn't say anything so I said, "This pill is yours, I take it? It has your distinctive trademark on it."

Frazer was a small neat man with the wide-eyed look of an alert bird of prey. "Of course it isn't ours!" he said sharply, biting off the words. "Even if it does bear our trademark. Why else do you think they're asking a quarter of a million dollars? And why do you think I'm hiring you?"

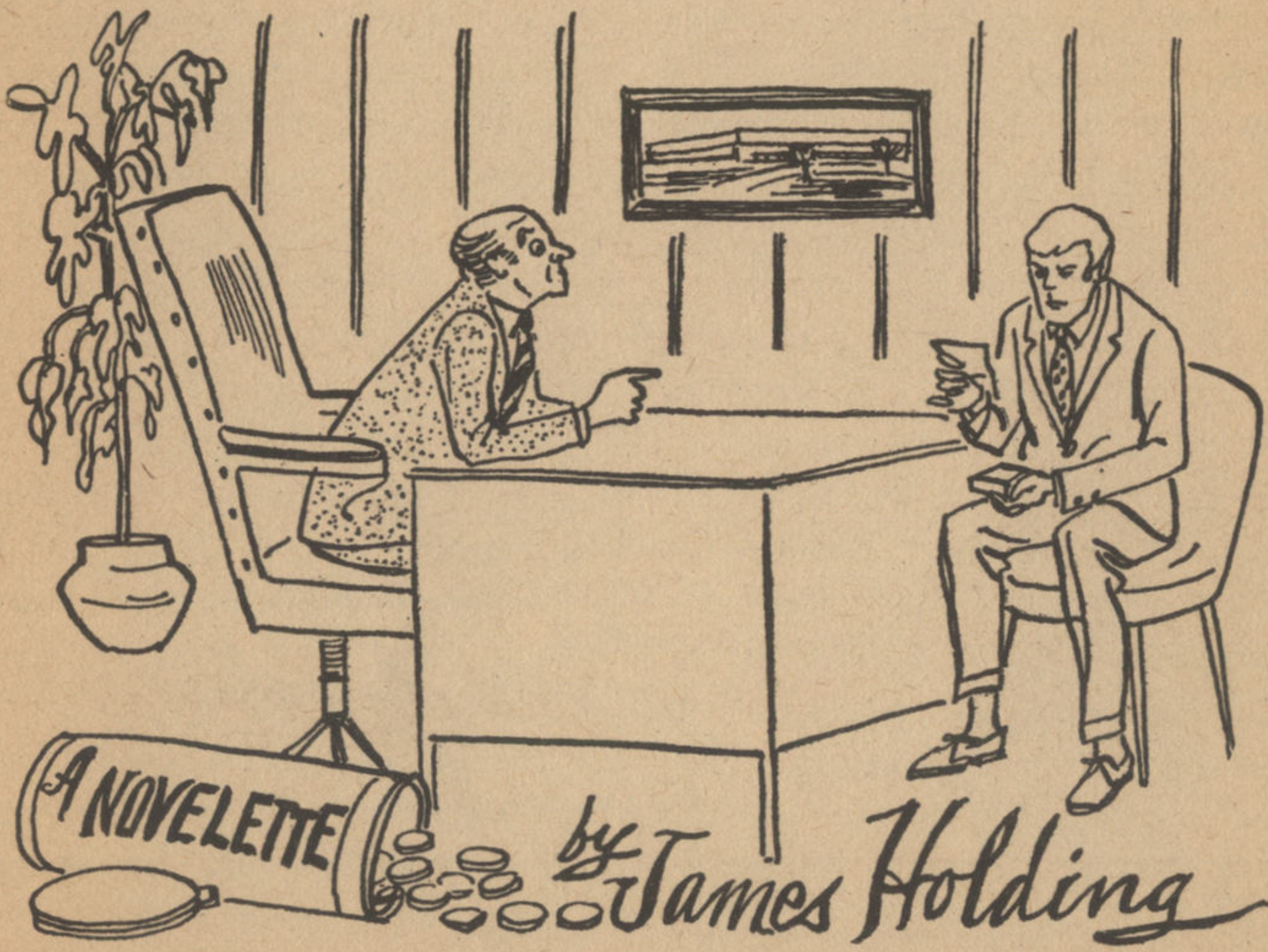
I shrugged. All I knew was that I'd been asked to come and talk with him about a quarter million

dollar problem. I said, "Then can I take it that the pill is a counterfeit?"

"Definitely, Mr. Conrad. Frazer Pharmaceuticals didn't make it."

"How can you tell?"

"Several ways. We have a kind of



ballistics-type test that can identify our own pills by the instrument markings left on them when the pills are punched out. We know the markings of our own instruments and they can't be duplicated. And recently we've been putting inert tracers into our brand-name prescription items for easy identification. A simple chemical test can immediately distinguish between our products and moonshine drugs like this." He jerked a finger at the box. "Furthermore," he finished grimly, "we've analyzed one of the pills as the note suggests."

"Note?" I said.

He passed me the little box with the pill in it. "Under the cotton."

I pried the cotton up with a fingernail and saw a piece of paper folded small in the box. I unfolded the note and read the block-letter pencil printing:

Suggest you analyze one of the enclosed. We can produce millions like them and get national distribution in thirty days. And we will—unless you pay two hundred and fifty thousand dollars by Friday. No po-

lice, please. We'll be in touch.

"Oh," I said, light breaking. "Blackmail."

"Yes." Anger painted a flush on Mr. Frazer's sharp cheekbones. "But blackmail with an odd twist. We're asked to pay the blackmailers a quarter of a million dollars for suppressing *counterfeit* evidence."

I was still way behind him. I said, "What's in the fake pills?"

He spread his hands. "I'm not telling this very well. There were two tablets in that box when it arrived in this morning's mail. We analyzed one of them. It proved to be of very poor quality, made under extremely unsanitary conditions. But it did contain a fairly close approximation of the ingredients in Frazer Nervasil, the trademarked tranquilizer we manufacture. To all appearances, the counterfeit pill in that box is a genuine Nervasil tablet." He pressed his thin lips together. "Except for the fact that it contains some extra ingredients." He paused. "The extra ingredients could prove fatal to anyone taking the drug over a period of time."

I felt a small chill. "Then somebody has counterfeited your Nervasil and contaminated it too?"

"Exactly. Obviously we can't afford to have these phony Nervasil tablets showing up in drugstores where druggists will fill prescriptions with them under the impression they're just what the doctor ordered." Mr. Frazer looked hard at me. "Maybe you don't know it, Mr. Conrad, but when a doctor's prescription calls for a brand-name drug, pharmacists are required by law to fill the prescription with that brand-name drug and no other. And Frazer Nervasil is the most popular trademarked tranquilizer on the market. Literally thousands of physicians prescribe it by name for their patients. So you can see what would happen to our reputation if Frazer Nervasil suddenly began to cause dangerous side effects in a lot of people—and even kill some."

"Maybe they're bluffing," I said without much conviction.

"Possibly. Yet I can't afford to call their bluff, can I? Not because they could ruin Frazer Pharmaceuticals, but because we might be responsible for mass murder if we refuse to part with a quarter million dollars."

"You won't call in the police?" I said.

"Not yet. They might be able to handle this, given sufficient time. But we aren't given much time. Three days. If we don't pay their bribe by Friday, we are taking the risk that they'll start distributing deadly drugs in quantity."

"That sounds like a pretty big operation," I said. "Could a hole-

and-corner blackmailer really swing it?"

"What makes you think this is some hole-and-corner blackmailer, Mr. Conrad? Obviously he has facilities for manufacturing pills. And enough knowledge to add dangerous ingredients to our Nervasil mix. And possession of a tablet-stamping die which produces a trademark our own people can't distinguish from our genuine. That is a well-equipped blackmailer."

"Oh," I said.

"My guess is that the blackmailer is a drug counterfeiter who needs a quarter of a million dollars in a hurry." He paused. "Drug counterfeiting is a headache for everyone in our business, of course. Frazer has a separate department devoted exclusively to product protection. The sale of fake drugs totals over a hundred million dollars a year."

I stared at him. "Sold through reputable druggists?"

"Many of them, yes. The druggists often don't know they're fake, of course." He showed impatience. "And distribution can always be arranged when the profits are big enough." Mr. Frazer tapped his fingers on his desk top like a man who needed one of his own pills.

I said, "If you believe the police can't do anything to help you in three days, what makes you think that I can do any better for you?"

"You're supposed to be the best private detective in town. But you're not official police, so the blackmailers can't claim I'm not following instructions. Besides, you're an outsider who might hit on something we'd miss."

"Thanks. But I don't think I'll be able to do you much good by Friday."

"I intend to pay the quarter million on Friday anyway. To postpone catastrophe a few days, if nothing more. And there is a chance, you know, that this is a one-time money-raising scheme."

I wagged my head. "If you ante up once, you'll get another demand. That's practically guaranteed."

He shrugged. "In any case, I intend to call in the police, the state bureau, the federal field men, and everybody else after Friday, whether we get another blackmail demand or not. But I want to keep the possible cost in human lives as low as I can. So we play for time. Understood?"

"Okay."

"Then do what you can, Mr. Conrad. You'll work with George McCallum, our chief of product protection. He's already briefed and expecting you."

He stood up and reached across the desk to shake hands. He was a

full head shorter than I am and looked older, standing up. He hadn't asked me my rates, but I guess Frazer could afford them. "McCallum's office is on the second floor of this wing," he said. "You can use my private elevator here. And take this damn pill with you." He held out the box with its pill and I took it from him.

"Where are the wrappings it came in?" I asked him.

"McCallum has them."

"Fine," I said. I stepped into his private elevator.

McCallum was a handsome, red-faced, burly cigar smoker who looked ex-cop but turned out to be ex-public relations, which was logical enough, I suppose. When the second floor receptionist led me to his office—a spacious corner room that smelled of stale cigar smoke in spite of its air-conditioning—McCallum took his cigar out of his mouth long enough to say, "Come in, come in." He didn't get up. "You're Conrad?"

"Jess Conrad," I said and took a chair. I put the pill on his desk. "You know why I'm here?"

"Sure. Old man Frazer sent for you to give us a hand. Glad to have you sit in. We need help, all right. I suggested you to Frazer."

"Thanks. Have you got anywhere?"

"No. I haven't had a chance to do much." He made a sour face, twisting his cigar lopsided. "Not that I know what to do, anyway. This is over my head. Counterfeiting I can deal with, but add blackmail to it and it's so touchy I'm afraid to move."

"Mr. Frazer explained that," I said.

"He would. He's all heart when it comes to protecting the public, which makes our job tougher. I have started some wheels turning, though."

"Such as what?"

"Such as starting a check on the repackagers to whom we sell drugs in bulk . . . especially Nervasil ingredients. You never can tell when some repackager may decide to turn into a manufacturer overnight." McCallum discarded his cigar in an ash tray as large as a dinner plate. "Because of the extra ingredients in these fake pills, it must be a manufacturer who's trying to blackmail us."

"Oh," I said.

"And I've started on a list of manufacturers who put out generic tranquilizers near enough like our Nervasils to run a bluff with, or to use as the basic building block in these phony Nervasils."

I nodded. I knew that there are generic tranquilizers that are sold through the same channels as trademarked pills for considerably

lower prices than their brand-name brothers, and I realized that the price differential between generic and brand-name drugs must be where a drug counterfeiter's profits came in.

McCallum was saying, "A drug counterfeiter, of course, can mix the basic chemicals himself or buy generic drugs in bulk very, very cheaply. Then he counterfeits the trademark or label of a nationally-known manufacturer on them and either sells them to the trade as genuine brand-name drugs at full price, or he connives with wholesalers, pharmacists, even doctors, to foist the counterfeits on the public at brand-name prices."

I thought for a minute. "How many repackagers, small manufacturers, chemical suppliers, potential counterfeiters or what have you, would you say there are?"

"Thousands."

"That's a lot of investigating by Friday."

"You are so right. We're just going through the motions, really. We haven't a prayer of coming up with anything by then. The boss will have to cough up the quarter million, that's all."

I thought some more because I agreed with him and didn't like to admit it. "You're the product protection chief for Frazer," I said at length. "What exactly do you do?"

"My job is to track down counterfeited versions of Frazer drugs and do what I can to stop their sale." McCallum shrugged. "Once we've spotted a druggist selling moonshine drugs, we usually turn in the evidence to the state's pharmacy board for legal action."

I asked, "How do you spot a druggist who's selling counterfeit drugs?"

"Through our shoppers. I've got a lot of women out in the field continually buying Frazer drugs on prescription from retail druggists. They send the drugs they buy to headquarters here, and our identification boys check them out to see whether they're ours or counterfeits."

"With inert tracers and punch marks on the pills," I murmured, remembering my lesson from Mr. Frazer earlier.

"Right." McCallum looked surprised.

"The ballistics-test thing," I said slowly, "looks to me like our only hope."

McCallum blew out cigar smoke. "How come?"

"Mr. Frazer told me you can tell by the instrument marks on the pills which pills are yours and which are fake."

He nodded.

"Okay," I said, "let's have your identification experts compare the

punch marks on this fake Nervasil tablet with the punch marks on the latest batches of fake pills you've weeded out of your shoppers' samples."

McCallum stared at me for a long moment. Then he grinned. "Say," he said, "that's an idea. Goes to show you it's a good thing to have an outside opinion."

"If the markings on this phony Nervasil tablet match up with punch marks on some of the counterfeit pills your shoppers have sent in, it would give us a place to start, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah," McCallum said. He picked up his phone, asked for somebody named Jackson. When he got him, he said, "Can your lab boys do a special rush job for me, Jack? Good." McCallum told Jackson what we wanted. "Just recent batches of shoppers' samples. And just tablets you've already found are phony. You got any?"

"Plenty. You want comparisons with fake Nervasils only, or with any counterfeit pills we've spotted?"

"Any pills. What we want is to find out if that moonshine Nervasil you analyzed for the Old Man was punched out by somebody who's been making other counterfeit pills with the Frazer mark on them. And if so, where the other counterfeit tablets have been showing up."

"That'll take quite a while, now."

"So get to it. Let me know right away if and when you find anything. I'll bring the second Nervasil pill up to you. It's your control pill, the only one we've got. So be careful with it."

McCallum hung up. I retrieved the pillbox from his desk top and we left his office. Walking along an antiseptic-looking corridor with him toward the elevators, I said, "Where was this pillbox mailed? Frazer said you had the wrappings."

"Los Angeles," McCallum said. "Airmail." He gave me a baffled look. "Two thousand miles away!"

We left the control pill with Jackson and went into town in my car for lunch. We took a table in Zelner's Restaurant and ordered barbecued ribs, with a martini apiece before the ribs.

As I tilted my head back to lick the last drop out of my glass, I saw Gus Schenk sitting at a table in the corner. I waved to him and he waved back.

"Friend of mine named Gus Schenk," I said to McCallum. "You know him?"

"No."

"When you get a chance, take a peek at him."

McCallum sneaked a quick look over his shoulder. "Man, what a monster!" he said, turning back to

me. "His ears are countersunk."

"Not countersunk. No ears at all. Bunch of teen-agers cut 'em off one night."

"You kidding?"

"No. Gus is a messenger boy for Carl Venture, the local gambling boss. You've heard of him."

"Sure." Our ribs arrived. "Everybody's heard of him. I never met him personally, though. Gambling is one bad habit I don't have, thank God. What about the ugly guy's ears?"

"One night Gus is tongue-lashing a bunch of kids who borrowed his car for a joyride, and they don't tongue-lash worth a damn. They threatened to cut off Gus' ears, which were very prominent in those days, unless Gus apologized to them for being alive. Gus told them what to do with their apology, so they held him down and cut off his ears."

"Horrors!" McCallum said.

"They were just starting on Gus' fingers with their boy scout knife when somebody came by and scared them off. They left Gus on the sidewalk with no ears and only nine fingers. Luckily for me."

"What do you mean?"

"I was the guy who came by and scared them off. If they hadn't run, I might have only seven or eight fingers left myself. I picked Gus up, put him in his car, and drove him to the hospital. Only thing was, I didn't pick up his cut-off ears. The doctors might have been able to hook them on again somehow." I went on, "So now Gus Schenk thinks I'm an all right guy because I scared those kids away while he could still hold a whisky glass. Aside from me, he hates cops."

We had lemon ice for dessert. I looked at my watch and suggested we get back to the Frazer plant. I waved to Gus Schenk once more on the way out.

It was three o'clock when we got back to the Frazer plant. Jackson had no results for us yet, so McCallum and I went to his office, and started to go through his lists

of chemical suppliers, repackagers and manufacturers in California whose purchases, products, or shady reputations in the trade made them remotely possible as suspects in a blackmail gimmick like ours. At my suggestion, we confined our efforts to outfits in California, since the counterfeit Nervasil pills had been mailed from Los Angeles. Even so, McCallum's heart wasn't in it. There were enough suspects in the L.A. area alone, he said, to keep him busy for a month, just checking their credit ratings.

The phone rang at four-forty. It was Jackson.

"You find anything?" McCallum asked him eagerly.

Jackson said, "Come up to my office and I'll show you."

We charged up to his office like colts out of the starting gate. His studious face broke into a smile when he saw us. "There they are." He waved toward two clusters of bottles on his desk. "Two batches."

"What are they?" McCallum asked.

"Hormones, sleeping pills, diet tablets in both batches. All marked with our 'F', but we definitely didn't make them. They were made by whoever made that moonshine Nervasil. Same punch marks."

"Where did they come from?" McCallum pressed. He grabbed up one of the prescription bottles on Jackson's desk and read the label out loud. "Los Angeles!" he said. He looked at me. "The shopper that sent in this prescription bought it at Penxtil Pharmacy, Los Angeles."

He reached for another bottle. "Don't bother," Jackson said. "All the stuff in that batch was sold by Los Angeles druggists. And all these . . ." he pointed to the second cluster of bottles, "come from Tampa, Florida."

"Ouch!" McCallum said.

"Why ouch?" I asked.

"That means our blackmailer already *has* national distribution of counterfeit drugs. He's a regular moonshiner with a going business, apparently, if he's counterfeiting our diets, hormones and sleepers."

"Are there any Nervasils in those lots?" I asked Jackson.

"No."

"Extra ingredients in any of the pills—dangerous ones—like in the one you analyzed for Mr. Frazer?"

"No. I analyzed a sample of each. Just general dirt and sloppy proportions and a dilution of some ingredients to make them stretch farther."

"Thanks," I said. "Do you keep records of this sort of thing?"

"Sure," Jackson said. "I've saved a few tablets out of each bottle, suitably identified, for evidence, if it's ever needed."

"Good," I said. "Keep it safe."

We went back to McCallum's office. "Los Angeles and Tampa," he said as we sat down. "Three different drugs from each place, and from half a dozen different stores in each city." He waved at the prescription bottles we'd brought from Jackson's office.

I said, "We've narrowed it down a little, though, haven't we?"

"Damn little. If the blackmailer has distribution in two cities as far apart as Tampa and L.A., his factory could be anywhere in between. And we have to find his factory before we can find him."

"Well," I said, "Mr. Frazer is paying me to try. So how do I go about it?"

"Go to Tampa or L.A., I guess. Talk to one of the druggists who sold these prescriptions to our shoppers. Through the druggist, try to get a line on the distributor who supplied him with the pills. Through the distributor, try to do the hard bit: get a line on the counterfeiter who supplied *him* with the pills." He sighed.

I sighed, too. "It isn't going to be easy."

"It's going to be impossible," McCallum said bitterly. "You understand that somewhere along the line, either the druggist, or the distributor, or both, have to be crooked, in order to deliver these counterfeit pills to the consumer?"

"The name of the patient, the pharmacy, and the doctor is on every label," I insisted. "If the druggist is honest, he'd cooperate with us for his own sake, wouldn't he? Before information is lodged against him with the state pharmacy board?"

He nodded.

"So maybe we might get lucky."

"Yeah. And Frazer Pharmaceuticals might develop a cure for the common cold by tomorrow morning. So I'll take L.A."

He saw my surprised look at his sudden capitulation and grinned. "Los Angeles is where the fake Nervasils were mailed from. So on the face of it, L.A. figures to be nearer the blackmailer's factory than Tampa, right? And I was a PR man at our San Francisco plant before I was moved here, so I know the California distribution setup pretty well—for all the good that'll do us. But I've got to go through the motions, anyhow, for the same reason you do. Frazer pays me, too."

"Then I go to Tampa?"

"Why not? Accidents happen. As you say, you might get lucky."

So it was settled. McCallum summoned his secretary and told her to book seats for us on the earliest flights she could to L.A. and Tampa. She nodded in a business-

like manner and went out to telephone. She had a lovely, free-swinging walk, hazel eyes, reddish-blonde hair. Even the back of her neck was pretty.

"Hey!" I said to McCallum. "Where have you been hiding that?"

He grinned. "Hands off. Already spoken for."

"By whom?"

"Me."

I sighed. "Well, congratulations. When's the wedding?"

"Next month."

The secretary, Miss Burgess, came back and said McCallum was booked on the ten-forty-five to L.A. by TWA, and I had a place to Tampa on the eleven-twenty, National. She had also reserved us hotel rooms. After delivering this information, she turned to go out and I said, "Mr. McCallum tells me you're to be married next month, Miss Burgess."

Her smile would have melted icebergs, "That's right," she said. Then, with a warm, mischievous look at McCallum, "And about time, too! He's been putting me off for over a year now, haven't you, George?"

He waved her out with an indulgent grin. "She wants to quit working and be a full-time housewife," he explained as the door closed after her, "and I want to be sure she's a housewife whose husband can keep her in the style to which she's accustomed, so I've been playing hard-to-get for a while."

"You must be nuts to put off a dish like that," I said, "money enough or not. I'd be happy to take her off your hands." I picked up the prescription bottles with the Tampa labels on them and distributed them among my pockets. "Can you give me the names of your shoppers in Tampa?"

"Shopper," he said. "We've only got one there." He rang for Miss Burgess again, and told her to get me the name and telephone number out of her files.

While she was doing it, I called Mr. Frazer and told him about the result of Jackson's research, and that McCallum and I were flying to L.A. and Tampa to try to run down the slender clue he'd uncovered for us.

Frazer listened without a word, and when he did speak, he sounded subdued. "I hope you'll find something," he said, "but it's almost too much to hope for. Meanwhile, I've asked our treasurer to arrange with our banks to get me a quarter of a million dollars in cash." He hung up.

I said to McCallum, "Where do you live? I'll pick you up. We can go to the airport together in my car."

"Pick me up here at the office about ten o'clock, okay? I've got plenty of my regular work to catch up on before I leave on our wild-goose chase."

Traffic was heavy and we cut it pretty fine getting to the airport. I had plenty of time to catch my flight, but McCallum's was due to depart in fifteen minutes so I let him off at the waiting room entrance to pick up his ticket while I went to park my car.

When I walked back into the terminal, I saw George standing beside a bank of pay phones, patting his pockets. I looked at the airport clock and went over to him. "You'd better move," I said, "your flight's going in four minutes."

He had an unlit cigar in his mouth. "I think I must have left my cigar lighter at the office," he said. Then he pulled his lighter out of his trousers pocket. "Ah, here it is." He snapped the flame and puffed at his cigar.

The door of one of the pay telephones behind George opened and Gus Schenk came out. His eyes lighted on me at once. He walked toward us, smiling. "Hi, Jess!" he said, and he nodded his earless head at George.

George said, "Good luck in Tampa, Jess," and took off for his departure gate. They were calling his flight for the last time over the speaker system. He turned on speed.

"You going somewhere, Jess?" Gus asked.

"Yeah. To Tampa. How about you?"

"I just came out to meet a plane. Friend of Carl's."

"Well," I said, "say hello to Carl for me. And keep your ear to the ground." It was an old joke between us. I headed for the ticket counter.

In Tampa the next morning, after breakfasting in the coffee shop of my motel, I went to my room and took the bottles of counterfeit pills out of my overnight bag, lined them up on the telephone table, and dialed the number McCallum's secretary had given me of his shopper in Tampa, a Mrs. Caroline Smart.

She answered on the first ring. After I'd identified myself, she said, "Can I help you?"

I read her the names of the drugstores on the bottles of phony pills. Then I said, "Those Tampa druggists filled prescriptions for you recently with counterfeit Frazer drugs."

"Oh, dear!" she said.

"You sound surprised."

She hesitated. "Not exactly. I'm used to finding moonshine drugs. But . . . I'm surprised that Kelto's Pharmacy was one of the stores, Mr. Conrad."

"Why the surprise, Mrs. Smart?"

"Because Kelto's is the one independent drugstore in Tampa I'd think least likely to dispense counterfeit pills."

"What makes you think that?" I rattled the pills in the Kelto bottle.

"Well, Kelto's is an old family business with a fine reputation for fifty years back. They wouldn't dispense counterfeit drugs deliberately, I'm sure of that."

'Deliberately' was the operative word. I said, "Thank you, Mrs. Smart. You've been most helpful. Thank you very much."

I went outside and took a cab to Kelto's Pharmacy, giving the cabdriver the address on the prescription bottle. As luck would have it, the store was empty of customers when I walked in. I went back through the spacious modern store to the prescription counter in the rear. A man in a white coat greeted me pleasantly there.

"Mr. Kelto?" I asked.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

I took the Kelto prescription bottle from my pocket and put it on the counter. "You filled this prescription, didn't you?"

He examined the label and one of the tablets closely. "Looks like it," he said. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"Nothing much, except that the Frazer tablets are counterfeit."

"What!" He stared at me as though a deadly snake had just crawled from under my necktie.

"Phonies," I said in a quiet voice. "Moonshine hormone pills that never came within a mile of a Frazer plant, even if they do carry the Frazer trademark."

He shook several more of the tablets out into his hand and looked at them again. Then he looked at me. "You're from Frazer?"

I nodded and showed him the note of authorization with which McCallum had armed me.

He swallowed. "What's this all about?"

"You've had counterfeit drugs on your shelves, Mr. Kelto, and Frazer wants to know how come." I paused. "We feel sure you aren't selling false drugs deliberately, of course."

"Thanks," said Kelto dryly.

"So we'll have to trace them back a little further. Who's your usual supplier for Frazer brand-name drugs?"

"O'Hara and Doan," he said promptly. "We've dealt with them for years."

"Who's the boss? O'Hara or Doan?"

"O'Hara's dead. Doan's been running things for the last ten years. But they're absolutely above suspicion, Mr. Conrad."

"So are you," I said. "I'll have to

look into it, anyway. Thanks for your help. You'll be hearing from Frazer before long. Where is O'-Hara and Doan's office?"

He gave me an address. I turned and left before he could say anything more.

I flagged down another cab and crawled into the back, giving the driver the drug distributor's address. It was hot and humid in Tampa; my shirt collar felt sticky around my neck and I was sweating a little.

O'Hara and Doan's was a long one-story building with a loading platform at one end that could serve four or five trucks at once. It was mostly warehouse; but at the opposite end from the loading platform was a door with a small metal sign beside it that said "Office".

I went in and told a switchboard girl that I wanted to see Mr. Doan on a personal matter. She rolled her eyes at me and said, "Mr. Doan isn't in today. He hasn't been in all week."

"He sick?" I asked.

"No, he's semi-retired. He doesn't come in much anymore."

"Who handles things for him, then?"

"His assistant, Mr. Harper."

"Is *he* in?"

"Yes." She turned to her switchboard. "Who shall I say?"

"Frazer Pharmaceuticals."

She murmured into her mouthpiece for a moment, then nodded brightly. "He'll see you. Down at the end of the hall and turn right. You can't miss."

I followed directions. Mr. Harper's office was small and unbelievably cluttered. Cardboard shipping cartons, bottles, boxes, manufacturers' samples, dusty piles of counter cards and window streamers for old product promotions were stacked everywhere, helter-skelter. In the middle of the mess was a desk, equally cluttered with letters, invoices and product lists. Mr. Harper sat behind this desk in a battered swivel chair. He was short and had no visible neck and very little hair. What hair he had was a pale pink color like faded cotton candy. His voice was brusque. "You're from Frazer?"

"Yes. On unpleasant business, I'm afraid, Mr. Harper. We've had some counterfeit drugs showing up in the Tampa area under our label and we're trying to track down their source."

He put small greenish eyes on me and said, "You're wasting your time here, then. We're strictly legitimate."

"That's what they all say." I grinned at him and looked around for a place to sit. There wasn't another chair in the room besides Harper's. I perched one hip on a

stack of cartons flanking the door.

He said at length, "Well, what do you want from me?"

It was a good question. I hadn't the faintest idea what I wanted from him, except a full confession, maybe, of selling illicit drugs. I said, "A little inspection tour of your Frazer inventory wouldn't hurt."

He gave a nasal laugh. "What will that prove? Anybody who can counterfeit drugs can presumably counterfeit labels and carton stencils, too. So what good will it do to look?"

"I've got X-ray eyes," I said. "Let's go, shall we?"

He shrugged and stood up and came around his desk, picking his way through the debris. I pressed back against the stack of cartons I'd been leaning on to let him pass. In doing so, I unbalanced the top carton. It fell to the floor on its side and the top flaps came open.

Harper stooped down irritably and shoveled a plastic bottle that had spilled out of the overturned carton back into it and set the carton on top of the stack again.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He grunted and led me down the long corridor to the reception room, through an insulated fire door and into the O'Hara and Doan warehouse. It looked like any other drug wholesaler's stock room, I supposed: stacks of shipping cartons and boxes, shelves filled with packages and bottles, drums of liquids. It took us about five minutes to pass slowly in front of every Frazer carton, box, bottle and drum. I learned nothing, of course.

Back in the reception room, I said, "Thanks for being patient, Mr. Harper. Sorry to waste your time."

He stalked away without a word of farewell, grunting his contempt of me.

I went outside and walked past the loading platform to the next street corner. I looked at my watch. It was nearly lunch time. There was a chain drugstore on the corner opposite the warehouse. I went in and sat on a stool at the counter and ordered a junior club sandwich and a glass of milk. While I ate, I looked out of the drugstore window toward the warehouse opposite. I ate as slowly as I could, stretching it out. Half an hour went by. I ordered a second dish of chocolate ice cream from the counter girl.

At twelve-fifteen, Harper came out of the office entrance to O'Hara and Doan and climbed into a new car that was parked to one side of the loading bay. He backed into the street, cut the wheels, and took off in the direction of Ybor City.

I paid for my protracted lunch, lit a cigarette and strolled down the street to the O'Hara and Doan office. I walked inside and the same switchboard girl peeked out at me. "I forgot my hat," I told her. "I left it in Mr. Harper's office."

"He's left for lunch," she answered. "I'll see if—"

"Don't bother. I'll get it. I know just where I left it." Before she could stop me, I walked quickly up the corridor to Harper's office.

My hat was where I'd left it, all right, tucked carefully out of sight behind a dusty pyramid of counter cards. I put it on my head, then quickly unscrewed the top of one of the jars in the carton I'd knocked over a little while before. I shook two or three white pills out of the jar and stashed them in my change pocket, then put the lid back on the jar, the jar back in the carton, took another quick look around and did double-time back to the switchboard girl.

She nodded when she saw my hat. "You got it. Good."

"I got it," I said. "Thank you, miss."

By nine-fifteen next morning, I was back in the office of Armstrong Frazer. Two days of the three-day grace period granted him by the Nervasil blackmailers had already passed. I said to Mr. Frazer, "It seemed a little peculiar that Harper should accept my word for it that I was from Frazer. It was almost as though he was expecting somebody to come and interview him about counterfeit Frazer drugs."

Frazer nodded without saying anything.

"In his office," I went on, "I knocked over a carton that I'd been half sitting on, and a labeled bottle slid part way out of it. I saw the label on the bottle before Harper scooped it back in the carton. The label said *Frazer Nestrolene*."

Mr. Frazer nodded again. "That's one of our hormone pills."

"Yes, sir. Only the Frazer pills didn't spill out of a Frazer carton."

"Oh." Mr. Frazer hooded his hawk eyes to conceal his sudden interest. "Whose carton was it then?"

"A plain fiberboard carton without any name or trademark on it, addressed to O'Hara and Doan on a typewritten label pasted on the side . . . which I saw when the carton fell over. It was labeled WATER SOFTENERS. And the carton under it was labeled MACHINE TOOLS."

"That's curious," said Mr. Frazer.

"I thought so. So I managed to get some samples of the Nestrolene pills without Harper knowing it." I took the pills out of my change

pocket and put them on his desk. He took in the curlicue "F" stamped on them. "How about getting your Mr. Jackson to test these for genuineness?" I suggested. "And compare their markings with the blackmail pill?"

"I think that can be arranged," he said. He sent his secretary off with the pills for Jackson with explicit instructions. "But for what purpose, Mr. Conrad? Even if the pills prove counterfeit. I must point out that it won't help us any unless we can discover who made them."

"I realize that. That's why I left my hat in Harper's office. An excuse to go back and get samples of the pills, of course, but also to see if that mailing label on the WATER SOFTENERS carton had a return address on it."

That got him. He sat up straighter in his chair. "And had it?"

I grinned at him. "It had. The Ace Expediting Company, Highfield, Indiana. But it probably doesn't mean a thing."

"We could find out. Highfield is only sixty miles away."

"Close enough for me to run down there today and check."

"Yes. We have until tomorrow before the money must be paid."

"I planned to go . . . *if* the Nestrolene pills turn out to be fakes with the right markings. Incidentally, have you got the payoff cash all assembled now, Mr. Frazer?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't heard any more from the blackmailers?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. Perhaps in the morning mail today. Why not wait in the anteroom there till it arrives . . . and we get Jackson's report?"

The anteroom to his office wasn't much larger than a Hilton Hotel lobby. I sat in a big leather chair out there all by myself and smoked a cigarette until the mail girl arrived. Jackson arrived with her. I stood up and followed Frazer's secretary and Jackson back into Frazer's office.

Jackson and I sat down while Frazer rapidly riffled through his mail. He grunted, pulled one envelope from the stack and handed the rest back to his secretary who went out, closing the door carefully behind her.

Frazer said, "Well, Jack, what about those Nestrolenes?"

Jackson replied, "Moonshine, Mr. Frazer. Counterfeit."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely. No sign of our tracers, and definitely not our punch marks. The trademark looks genuine enough through the scope, but the markings don't. They're the same punch marks those Tampa and Los Angeles fakes showed. And the phony Nervasil tablet."

Without any change of expression, Frazer said, "Thank you, Jack. You've been very helpful." It was an invitation to Jackson to leave. He left.

Frazer tore open the envelope he had selected from his pile of mail. "It's postmarked Chicago," he informed me. He unfolded the single sheet of cheap, lined paper. His eye ran rapidly down the page.

I sat quietly until he lifted his head. His expression was bleak. "They've moved the payoff up a day." He tossed the note to me.

Forget Friday. We want the money tonight. Pack unmarked bills in #4 Nervasil carton and bring direct from your office to your ancestor in Emory Churchyard at exactly 8:12. Come alone, Armstrong Frazer, in your own car. No police, no traps . . . or shipment of contaminated Nervasils automatically starts at once. Leavy money, return your office, and stay there till midnight.

I looked at Mr. Frazer. "What's this ancestor bit?"

"My great grandfather was the first Frazer to settle here. He's buried in the old graveyard of Emory Church on the North Side."

"I advise you to call the police right now," I said, "with this definite rendezvous." Frazer merely shook his head. I said, "All right, then. You won't be leaving for the payoff until almost eight tonight. I can get down to Highfield and back by then."

The door opened and his secretary came in to tell him that George McCallum was calling from California. "Will you bring George up to date, please?" Frazer asked me. "In the anteroom."

I took the blackmail note, handling it carefully, and went into the anteroom and picked up the phone there. They put George McCallum's call on the line. "Here's the latest," I told him at once. "It came in the morning mail postmarked Chicago." I read the blackmail note to him. "They've jacked up the time on us."

George's voice rasped, "I'm coming back, then, Jess. I'm not doing any good out here. What do you suppose that Chicago postmark means?"

"You've got me. Except that these boys must have quite an organization."

"Yeah. Los Angeles, Chicago, Tampa . . ." McCallum brought himself up short. "Did you run across anything in Tampa?"

I told him about the carton at O'Hara and Doan's that contained counterfeit Frazer hormone pills instead of water softeners as the label promised. "It's strictly a long

shot," I said, "but I'm going down to Highfield this afternoon to check it out."

"Ace Expediting Company," McCallum echoed thoughtfully. "What's to expedite in a little place like Highfield?"

I laughed. "Water softeners, I guess."

Highfield is a sleepy county seat of maybe fifty thousand souls, located on a spur of the I.T. & W. Railroad. No airport, no trucking companies, a few trains a week, and several small manufacturing plants set in the middle of forty square miles of corn fields and truck gardens . . . that's Highfield. McCallum was right. It seemed like a funny place to have an expediting company, but when I stopped at a drugstore on the main business street, I found an Ace Expediting Company listed in the Highfield telephone directory at 4220 City Line Avenue.

I asked directions from a drugstore clerk, went back to my car and headed for City Line Avenue. It was only three blocks east and ran parallel with the main drag. I turned south on it and wheeled slowly along, looking for numbers. I passed a neat railroad station on my left, and then, a hundred yards beyond, City Line Avenue petered out into a turnaround in front of a small barn-like stone building, black with soot. It had a high garage-type metal door with one of those small people-size doors built into the big one. The place looked like an old freight warehouse long since abandoned by the railroad and as empty as a church on Saturday night.

Aluminum numerals above the door indicated that this was 4220 City Line Avenue, though, so I parked my car in the turnaround, got out, and tried the knob of the small door. It was locked.

I rapped smartly on the panels and waited, listening. Nothing happened for a minute. Then I heard brisk, approaching footsteps inside and the small door opened about six inches. A face peeked out at me from the gloom. And I mean gloom. There wasn't any light in the windowless room beyond the door.

I used a querulous tone. "Ace Expediting?"

The door didn't budge an inch. The guy inside looked me over for a second, then said politely, "What's your problem?"

"I need some expediting done, what else?" I answered. "I farm two hundred acres south of town and I ordered one of those new automatic seeders from Chicago over six weeks ago, and the damn thing hasn't shown up yet—"

The man interrupted me. "Come

on in," he said. "I thought you were selling something." He opened the door wider and I stepped over the high sill and ducked inside. He closed the door after me, then put a hand on my arm to guide me, drawing me toward an open door with some daylight leaking out of it at the far end of the place. Our steps echoed on concrete.

The open door was cut into a ten-foot-high partition that boxed in a corner of the warehouse to form a small triangular room. Daylight came through two grimy windows. My guide preceded me into the room and invited me to sit down. There was a scarred wooden desk smack in the middle of the office, with a straight chair behind it and another in front of it. Aside from a telephone on the desk, and one three-tiered filing cabinet of ancient vintage leaning against the wall, that's all the furniture the room contained; not even a rug on the concrete floor. I sat down in the chair facing the desk while the man went around the desk and sat in the other.

He was lean, dark, bespectacled, and remarkably handsome. He had on a blue suit with a chalk stripe, very chic. He offered me a cigarette and said, "Now, then. An automatic seeder, was that it?"

I went through the whole thing again, trying to sound authentic.

"What's the make and model of the seeder and what dealer did you order from?"

I said the first thing that came into my head. "International, model Y-42, ordered from Scott and Western in Chicago." He wrote the information down on a pad. "Do you think you can get some action for me?"

"I'm sure we can."

"How much'll you soak me?"

He temporized. "I'll have to discuss that with my partner."

"Why?"

"He's going to Chicago tomorrow on another job, and might handle yours at the same time. It would cost you less that way."

"Great," I gave him a thrifty smile. "Where is he? Can't we settle it now?"

"He stepped over to the station just before you arrived. Back in a minute."

"Good," I said. "I'll wait." I shucked out of my topcoat and threw it over a corner of the desk and put my hat on top. "You got a men's room here?" I wanted another look at the warehouse beyond the partition.

He stood up and his eyes went over my shoulder toward the door behind me. "Here's my partner now," he said. "Come on in, Luke, you're just in time. Mr. Conrad

here wants us to do a little job for him in Chicago."

The oldest trick in the book: he lifted his telephone receiver off its stand and stretched over the desk in my direction with his arm cocked back. The script was perfectly clear to me. His telephone receiver was to make violent contact with the back of my head when I obeyed my natural reflexes and turned toward the door and

looked for his returning partner.

So I didn't turn my head as he expected. I jumped back from his desk instead and kept my eyes on him while I threw up a forearm to block his blow. As a result, I backed right into it; not his blow, but another. Everything went as black for me as the inside of the Ace Expediting Company warehouse.

When I came to my senses I was lying full length on my right side with my eyes open and I couldn't see anything. Not a thing. My cheek was pressed against a dank, chill surface that smelled of oil and chemicals and could only be a concrete floor. My hands were tied behind me with something that felt as unstretchable as picture wire, and my ankles, when I tried to move my legs, were hobbled, too. In my dismay at this discovery, I tried to swear, only to find I couldn't make a sound. Some sort of vile-tasting fabric in a messy lump had been stuffed into my mouth and secured by a strip of adhesive tape pasted across my lips. I felt pretty certain where I was: on the floor of the cavernous warehouse of Ace Expediting Company.

I began to work my wrists a little against their bindings, experimentally, hoping I'd been mistaken in my first impression of their strength. I hadn't been mistaken. I flexed my knees and tried for some slack in my ankle binding. There wasn't any. I scraped my mouth and cheek against the concrete floor for a few minutes, seeking to dislodge the tape that gagged me. All I got out of that was a lacerated cheek and a badly scraped nose.

That pink-haired Harper in Tampa was sharper than I gave him credit for, I thought. When I knocked over his carton full of fake Frazer pills, he must have figuerd that maybe I saw the return address on it and passed along a word of warning to Ace Expediting, for they were certainly waiting for me; no lights in the warehouse, and Luke hanging outside the office door in the dark to conk me.

I took a certain amount of satisfaction, it is true, from the thought that I had probably uncovered the factory where illicit Frazer drugs were being concocted, but I had an uneasy feeling that I had missed something along the way somewhere that might explain the real mystery of this crazy operation: namely, why a gang of counterfeiters with an established business in moonshine drugs should suddenly endanger their whole setup by plunging headfirst into the uncertain and far more risky business of blackmail.

I closed my eyes, waited for time to pass, and did a little thinking.

Mr. Frazer and George McCallum both knew I'd come to this warehouse. So somebody would in due course show up and release me, I hoped.

Some time later, maybe half an hour, I thought I heard a noise, a faint tinkle of sound, far, far away, like a church bell ringing outside. Could this be Sunday already? It was only Thursday the last time I'd looked.

I closed my eyes again and more time went by. Then I thought I heard another noise, much nearer. My eyes snapped open, and it wasn't dark anymore. At least, it wasn't as dark as it had been. A faint glow of light was spilling over my left shoulder, which was the one I wasn't lying on. The light flickered and drew nearer, accompanied by muffled thuds that I felt through the concrete rather than heard.

I got a little panicky, thinking Luke and his handsome buddy might have come back to finish me off, or that the joint was on fire and I'd be burned alive. I rolled over painfully across my bound hands to see what I could.

The light was from a flashlight, and the muffled sounds were therefore footsteps. The flashlight beam was being turned this way and that about the warehouse floor as its owner, invisible behind it, advanced. Perhaps it could mean help.

I figured that if it was Luke or his pal, they wouldn't have needed a flashlight to find me, so I scuffed my shoes on the concrete floor to draw attention. The flashlight beam darted instantly in my direction, found me, and held steady on my face. "What the hell!" somebody said. Then he was bending over me, breathing heavily. He said, "Hi, Jess, it's me," and turned the flashlight beam up into his own face.

He didn't have any ears. It was Gus Schenk.

My wristwatch told me it was a quarter to ten when I wheeled into the employees' parking lot, now deserted, at Frazer Pharmaceuticals. I checked with the lobby guard in the office wing before stepping into Mr. Frazer's private elevator.

When the door of the elevator whispered open and I stepped out into his office, Mr. Frazer, sitting at his desk, raised startled eyes to me. George McCallum was ensconced in a leather chair flanking Frazer's desk, smoking the inevitable cigar.

I said, "Hi, sorry I'm late," and sat down in the chair at the other corner of Mr. Frazer's desk. I kept my hat and topcoat on.

Mr. Frazer said, "What happened to you?"

I didn't know whether the question was prompted by the scratches on my cheek and nose, or by my late arrival from Highfield, so I said, "I ran into a floor," and kept right on talking. "Did you make the payoff, Mr. Frazer?"

"I did. About an hour ago."

"In Emory Churchyard?"

"I took the money there at the agreed time. But there was a note taped to the headstone of my ancestor's grave with further instructions." He pulled a scrap of paper out of his pocket and handed it to me.

Return to the car with the money. Drive 25 mph Center Avenue to route 789, turn right four miles to where 789 crosses river on Dandeman Bridge. Stop on bridge. When sure unobserved, throw carton of money over bridge rail into river. Return to your office, same route, until midnight.

"Into the river!" I said, dumbfounded. "Did you do it?"

"Of course." His voice was flat.

George McCallum said, "How about that? We figure they were in a boat under the bridge, ready to grab the money the minute it splashed in."

"Did you see a boat under the bridge?" I asked Frazer.

"No, it was too dark. Anyway, I didn't look."

"Was the money in a Nervasil carton, as ordered?"

"Certainly." Mr. Frazer sent a wry look at his brown-spotted old man's hands. "It was quite heavy, too. George helped me down to the garage with it when I started out."

"When did you get back from California?" I asked George.

"About seven. I got a no-show seat on an early afternoon flight and came right here in a cab from the airport."

"He wanted to follow me in his car when I made the ah . . . payoff," Frazer said, "or conceal himself in the back seat of my car."

"I wanted to get a gander at whoever showed up to take delivery of the dough," George said.

"I refused, of course," Frazer said. "I was instructed to come alone."

"He made me stay here in the office and wait." McCallum was disgusted.

Frazer made a dismissive gesture and asked sharply, "What about Highfield?"

I took off my hat and showed them the bump on my head. "I got this there," I said.

McCallum burst out, "Who slugged you?"

"One of our blackmailers, I think. A man named Luke."

McCallum blinked. Mr. Frazer leaned forward and clasped his

hands together. "Well, Luke what?"

"Just Luke, that's all I know." I gave them a brief account of my adventure at Ace Expediting Company.

When I finished, McCallum asked, "How'd you get loose?"

"Some fellow who had lost something in the warehouse earlier happened to come back looking for it," I said, "and found me." I turned to Mr. Frazer. "Ace Expediting is where those fake Nervasils were made, sir."

"You're sure of that?"

"When I got loose, I made a quick inspection tour of the Ace Expediting warehouse. It turned out to be a kind of loft building with two floors and a basement. I found mixing utensils, a laboratory, a machine for punching out pills, and containers of chemicals lying around, open and unmarked, all over the place; even in the basement, where the floor was partially covered with pools of dirty water."

Mr. Frazer shuddered. "Not even rudimentary sanitary standards."

"Sanitation was the last thing these boys were thinking about," I said. "The mixing utensils were cruddy. The lab was filthy. When I turned on the lights, the cockroaches fell all over each other trying to get out of sight."

Mr. Frazer shuddered again.

"On the first floor," I went on, "there were large quantities of drugs packed for shipment in cartons labeled everything from machine parts to cutoff valves."

"Water softeners?" Frazer inquired softly.

"Some of those, too. But just cartons labeled that way. Inside were drugs."

"Nervasils?"

"No, sir. At least I didn't see any in the superficial search I made."

"That doesn't mean anything," McCallum said gloomily. "The contaminated Nervasils could have been labeled something else, or stashed away in another building somewhere, ready to ship out if Mr. Frazer didn't pay tonight."

I nodded. "Or," I said, "these blackmailers may never have made any other Nervasils except for the two they sent you with the blackmail demand, Mr. Frazer."

"That possibility has, of course, occurred to me many times," Frazer murmured, "and I fervently hope it is true. Yet I couldn't take a chance on it." He touched a clean white handkerchief to his lips. "What about the other drugs?"

"What about them, sir?"

"Did they carry the Frazer name and trademark?"

"Yes. And I found something else—a tablet-stamping die locked

in a drawer of the laboratory carrying your curlicue 'F' trademark."

Mr. Frazer rubbed his hands together. "I congratulate you, Mr. Conrad. That is hard proof. Did you bring the die back with you?"

I shook my head. "I was tempted, but I left everything as I found it for your own experts to look over. Under guard by the Highfield police."

McCallum said, "One thing bugs me, Jess. If the counterfeiters had a flourishing business going in moonshine Frazer drugs—which they evidently did—why risk it all for a lousy blackmail deal?" He blew cigar smoke. "They must have been making a bundle . . . maybe fifty thousand every month . . . marketing counterfeit drugs under our trade names. So why risk it for one blackmail bite?"

"Perhaps," Frazer speculated, "the blackmailers are not themselves drug counterfeiters. Suppose they merely hired Ace Expediting to compound those two contaminated Nervasil tablets for them?"

"A distinct possibility," I said. "Another is that someone in authority, perhaps the head of the counterfeiting ring, has squandered his share of the profits from their common enterprise, and suddenly finds himself in need of a quarter million dollars for some private reason, and so he uses his counterfeiting connection to launch his blackmail scheme, but fails to include his moonshining pals in it." This sounded pretty complicated to me, and I could tell that Frazer and McCallum thought so too. So I went on. "There's a third possibility. Both theories could be right. Our blackmailer may be somebody who's working both sides of the street; a legitimate drug manufacturer, say, who is also a drug counterfeiter on the side."

Frazer said, "What?" in an unbelieving tone.

"Such a person or persons, connected with a reputable drug maker, would be unusually well-equipped to levy successful blackmail, with a threat of contaminated drugs, against a company noted for its conscience in matters of public welfare."

"What you are implying," said Mr. Frazer, "is that perhaps someone here at Frazer Pharmaceuticals may be behind this blackmail scheme?"

"Why not?" I said.

McCallum put his eyes on me and took his cigar out of his mouth. "Somebody at Frazer?" He underlined the name with his voice.

"It looks like it, George. If for no other reason, because Mr. Frazer was selected as the blackmail victim. That argues familiarity with

his strong feelings about protecting the public; and familiarity with Emory Churchyard; and the sizes of Nervasil cartons; and Frazer's distribution pipelines, including personal acquaintance, probably, with certain distributors and retailers willing to turn a fast buck by selling moonshine drugs."

I lit a cigarette to neutralize some of the cigar fumes drifting about the room. Frazer and McCallum, as the saying goes, were wrapped in thought.

"That is pure conjecture," Frazer growled at length, "which is pointless until we have more facts. Unless you have settled, Mr. Conrad, upon a specific Frazer employee who could be our blackmailer? As well," he added with a touch of acid, "as a drug counterfeiter?"

"Well," I said, "how about the president of your company, Mr. Frazer?"

Frazer's neck cracked as he jerked his head up. "Do you mean me?"

"Sure. You've got to admit that this whole blackmail thing could be an elaborate scheme of yours for embezzling a quarter million dollars, couldn't it?"

He didn't deign to answer. Quite obviously, he disapproved of my awkward attempt at humor. I said stubbornly, "All the same, it's possible—except I couldn't fit you with a motive. If there's anything you don't need desperately, it's money."

McCallum said, "Jess, are you out of your skull?"

"Thanks," Frazer murmured.

I waved a hand. "It seemed certain that Luke and his pal had been warned I might be calling upon them, so I asked myself who warned them. Whoever it was must be in the drug counterfeiting at least, and perhaps could even be our blackmailer."

McCallum took his cigar butt out of his mouth. He said, "Who knew you were going to Highfield today, Jess? Besides Mr. Frazer and me?"

"Harper, maybe," I said, "of O'-Hara and Doan in Tampa."

"Sure. When you knocked over that carton in his office, he must have seen you take notice of the Highfield address."

I wagged my head. "That's what I thought at first. But there was one thing against it."

"What?"

"The man who admitted me to the Ace Expediting warehouse knew my name."

"Of course," Mr. Frazer said. "Why wouldn't he? If Harper called him from Tampa and warned him you were coming?"

"Because I never told *Harper* my name," I said.

Frazer stiffened. "You didn't?"

"When his switchboard girl asked who I was, I merely said I was from Frazer Pharmaceuticals. She announced me to Harper like that, and he never asked me my name." I leaned back in my chair and stretched wearily. "So you see, it couldn't have been Harper who warned the counterfeiters in Highfield. That leaves you two."

McCallum said, "Let's not clown, Jess."

"I'm not clowning, George. You're the blackmailer."

George gave me an undisturbed grin, natural and spontaneous. "You're really something, you are," he said. "Can't you spell it out for us a little plainer?"

"Yes," I said. "First of all, you're carrying a hundred thousand dollar gambling debt around on your back, George."

"Me?" said George. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"From Gus Schenk, the man who cut me loose in Ace Expediting's warehouse. You owe the money to Carl Venture, his boss, and you'd been warned to pay off by next week or take the welcher's cure from Carl's boys . . . which is sometimes fatal."

"Gus Schenk?" McCallum laughed. "The earless wonder you pointed out to me at lunch? What the hell has he got to do with me?"

"I wondered that myself when Gus came out of a telephone booth beside you at the airport the other night, and nodded at you when you'd said you didn't know him."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Frazer interrupted. "I don't understand any of this."

I explained. "Gus Schenk is an errand boy for the local gambling boss, Carl Venture, and he was following George everywhere he went day before yesterday. Gus had orders from Carl not to let George leave town before he paid up."

"So to pay off a gambling debt of a hundred thousand dollars, I blackmail Mr. Frazer for a quarter of a million?" George asked reasonably.

"Why not? It gives you a little cushion to get married on. You've been putting off marrying Miss Burgess for over a year because you were so deep into Carl Venture that even your drug counterfeiting profits couldn't bail you out in time. And besides, a quarter of a million dollars is a much more suitable sum for a big firm like Frazer to pay to prevent mass murder . . . and a tarnished reputation." I took a breath and kept on talking to George. "There were some other things that pointed your way too. Like your patronizing tone of voice when you remarked to me, Mr. Frazer was all heart when it came to protecting the public, and

the fact that you thanked God a little too piously that gambling wasn't one of your vices."

Mr. Frazer held up his hand. "George," he said to McCallum, "are you a gambler?"

George said, "No, sir. That bump on the head has addled Jess' brains."

I bulled ahead. "Carl Venture told Gus Schenk to follow you and keep you from leaving town, George. That explained Gus' nod to you at the airport before you ran for your plane. You were obviously leaving town, so Gus braced you while I was parking my car and wanted to know why you were going and where, and then he called Carl Venture, while you waited, to see if Carl would give you an okay to leave. When Gus came out of the phone booth and nodded to you, it meant Carl gave you permission to fly to L.A. So you took off."

"Tell us more," McCallum urged genially. "Why would Carl Venture tell Gus it was okay for me to leave town when Gus was following me to prevent that very thing?"

"Because Gus told his boss that I was with you, that's why. That I was flying to Tampa while you went to L.A., and that our common purpose was to raise the dough you owe Carl."

McCallum gave me an incredulous look, still not convinced.

I shrugged. "I don't lend a lot of class to most operations, George, but I did to that one. When you told Gus I was helping you raise Carl's money, they decided to let us leave town. Right?"

"Wrong," McCallum said. "And how come this Gus Schenk showed up in Highfield sixty miles away, to save your bacon by cutting you loose?"

"He was following *me* today, George."

Derision. "Why?"

"Because I came back from Tampa before you came back from L.A., and Carl Venture had assigned a tail to *both* of us when we got back to town. Gus followed me to Highfield, saw me enter Ace Expediting and fail to come out again. Two other fellows did, though, and Gus took their license number. When it was dark and I still hadn't come out, Gus came in through the window to see what had happened to me. He had to break the glass to get in."

McCallum said, "As I get it, you think I'm part of a moonshining outfit as well as head of Frazer's product protection department."

"Right," I said.

"And that I owe a hundred grand to a local gambler and am attempting to blackmail my own company. And that I've arranged

to have blackmail notes sent from Los Angeles and Chicago to Mr. Frazer?"

"Yes," I said, "and telephoned your partners in Highfield from L.A. to be ready for me when I visited them this afternoon . . . and then run, since their Ace Expediting cover was blown."

George shredded his cigar in an ash tray. "Okay. Just so we understand each other." He turned to Mr. Frazer. "This man is out of his mind."

I said, "Why don't we settle it right now?"

"How?" Frazer asked.

"The money. That's the simplest way."

"The old man fumed, "The money, may I remind you, has been thrown over a bridge rail into the river!"

"I don't think so," I said. "I think the money is still in this building. You threw a carton full of torn-up newspapers or blank paper over that bridge rail."

"What? What?"

"Yes. Look, it was a breeze. George told you in the blackmail note to pack the money in a #4 Nervasil carton, right? So he merely switched cartons on you before you left for Emory Churchyard."

Tolerantly, George asked, "How did I work that?"

"Where's George's usual parking space in the executive garage downstairs?" I asked Mr. Frazer.

"Next to my own. On the right."

"You said George helped you down to the garage with the money. So all he had to do was have his duplicate Nervasil carton stashed handily in his car and switch cartons on you. Wouldn't take two seconds. He probably had the duplicate carton packed and ready in the back of his car before he left for L.A. on Tuesday night."

George was fiddling with another cigar wrapping, breaking out a fresh smoke. I talked earnestly to Mr. Frazer. "While you were delivering what you thought was the blackmail money, George had plenty of time to conceal the real stuff. I think the trunk of his car is the likeliest place, myself."

George didn't look a bit guilty, but more like a man good-naturedly putting up with the insults of a drunk. He stood up. "The only way to prove he's wrong, Mr. Frazer, is to do what he wants. Let's go down to the garage." He shoved his unwrapped cigar into a corner of his mouth and clamped down on it, showing a little temper.

I stood up, too. "Let's go," I said. I waited for Mr. Frazer. The three of us stepped into Frazer's private elevator. In the lobby, we transferred to the garage elevator. I

didn't see the lobby guard around. We went down another two levels.

When the elevator stopped, George stepped out first, stood aside for Mr. Frazer, then followed him respectfully toward the only two cars remaining on that level at this late hour. I brought up the rear. We walked from the elevator past Mr. Frazer's car, a black sedan, to the convertible parked in the next slot, George's car. George fumbled in his pockets for his keys. "Where would you like to look first, Nero Wolfe?"

"The trunk, George. If you please."

Frazer stepped back so that George could fit his key into the trunk lock. I went closer. George was between us. He unlocked the trunk. The lid started to rise on its springs, but stuck on dead center partway up. I leaned down to peer through the five-inch gap into the luggage compartment; I couldn't see anything. I glanced up to discover what was keeping the trunk lid from rising. It was George's left hand.

Then I forgot the trunk lid, for George had taken his unlighted cigar out of his mouth and was holding it peculiarly between his thumb and second finger, its blunt end aimed directly at my face. George's thumb was pressed firmly against the other end and, most surprising of all, a thin spray of vapor was issuing from the cigar.

At the same instant, somebody got up from the floor of Mr. Frazer's car in the next stall and pointed a businesslike revolver out of the back window at George. A gravel voice said, "Hold it, Mr. McCallum! That's all!"

He wasn't fooling. That's all I knew for an hour and forty-five minutes. When I came to, I was in Mr. Frazer's office again, lying on his leather couch. I sat up and looked around and didn't see George. I raised an eyebrow at Mr. Frazer who was sitting behind his desk again.

He said, "My apologies, Mr. Conrad. The money was in George's car as you guessed. And my disinclination to believe you has caused you some . . . ah . . . discomfort, I'm afraid."

"Forget it," I said. "Where's George?"

"The police have him. You have been asleep for more than an hour."

"Good old George. He probably figured to handle me first with his little squirter, then you, and then take the money and run with it."

Frazer nodded, once up, once down. "Our lobby guard said you planted him in my car to stop George from getting away."

"What was the stuff in George's cigar?" I wondered.

"A liquid tranquilizer that vaporizes on contact with the air and induces instantaneous slumber," Frazer replied. "Harmless unless inhaled too liberally."

"Tranquilizer?" I said. "Not Nervasil?"

"No. Some preparation cooked up by George's counterfeiting companions, undoubtedly. At least Jackson was of that opinion. It's not a Frazer drug."

"Too bad," I said. "It's pretty good stuff. I didn't even dream."

He said, "Jackson also thinks it possible that the moonshiner named Luke could be one of our former chemists, Luke Chagin, whom Jackson was forced to discharge several years ago for selling formula information to our competitors."

"Then he ought to be easy to find. And I've got the license number of their car."

"Good." Frazer paused. "Frazer Pharmaceuticals owes you a considerable debt, Mr. Conrad."

"Three days' pay and expenses, that's all," I said.

"That is not all . . . as you shall see when we make out your check." His predatory eyes hooded themselves for an instant in extreme weariness. "Could you dictate a statement about this blackmail business for the police, Mr. Conrad? I more or less promised them."

I said, "Of course. But my secretary is on vacation . . ."

"Use one of ours, if you wish."

"Fine," I said. "I'll be in tomorrow and dictate it to George McCallum's secretary. Somebody's got to tell her that her wedding has been put off again."

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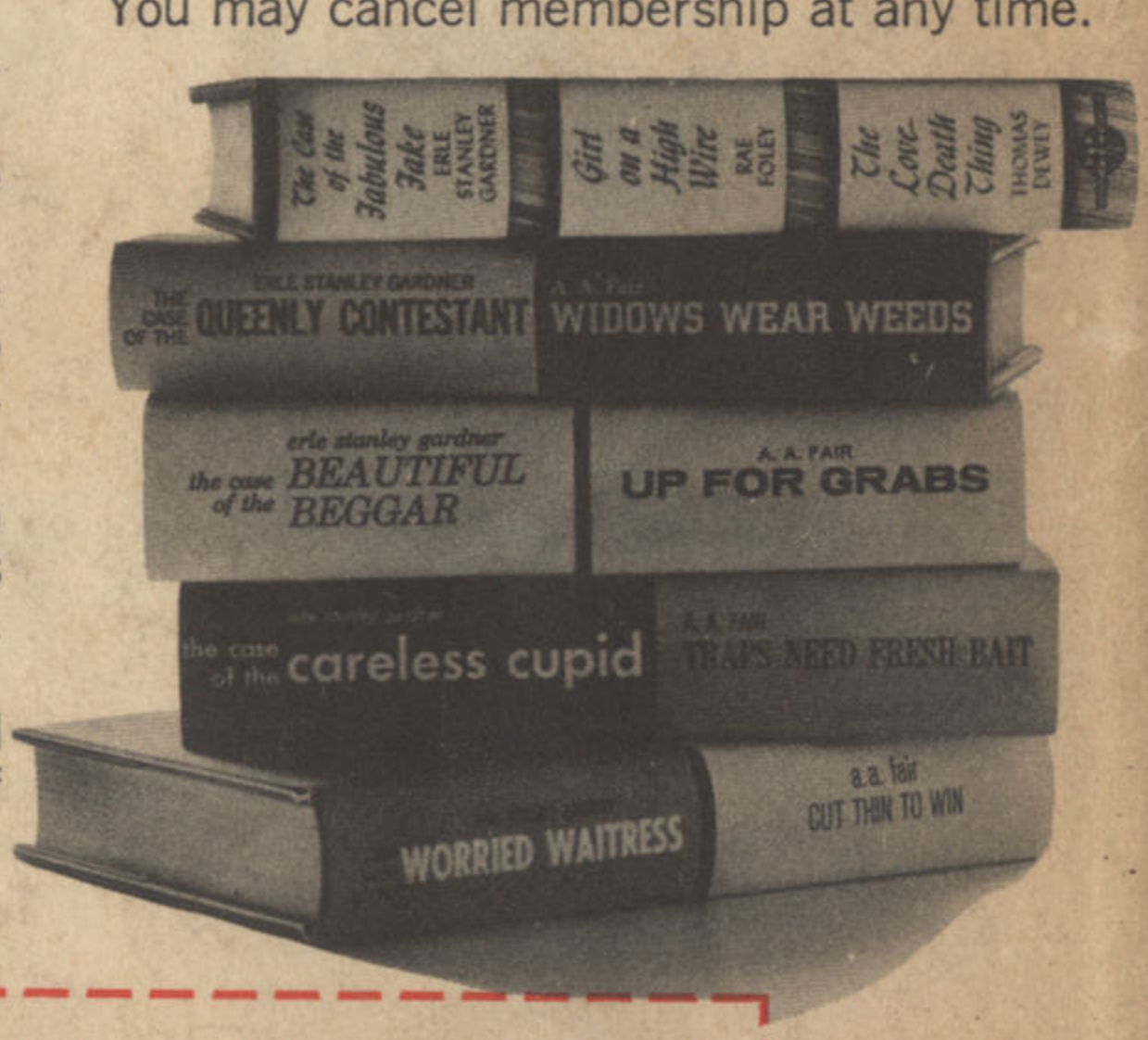

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