ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 35¢

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers,

In my opinion, the cover of this issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* is self-explanatory. Nonetheless, I shall proceed forthwith to explain it. The individual in the center, foreground is someone revered by all—Alfred Hitchcock; to my rear, in the stadium, is that nondescript mass garnished with chrysanthemums known as the football fan. Why such a scene should be on the cover of a mystery magazine is self-evident; mayhem and eventually murder is annually attempted on the so-called playing field.

Which brings me to Thanksgiving. This is a holiday that has always been close to my heart, and its neighboring organ, the stomach. Seriously, man should be thankful that he is capable of the very act of giving thanks, for this implies a complex of capacities which he alone possesses. A certain pickpocket, or dip, whom I know adorns the festive board each Thanksgiving with a cornucopia as a centerpiece, filled to overflowing with watches, billfolds, fountain pens, money clasps, and loose change, for he, too, sincerely believes that man does not live by bread alone.

May I wish all of you a happy holiday—and a shuddering good time with the stories that follow.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 3, No. 12, December, 1958. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions $4.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 122 East 42 Street, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone OX 7-8680. Second class postage paid at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Chanin Building, Room 547, 122 East 42 Street, New York 17, N. Y.

VOLUME 3, NO. 12 DECEMBER, 1958

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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by Helen Nielsen

It was murder, although slaughter was a better term for it—or even assassination. Naomi Shawn settled on murder because it was a word that felt strangely at home in her mind. The crime, by any name, was happening to a bewildered citizen, one Henry Babcock, whose place of execution was the witness stand in Judge Dutton's court. Henry Babcock was in a somewhat similar circumstance to the late Agnes Thompson, housewife, who had been struck down by a Mercedes-Benz and subsequently buried. Henry was being buried, too; but he had the uncomfortable disadvantage of not being dead.

From her seat among the courtroom spectators, Naomi watched the scene with fascinated eyes. Arnold Shawn was a man of electrifying virility, persuasive charm, and intellectual dexterity. He was a dramatist, a strategist, a psychologist, and could, if need be, display the touch of the poet. He was more handsome at fifty than he'd been at twenty-five, more confident, more successful, more feared and much more hated. He was a lawyer who selected his clients with scrupulous care, basing his decision solely on ability to pay. But once a retainer was given, the accused could sit back with whatever ease an accused can muster and know that his fate was in the hands of as shrewd a legal talent as money could buy.

And the biggest heel.

Naomi Shawn's vocabulary wasn't as extensive as her husband's. He would have found a more distinctive way of describing his own character. In fact, he had done that very thing only a few hours earlier.

"I'm not cruel, Naomi; I'm honest. I could lie to you. It would be easy, easier than you know, my dear. I could prove to you, beyond your innermost feminine doubt, that I am an innocent, loyal, devoted husband who is passionately in love with you, and everything you think you've learned to the contrary is pure illusion. But I won't lie. There is another woman."

Naomi tried not to listen to echoes. Arnold was speaking, and Arnold commanded attention when he spoke.

With a degree of bitterness, a lawyer has been defined as one who can make black appear white or white appear black. Our detestible, forensic hero is singular only in that he proved a red traffic light green.

"Now, Mr. Babcock," he was saying, "you have testified that you saw my client's automobile run a red light, strike the deceased, Agnes Thompson, drive on for a space of some fifty yards, stop, back up to a spot parallel with the body, and then drive on again without my client, Mr. Jerome, so much as alighting from the vehicle..."

Mr. Jerome. He was nineteen. A slight nineteen, with an almost child-like face and guilty blue eyes that stared disconsolately at his uncalloused hands laced together on the table before him. His blond hair was combed back neatly, and he wore a conservative tie, white shirt and dark suit, as per Arnold's instructions. Kenneth Jerome looked more like an honor Bible student than a cold-blooded hit and run killer. And he was that; Naomi was the one spectator in the courtroom who knew. She had gone to Arnold's office one morning. He hadn't been home all night, a situation that was becoming alarmingly frequent. It was time to have a showdown. But young Jerome and his father had come to the office that day, and she was shunted off to another room. She heard the story. Kenneth Jerome couldn't deny hitting his victim; the police had already traced his car to the garage where it was being repaired.

"I didn't know I'd hit a woman," Kenneth Jerome explained. "I didn't see anyone. I thought I felt a thud, but it's open country out near the airport. Sometimes you hit a rabbit or even a cat late at night. And it was late. Somewhere near three-thirty, I think. Anyway, I thought that's what happened when I got home and saw my right front fender. I thought I'd hit a rabbit or a cat."

And Arnold's voice had queried him from across the desk.

"Is that what you told the police?"

"Sure, it is. What else could I tell them?"

"Is there a traffic signal at that intersection?"

"There is—but there wasn't another car in sight."

"Was the signal with you, or against you?"

"It was with me. It was green."

"Is that what you told the police?"

"Sure, it is. I said this woman must have tried to cross against the light. I didn't see her at all."

And then Arnold had smiled. From the next room, Naomi couldn't see the smile; but she could hear it in his words.

"Very good, Mr. Jerome. Now, unless you want me to throw this case back in your teeth, tell me what really happened last night. I don't deal with clients who aren't honest with me..."

Honest was one of Arnold's favorite words. It had an exceptional meaning to him.

"To be perfectly honest with you, Naomi, I never did love you. Not

the way a man wants to love a woman. Your father had influence and I needed a start. It was that simple."

Echoes. She pushed them from her mind. She had come to watch Henry Babcock take his punishment for being a good citizen.

Arnold's voice came again. "You were standing on the sidewalk near the intersection at the time of the accident, is that right?"

Henry Babcock was merely nervous at this stage of the cross-examination. He was a rather slight man, balding, had a clean shaven face and wore thick lensed glasses that magnified his eyes owlishly. He might have been Arnold's age. Naomi realized with a sense of incredulity. There was no other similarity. Henry Babcock looked shabby and servile. There was a natural elite, Arnold had always maintained, that was pre-destined to govern any society. At the moment, the validity of his theory seemed self-evident.

"Not exactly," Henry Babcock answered. "I was sitting on a bench at the bus stop, waiting for a bus."

"And how far was the bench from the intersection, Mr. Babcock?"

Henry Babcock hesitated. "I don't know as I could say, exactly. Not very far."

"Not very far." Arnold smiled. He was always dangerous when he smiled. "That doesn't help the jury much, does it, Mr. Babcock? Can't you be more specific? Was it as far—" He turned slowly, his eyes sweeping the courtroom and finally coming to rest. "—as from where you're sitting to where the defendant is sitting?"

"Well, now, I don't know—"

"Yes or no, Mr. Babcock?"

The question was like a whip. Henry Babcock straightened his glasses and sat at attention.

"Well, yes," he said.

"The bench was the same distance from the intersection as you are from Mr. Jerome at this moment?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Now please continue and tell the jury just what happened..."

What had happened? Naomi's mind would wander, no matter how she tried to keep it in line. Was it really as simple as Arnold had said —merely a marriage of convenience? It was difficult to believe. She knew why she'd married Arnold. She had loved him; she still loved him, in spite of what he'd become. Was she somehow responsible for that? She'd tried to be a good wife and mother; she tried to keep up with Arnold's dazzling success...

"Mr. Babcock—" Arnold's voice intruded on the memories again. "—I want you to clarify one detail. You say that you didn't see Agnes Thompson prior to the accident. You were sitting on the bench waiting for a bus. Mrs. Thompson ap-

proached the intersection from the east—"

Someone had set up a blackboard in view of the judge and the jury. On it was drawn the intersection with crosses indicating the location of the bench and Henry Babcock, the spot where the accident occurred, and now, at Arnold's instruction, another cross for Mrs. Thompson approaching the intersection.

"We know that she came from the east," Arnold continued, "because we know that she had been visiting a sick grandchild and was returning to her own home, six blocks distant, only after the grandchild had shown signs of recovery and gone to sleep. Presumably, Mrs. Thompson was weary after the strain of her vigil; presumably, she walked with a heavy tread —she was a rather heavy woman. How do you account for not hearing Mrs. Thompson approach the intersection, Mr. Babcock?"

Henry Babcock appeared puzzled. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully with one hand, and the light glinted off the lens of his eyeglasses. The staring eyes of the jury and the courtroom seemed to bother him. The question bothered him, too.

"I didn't say that I didn't *hear* her," he answered.

"Then you did hear her."

"I didn't say that, either. Maybe I heard her. I don't remember. I was tired, too. I'd just come from work."

"At the Century Club?"

"Yes sir. I clean up there after the place closes at two o'clock."

"Two AM, that is."

"Yes, sir."

Two AM. It was difficult to find an accident witness in broad daylight; but when, a few days after taking the case, Arnold had received an urgent telephone call from Jerome Sr. at a similar hour of a different morning, he knew there was work ahead. It was in the downstairs hall. Arnold had just come in. He still wore his black Homburg and black topcoat over his tuxedo. Naomi had descended most of the way down the stairs, having started when she heard him come in. He took the call in silence, concluding it with a curt assurance that he would handle everything. He'd dropped the telephone back into the cradle for a moment; then took it up again and dialed.

"Fran? Arnold here. Sorry to call you now, but something's come up. The Jerome case—a witness. Yes, the police are keeping him under wraps; but old man Jerome just got wind of it at a cocktail party and passed the word along. Now, here's what I want you to do. Get the wheels rolling. Get everything you can on Henry Babcock. That's right. Babcock. He's a janitor, or porter, or some such thing at the Century Club. He was waiting for a bus to go home after work when the accident happened. I want him tabbed from the year One. You know how."

Arnold had dropped the telephone back into the cradle and turned around. Naomi was at the bottom of the stairs by that time. He stared at her without seeming to see her at all.

"Is that who she is?" Naomi had asked. "Is it Fran, your secretary?"

Arnold's eyebrows had a way of knitting together when he was annoyed. At that moment she hadn't been sure whether he was more annoyed with her question or with Jerome's call; but it was probably the latter. She didn't even possess nuisance value any more.

"Is that who *who* is?" he'd asked.

"The woman you've been with tonight."

She'd reached out and straightened his tie. Old fashioned as it was, and Arnold did hate being old-fashioned about anything.

"You're talking nonsense, Naomi. Go to bed."

It was the way to dismiss a child. He'd stalked upstairs, his mind busy with the problem of Henry Babcock, good citizen, bent on the folly of doing his duty...

And so they were in the courtroom, and Arnold was solving his problem.

"...so, at approximately half past three, having finished your work at the Century Club, you were sitting on a bench at the bus stop waiting for transportation to take you home. Where do you live, Mr. Babcock?"

It was an innocent question. Henry Babcock answered without hesitation.

"In Inglewood," he said. "I've got a three room apartment."

"And do you live alone?"

"Yes, sir. Since my wife died three years ago."

"Since your wife died," Arnold repeated. "My sympathies, Mr. Babcock. It must be lonely, coming home to an empty apartment."

The prosecutor stirred uneasily. He seemed to sense some ulterior motivation behind the question. Before he could object, Henry Babcock, who sensed nothing but the discomfort of the witness box, had answered.

Yes, sir, it is," he said.

"But you do have friends."

"Friends?"

"At your place of employment. I believe the Century Club employs entertainers, including several very attractive young ladies. I understand that you do little favors for them, such as bringing coffee to the dressing rooms—"

The prosecutor leaped to his feet.

"Your Honor, I object to this line of questioning. We aren't here to ascertain the witness's sociability, or to delve into his personal life."

Arnold turned toward him, smiling.

"And why aren't we?" he asked. "The witness has testified in direct contradiction to the sworn statement of my client. Obviously, one of these two men is either mistaken or an outright liar. I see nothing

objectionable, in attempting to establish the character of the witness. For that matter, I see nothing objectionable —although the learned prosecutor seems to differ with me on this point— in a lonely widower bringing coffee to a ladies's dressing room."

There was something diabolical about Arnold in action. Naomi was beginning to realize that. In a few words, he'd turned the prosecutor into an unwitting counsel for the defense. The man sat down, chastened and confused.

Arnold turned back to Henry Babcock.

"Agnes Thompson approached the intersection from the east," he resumed: "That means that she came from behind you, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Babcock answered.

"Yes, because you sat on a bench parallel to a street running north and south. The bench—" Arnold referred to the blackboard again, "—is on the southeast corner of the intersection. The signal, which you have testified was red when my client's automobile struck Mrs. Thompson, is approximately ten feet north of the bench, which would have been to your right as you sat facing the street. Correct?"

Henry Babcock adjusted his glasses and leaned forward to follow Arnold's indications on the blackboard map.

"Yes, that's correct," he agreed.

"And so, you were sitting on the bench, tired after the night's work."

"Yes, sir."

"And alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Waiting for a bus to take you home to your apartment where you live alone."

Babcock's forehead had corrugated into a puzzled frown, but he answered.

"Yes, sir."

"You looked at the signal, and saw that it was red."

"Yes, sir."

"And before it changed to green, my client's automobile raced past the intersection, striking down Mrs. Thompson, whom you hadn't noticed prior to the accident—" Arnold paused, as if only at that instant discovering a flaw in the testimony. "Now, that does seem strange," he mused aloud. "You turned your head to the right and saw that the signal was red. Why didn't you also see Mrs. Thompson preparing to step down into the cross-walk?"

There was a slight murmur in the courtroom. Arnold's strategy was beginning to take hold.

"I don't know," Babcock answered. "I guess she wasn't there yet when I looked."

"Then you must have looked away from the light for a time."

Babcock hesitated, sensing a trap.

"The light was red!" he insisted.

"But you didn't see Mrs. Thompson."

"It was dark."

"Isn't there a street lamp at that

intersection? Think, Mr. Babcock."

"There's a street lamp, but it only shines so far. After that, it's dark."

"And yet Mrs. Thompson would have had to come into that arc of light, wouldn't she?"

"Maybe she came too fast for me to see her. Maybe she was running."

"Running?" Arnold caught up the word and dangled it before the ears of the court. "Now, why would she have been running, Mr. Babcock? Haven't we already established that it was late, very late, and that she must have been weary from sitting up with a sick grandchild?"

Henry Babcock was an uncomplicated man who, very likely, had never sat in a witness box before in his life. He'd come to do his duty, and yet, by answering extemporaneously a few minor questions he hadn't thought through, he'd gotten himself into trouble. He glanced pleadingly at the prosecutor, who was helpless at the moment, and then got himself into worse trouble.

"Maybe she was afraid."

"But why should she have been afraid," Arnold demanded.

"Because it was so late. It's not safe for a woman out alone at that hour. Things happen. You read about it in the paper all the time."

Arnold listened carefully to Henry Babcock, so carefully that he caught up the entire courtroom in his attitude and everyone listened, carefully.

"I read about it?" he echoed. "What do *I* read about?"

The accentuated pronoun forced Henry Babcock to a correction.

"I mean, people do," he explained. "Anybody."

"I think what you mean," Arnold interpolated, "is that *you* read about it all the time. Now, just what do *you* read?"

Henry Babcock was perspiring freely. He didn't bother to wipe his brow.

"Things that happen," he said. "Robberies, attacks—"

"And you always read about these things, is that right, Mr. Babcock? When you're all finished bringing coffee to the ladies' dressing room, and cleaning up the deserted club, you go home to your apartment, alone, and read about terrible things that happen to women who go out on the streets at night—"

Arnold's voice was an instrument played with professional skill. It was impossible not to be drawn along with it. But he got no farther before the prosecutor was on his feet shouting an objection. Arnold smiled at him with an expression of tolerant patience, and only Naomi understood what was happening. The innocent must always be made to appear guilty. This was Arnold's secret of success.

"...I don't want a scene, Naomi. This woman need never have come between us if you hadn't insisted on a showdown. I'm not planning

to divorce you, or to allow you to divorce me. I can't afford a scandal, and you have the children to consider even if my career means nothing to you..."

The innocent must always be made to appear guilty.

"Your Honor," Arnold continued, with mock humility, "I'm deeply sorry if my remarks have caused prejudice in the minds of the jury. It wasn't my intention to infer that the witness has socially undesirable tendencies. Nevertheless, I'm still curious as to how he could have turned his head to observe the traffic signal and not have seen a woman about to step out into the crosswalk. If he was tired, he might have been dozing; but then, he wouldn't have seen the signal. If, however, he was alert enough to notice the signal, why didn't he see Mrs. Thompson?"

With these words, Arnold swung back to Henry Babcock.

"Or did you see her, Mr. Babcock?"

Henry Babcock drew back in the box.

"No," he said.

"Are you sure, Mr. Babcock? A few moments ago you were positive that you didn't see her; a few moments later you thought that you might have heard her. Now you can't seem to explain why you didn't see her. Isn't it possible that you did see her? That perhaps you spoke to her?"

"No—"

"That you approached her?"

"No! I never left the bench!"

"You never left the bench, and yet, with an automobile approaching, and surely Mrs. Thompson could have seen the headlights, the victim stepped off the curb and into its path. Why did she do that, Mr. Babcock, unless, as you have suggested, she was startled out of her wits? Was there anyone else in the vicinity at the time?"

Babcock was no longer bewildered; he was furious.

"No!" he shouted.

"Then no one could have startled Mrs. Thompson unless it was yourself."

"I didn't say she was startled."

"But you suggested it. You suggested that she might have been running. These are interesting suggestions, in view of the fact that you knew no one other than yourself was in the vicinity. Since you've volunteered this much light on the mystery of what happened at that intersection the night Mrs. Thompson died, perhaps, remembering that you're under oath, you would like to tell the whole truth."

Arnold waited for an answer, and the court waited with him.

"I told the truth!" Babcock insisted. "The whole truth!"

"Thank you, Mr. Babcock."

Arnold stepped back. He seemed ready to release the witness; only Naomi knew it was a feint. There had been another telephone call only this morning. She'd overheard

enough to know Henry Babcock wasn't going to get off so easily.

"...Yes, Fran, he's going to be tough to crack—too clean. Nothing on him unless I can color up that job of his. What? Do you have proof? Good girl! Of course, it's enough. I'll make it enough."

And then he'd looked up to find Naomi staring at him accusingly.

"What are you going to do to that poor man?" she had asked.

"I'm going to win my case," he had answered.

"Your client is guilty."

"Not until the jury brings in a verdict. Don't look so shocked, Naomi. You can't be that naive! A courtroom is just like a battlefield. When a soldier's ordered to take an objective, he can't consider if innocent people will be hurt. There are no innocent people; there are only the quick and the dead. I'm one of the quick. Because of that, you live in a beautiful home, wear lovely clothes, drive an expensive sedan—"

"Who is the woman, Arnold?"

And that was when he had stopped evading her.

I'm not cruel, Naomi; I'm honest. I could lie to you. It would be easy, easier than you know..."

Sitting among the spectators in the courtroom, Naomi learned how easy it was.

"Mr. Babcock—" Arnold swung back to face the witness, his sudden movement and the sound of his voice magnetizing attention. "—how long have you been employed at the Century Club?"

The change of tactic puzzled Babcock.

"Ten months," he said.

"I don't suppose your salary is anything remarkable."

"I don't need much."

"Still, it's not comparable to —let us say, an instructor of mathematics and mechanical drawing at Freeman High School, which position you held for fourteen years prior to your employment at the Century Club. Tell me, Mr. Babcock, why does a man of your background work as a porter in a cheap night club? Why are you reduced to pushing a broom and running errands for showgirls? Or does this explain better?"

No one was prepared for Arnold's next move, least of all Henry Babcock. When Arnold reached out and snatched the glasses from his eyes, Babcock rose from the chair, grasped at empty air, and barely steadied himself against the side of the bench short of falling.

"My glasses—" he gasped.

"Your *eyes,* Mr. Babcock!" Arnold corrected. "Isn't it true that you relinquished your profession because you were going blind?"

"No! I had cataracts—"

"Because your vision was eighty-five per cent impaired when you underwent surgery eight months ago? Because you were totally *color* blind?"

Arnold had won his case. Naomi

could sense the feeling of the court even before her ears picked up the murmur. By that time, Henry Babcock was trying to explain that an operation had restored vision to one eye and he was awaiting the required full year before a second operation that would restore the other; but few people heard.

"I'll be good as new!" he insisted. "I'll get my teaching job back—"

"But you weren't 'good as new' the night you claim to have seen my client go through a red light!"

"With my glasses, I can see color!"

"Out of which eye?"

"The left eye. The one that had the operation."

"But the signal is to your right."

"I turned my head."

"But you didn't see Mrs. Thompson."

"I couldn't. I can't see out of the sides—only straight ahead."

"Only straight ahead!" Arnold pounced on the phrase, as if he had been waiting for it all this time. "And how far straight ahead, Mr. Babcock? As far as from where you are sitting to the defendant —that's what you said, didn't you?"

Henry Babcock leaned forward, a grotesque figure of a man trying to peer through a fog.

"With my glasses—" he began.

"Your Honor," Arnold announced, "I move that the testimony of the witness be stricken from the record. It's obvious to everyone in this courtroom that he is not capable of giving reliable information on anything of a visual nature. The distance from the witness stand to the defendant, which Mr. Babcock has, under oath, declared to be the same as the distance from the bench on which he was seated at the time of the accident to the point at which the accident occurred, can't possibly measure in excess of thirty feet. I invite the prosecution to check me on this." There was no need to check. Naomi, remembering, realized when Arnold had set his trap. He was always dangerous when he smiled. "I have already checked the distance between the bench and the place of the accident," he added, "and it is, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exactly sixty-two feet! Not only is the witness color blind, not only is he incapable of seeing out of the sides of his eyes; he is also completely unable to estimate simple distances. Unless he's deliberately lying about everything, unless he did leave the bench and does know some reason why Mrs. Thompson stepped out in front of a fast moving automobile, the most charitable conclusion we can reach is that this poor man's mind has been enfeebled by the double tragedy of losing his wife and almost losing his sight, and is incompetent to testify in a court of law!"

The prosecution roared a protest. Arnold turned toward him with a gesture of contemptuous dismissal.

"Your witness!" he said.

The jury was out fifteen minutes. After the acquittal, Arnold received congratulations with his customary indifference. The courtroom emptied. Naomi watched a defeated little man make his way toward the corridor: Henry Babcock, ex-good citizen. She caught his eyes, magnified by the lenses of the glasses, as he went by. It had been murder. He went out and she waited alone for Arnold.

"So that's how you take an objective," she said. "Did you have to destroy his character as well as his testimony? Do you think he'll ever get that teaching job back now?"

"If he's man enough," Arnold said. "That's his problem, not mine."

"Your problem is only how to get rid of a bothersome wife, isn't it?"

Arnold didn't seem to consider the question worth answering. They went out together. The sidewalk was deserted now except for a dejected man waiting at the bus stop, a man for whom Arnold didn't have so much as a glance. At the entrance to the parking lot, he looked up and frowned at the sky. It was starting to rain lightly.

"I'm glad you decided to visit court today, Naomi," he said. "I've got a five o'clock appointment and it's the very devil to catch a cab in bad weather."

"Five o'clock?" Naomi echoed. "That gives you time to pick up flowers. Shall I stop at a florist?"

"No, thank you, Naomi. Just get your car, please. I'll wait."

And Arnold waited. He stood at the edge of the parking lot driveway, so supremely confident that he didn't so much as step back when Naomi brought the sedan around. He didn't even have time to change his self-satisfied expression to surprise when she suddenly cut the wheels and slammed her foot on the accelerator.

After the police officer had extracted Arnold's body from under the wheels, Naomi tried to explain.

"It was a mistake!" she sobbed. "I meant to put my foot on the brake, not the accelerator! It was a terrible mistake!"

A small crowd had gathered, but there was only one eye-witness. The officer turned to him, and for a moment Naomi caught a glimpse of the man's eyes. The sympathy she'd given him in the courtroom was in them.

"If this woman is the victim's wife, surely she's telling the truth," he said. "Anyway, what I might have seen couldn't contradict her." Henry Babcock removed his glasses and blinked at the blur which was the policeman. "It's a legal fact," he said, "that I'm not a reliable witness."

This is a matter about which I feel most deeply. And I believe the citizenry of this great nation of ours should rise up and speak out against this minus-factor in our post-offices. The aliases on wanted posters are decidedly lacking in imagination.

"IF I WERE to commit a crime," said Mr. Nelson West over the bridge table that evening, "it would be for money, and only for money. But I would have the good sense to leave most of the money untouched afterwards."

"Then what is the point," his wife said, "in stealing it at all?"

"Ah," West said. "If you steal enough to begin with, you can use just a small portion of the money and still have enough to have made the crime worthwhile. The trouble with these big bank and payroll robberies is the robbers always become greedy afterwards. They're not content to spend just the used bills. They have to spend the new bills too, and that way they get caught. Greed." He shook his head.

Mr. George Simpson, proprietor of the Greater Arizona Realty Company, played a low club from the dummy. "I've always thought," he said, "that one of the reasons they get caught is there's more than one of them in on the robbery. The police catch one, he tells on the others; or they get mad at each other; or whatever."

"That's another thing," West said. "The crime must be executed by one man. Never trust anyone."

"But one man alone can't steal a lot of money," Simpson said. "It takes timing and planning and somebody to drive the car and so on and so forth."

"True," West said.

"Well," Simpson said with a laugh, putting up a trump from his own hand, "all I can say for you, Nelson, is I'm glad you work for me. By your own definition, you'll never commit a crime."

If it had not been for Mr. Hathaway, Simpson would have been right about West. Mr. Hathaway just happened. He came along out of the blue at a time when Nelson West, himself new to Arizona, had been working for Simpson's Greater Arizona Realty Company, as a sales agent, for no more than four months.

Simpson called West into his inner office. "There's a guy named Hathaway waiting outside. Take the keys to the Ford place out in

the desert and see if you can sell it to him."

"That deserted monstrosity?" West said. "You couldn't give it away."

"This is one nut who just might buy it," Simpson said. "I've been talking to him. He's an eccentric. Wanted to know the name of a good bank out here, and when I

THE ALIAS

by Lawton O'Connor

told him, he asked me for the name of *another* good bank. He's out here from the east. Rich old guy. No relatives, no ties. Wants to be away by himself."

West shrugged and went outside and met Mr. Hathaway. Then the two of them got into West's car and started east, toward the desert.

"I want to stop at a bank first," Hathaway said. "I'm carrying a lot of money around with me."

"Mr. Simpson said you were interested in relocating here," West said. "It's certainly marvelous country."

"I'm interested in more than one bank," Hathaway said. "Two hundred thousand dollars is too much to put in any one bank."

West swallowed. "Well," he said, "the thing to do is get it into one bank for now. There's one in Mesa that has branches all over the state. So we can stop there, and later—tomorrow or the next day—you can transfer some of it. This way you know it'll be safe. Won't have to carry it around with you."

He drove Hathaway to the bank in Mesa, and while Hathaway was inside he went down the street to a large sporting goods store and bought some bullets and five one-gallon jugs of muriatic acid, which is commonly used for cleaning and regulating swimming pools. He placed these articles in the trunk of his car and was sitting at the wheel when Mr. Hathaway came out of the bank.

"Now let's see that Ford place."

West nodded, and they drove a good distance into the desert.

"They were very nice at the bank," Hathaway said. "I told them I wouldn't be using the money till they had cleared my cashier's check back east, but that as soon as possible I wanted to transfer some of it to another bank. They said they understood."

"Good," West said. He turned onto a road that was hardly a road at all, leading to a scrubby ridge of hills.

"Nobody around for miles, is there?" Hathaway said.

"You want privacy, here it is."

"I should think you'd be afraid, driving this wasteland by yourself."

"We all carry guns in the glove compartment," the real estate agent said. He reached over and opened the glove compartment. "See?" He took out the gun and showed it to Hathaway, then drew back a little and shot the other man twice.

The road led among the deserted cave formations on the narrow sides and declivities of the upland. West stopped the car and dragged the body of the dead man to a particularly inverted formation of rock. Then he went back to the car and got the acid, and when he was finished with his work there was no recognizing Mr. Hathaway—not now and not, certainly, at any future date when some one might stumble across Mr. Hathaway. The odds were about 100 to 1 that anybody ever would.

Then West took the labels off the acid jugs and burned them, and then smashed the jugs themselves on a plateau of rock nearby. Finally, he replaced the used bullets in the gun, put it back in the glove compartment, and drove home.

Rather than try to get rid of any of the contents of Hathaway's pockets, he took them all home with him. That night, he suggested to his wife that she visit her mother in California, something his wife had been talking of doing for some time. She agreed to leave the following day.

He saw his wife off on the plane the next morning, then purchased some plain stationery and envelopes at the airport counter and went to a telephone and called Mr. Simpson.

"I think I've got that 24-hour virus," he said. "I'd better not come in till tomorrow."

"Take care of yourself," Simpson said. "How did Hathaway like the Ford place?"

"Sounded interested, believe it or not," West said. "He's going to let us know."

When he had finished with his phone conversation, West drove home and took from his own suit the contents of Hathaway's pockets. There were several items of identification—a New York driver's license, social security card, and so forth. There was nothing to indicate that Hathaway had any connections of a personal nature in the

east. He must have been telling the truth when he said he had no relatives, no ties.

There was a checkbook from the Mesa bank and a savings book as well, indicating that Hathaway had deposited $175,000 in the checking account and $25,000 in the savings. For a time, West practiced imitating Hathaway's signature. Finally, he got it down to his satisfaction.

Then he wrote out a check for $3,000 and made it out to the Greater Arizona Realty Company. He signed Hathaway's name to the check, and on the border of the check wrote, "Earnest Money on Ford Property." Then he put the check in an envelope, addressed the envelope to Mr. Simpson at the realty office, and went out and mailed it.

West was at his desk the next morning when Simpson came over with the check.

"That Hathaway's a real nut," Simpson said. "Here's a deposit on the property, but no note with it or anything. Where's he staying?"

"I don't know," West said. "I thought you knew." He shrugged. "Well, at least you've got his money. You'll be hearing from him." He paused. "If his check's any good. Anybody crazy enough to buy that Ford place would do anything."

"Well, suppose I just call the bank and find out if it's good," Simpson said.

"Good idea," West said.

He waited, and in a few minutes Simpson came back. "Good as gold," he said.

"Then we've made a sale," West said happily.

He waited until Simpson had come back from lunch before making the next move. Then he went in to Simpson's office and said, "That fellow Hathaway called while you were out to lunch. He's a nut, all right. Now he's leaving town for a few weeks, but he wanted to make sure we'd hold the house for him."

"So long as we've got his money," Simpson said, "I don't care what he does."

West had not yet, in the time he had lived in Arizona, been anywhere northwest of Phoenix. Now, however, he went to the Glendale branch of the bank in which Hathaway had opened his account. Here, he identified himself as Hathaway, producing the bank books on the other branch as proof, and transferred $85,000 to the Glendale branch.

He did not touch any of this money. Instead, over the next two weeks, he drew several checks on the Mesa bank and cashed them at the Glendale bank.

When he had $50,000 in cash, he stopped. There still was $85,000 in the Glendale bank and $62,000 in the Mesa bank.

At this point, West destroyed all of the Hathaway bank books and other credentials. He would spend

the money slowly and keep it hidden, never depositing it to his own bank account. For this purpose, he took out a safe deposit box at his own bank, into which he put most of the money.

If I were to commit a crime, he had said, *it would be for money... most of the money would be left untouched... it would be done alone, for you never can trust anyone else...*

Rules 1, 2, and 3—it was as simple as that. Certainly, people would start asking questions about the missing Mr. Hathaway: Simpson at the real estate office, and possibly the motel where Hathaway had been staying and had used as his address when taking out his bank account. But no matter who investigated the matter, there was no linking the missing man to Nelson West. West was not even the last man to have seen Hathaway alive; the last man to have seen "Hathaway" was the teller at the Glendale bank. And there was no linking West with anything in Glendale. If there had been, it would have happened by now.

It was not, indeed, for a period of several more weeks before Simpson greeted him at his desk one morning and said, "What in tarnation ever happened to that fellow Hathaway?"

"Beats me," West said.

"Did you know he was a crook?"

"What?"

Simpson nodded. "Embezzler. Took two hundred grand, back east. That's why he was yelling about getting to a bank when he was here that day. Wanted to get cash as soon as he could. And the business about wanting a house away from everybody and telling you he'd left town and all that. Wanted to make sure his tracks were covered."

West blinked. "How'd you find all that out?"

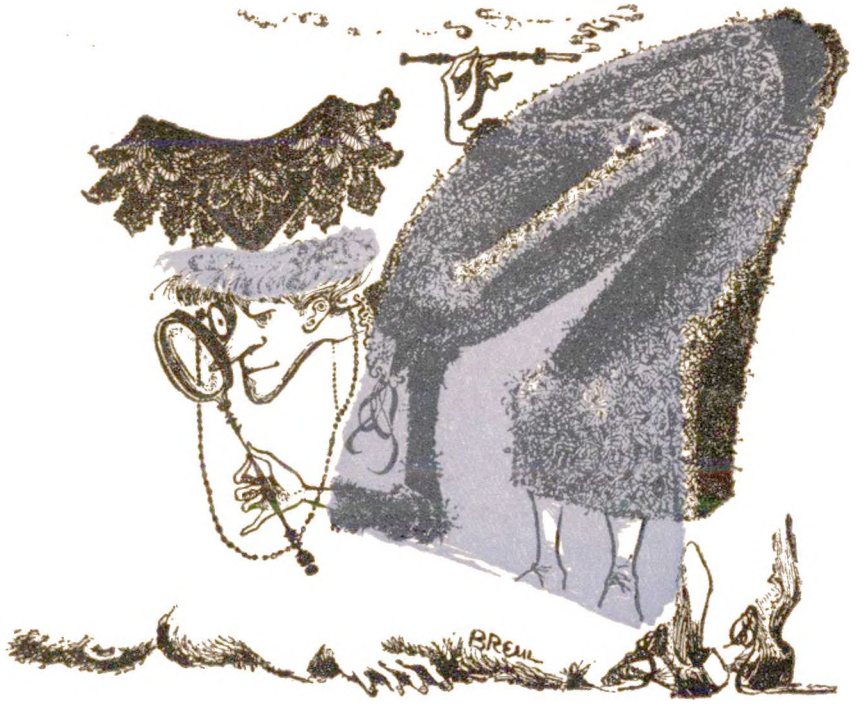
"I've got two FBI guys in my office inside. They tracked him this far. You and I and a teller at a bank out in Glendale are the ones who saw him most recently. The teller's in my office too. Come in."

Nelson West stood up. "The teller can identify Hathaway?"

"Name wasn't Hathaway at all," Simpson nodded, leading the way into his office. "Alias. Real name was Gerson or something. Had phony credentials and everything..."

The only thing that had gone wrong with his rules for crime, West realized brokenly, was Rule 3... *you can never trust anyone else.*

Including, he amended it now, *your victim.*



THE CASE OF THE *IRREPRESSIBLE AUNT*

by Rex Barr

MURDER, accident, suicide? Pepe Villangomez, deputy Police Chief for the island of San Jaime, didn't know. In fact, standing at the studio-window above the island's only harbor, fingering his all-but-whiskerless 25-year-old jaw, three things only were plain to him. *Item:* the English painter Martin Beaumont was dead of his three-story fall from this window to that alley. *Item:* when his boss, Police Chief Jose Sagarra, returned from the Spanish mainland he, Pepe, would be expected to have fathomed how and why this happened. *Item:* to do this he would clearly need help from his irrepressible Aunt Lola.

As for the last, the sooner the

Everyone, so it seems, has an aunt or so. They are invariably a sister of one's mother, but they all differ as individuals will. The aunt of this whodunit reads mysteries, speaks English, and has a nephew who must solve a murder in a hurry.

better. It would never do to have the Chief come back to find his own house the scene of an unsolved . . . Crime? How to classify the death of the Chief's own paying-guest? How to get the relevant facts from Jay Addison—the young American painter Beaumont had shared his studio with — when Pepe's Berlitz English wasn't up to it? How else, that is, but with Aunt Lola's help?

For Aunt Lola, surely, would lend a hand. This whole affair was —what was that English phrase she used?—*her cup of tea.* Aunt Lola doted on mysteries. Her library shelves were heavy with Saki and Chesterton, Sayers and Christie. Moreover, her English was perfect. The widow of a Spanish diplomat who had spent long years in London, she still affected a superfluous monocle, expensive but somewhat shapeless tweeds, and a curiously out-of-place mantilla. Yes . . . Aunt Lola would plainly revel in a thing like this.

"Well?" Eduardo, the Police Chief's nephew, said with insolent envy from the door behind him. "What's the verdict?"

Eduardo shared the lower half of the house with his bachelor uncle, while the top "studio" half was rented to winter visitors—this year two artists: Beaumont, now dead, and Addison, now under orders to hold himself ready for questioning.

"Verdict?" Pepe said with elaborate indifference. "My inquiries have not even begun."

"Could it possibly be that you do not know *how* to begin? Uncle Jose always maintained that you were unfit to be his deputy. He would so much rather have given the post to me."

"Perhaps," Pepe said quietly, "if you had stuck by our humble island instead of pursuing the bright lights of Valencia — and then growing weary of them—you *would* have got the job. But the fact remains, you *weren't* here, and *I* got it—and intend to keep it."

"You won't if you bungle this case—the first you've ever had to handle alone."

"I'll handle it all right."

"So? Without knowledge of English? Uncle and I speak superlative English, as you know. *Such* a drawback, that you do not yourself understand it."

"True. I do not," Pepe said grimly. "But Aunt Lola does. And, what's more, she *reads* it. Hers isn't just a collection of second-hand phrases picked up from foreign tourists like your own." He turned haughtily away. "You will please excuse me. There are things I must do."

First, to contact his aunt. Thanking heaven for the old lady's ability, he made his way through a crowd of rubber-necking sightseers outside the Chief's house and climbed the narrow cobbled street to her villa near the Cathedral del Christo Rey. If Eduardo had Uncle Jose, Pepe had Aunt Lola: a classic battle-royal between distinguished San Jaime families. And he, Pepe, must succeed—his future depended on it.

There was sobering truth in what Eduardo had said about a test case. The Chief had plainly wanted to rid himself of Pepe when Eduardo came back, bankrupt and disillusioned, from the mainland. But the Chief was a politician and it would have been rash, politically, to remove his nephew's rival for office without just cause. Public opinion would have been outraged. The youngest deputy the island had known, Pepe was popular and respected whereas San Jaime had never forgiven Eduardo for abandoning his birth-place for the glamorous but still-suspect peninsula.

Passing the cathedral, Pepe remorsefully crossed himself. Such thoughts at such a time were sacrilegeously unworthy; private concern had made him almost forget the dead man. "May Senor Martin Beaumont rest in peace," he prayed. "And prove to have fallen from his window by accident . . . Murders are such a headache to handle."

As he might have expected, Aunt Lola didn't agree. Nostrils quivering in unseemly excitement, smoking a black cigarette in a crimson holder, she adjusted her monocle rakishly and said, "Tell me all. And at once, boy. Who *was* the deceased?"

"Senor Martin Beaumont," Pepe said mournfully. "Aged fifty-seven, an English painter, unmarried, presumably childless. Arrived in San Jaime three months ago and rented the upper half of Chief Sagarra's house, sharing its studio with a young American, Jay Addison, aged twenty, also a painter, of New York. So much I know from the records—but very little else."

"Don't be so modest, boy," Aunt Lola slapped his shoulder with a devastating gusto. "You must surely know how he died."

"Correction. I know *where* he died. If I knew how, I would not be seeking your assistance."

"Granted," Aunt Lola said short-

ly, pushing a strand of blue-grey hair under her jet mantilla. "But you must give me a little more to work on. In detail, please."

Pepe sighed terribly. "Martin Beaumont was killed when he fell twenty metres from the third-floor studio to a dark and sealed off alleyway beside the house. Doctor Alvarez is of the opinion that death occurred between three and six last evening—though the body was not recovered until nine today. A post mortem reveals that death was due solely to injuries received in the falling. There is thus only one real question. *How* did he fall?"

"Or," Aunt Lola said avidly, "who *pushed* him?"

"Quite. Murder can not, of course, be ruled out. But there would seem to be no motive, Aunt Lola."

"Theft?"

"Unlikely. The British Government allows its tourists only one hundred pounds for continental holidays. Senor Beaumont's quota was all but exhausted. In fact, he had arranged to leave on today's boat for Barcelona and so return to London."

"It could be," Aunt Lola said thoughtfully, "that someone wished urgently to prevent him leaving the island—*alive,* that is."

"But, my dear Aunt Lola, why?"

"That's what you and I have to discover. We'll show that booby of a Police Chief that you can handle a criminal case like a true professional—like someone from Scotland Yard."

"But," Pepe protested feebly, "we don't know that anything criminal has *occurred—"*

"Oh," Aunt Lola said smoothly, "it must have. I feel it strongly." She polished her monocle on the green-tweed lapel of her jacket. "This youngster... the one Senor Beaumont shared his studio with—"

"Jay Addison?"

"Yes. What kind of man is he?"

"Quiet and industrious—and considered a promising artist, by all accounts. I saw some of his canvases this morning. It is bizarre work—all foggy and blurred—in the manner of the—er—"

"Impressionists?"

"Quite. I do not care for it personally. The deceased, on the other hand, seemed to me a most accomplished draughtsman. Every leaf of every orange tree, every strand of every fish-basket, was precisely rendered. A realist... His paintings are as accurate as photographs."

"And," Aunt Lola probed, "these two were on friendly terms to the end?"

"Most friendly."

"Where was Addison when the death is said to have occurred?"

"Of this I am uncertain. I have not, in reality, been able to question Senor Addison—since my English is not sufficient. But I have warned him to hold himself available." Pepe coughed delicately. "I had hoped you might assist me

with this. The Chief, who knows foreign tongues so well, would roast me if I mishandled this case through ignorance."

"Your Chief is a braggart and a fool," Aunt Lola snorted. "And he does *not* know languages—neither English nor anything else. I have caught him out a dozen times in this. The most he can do is nod his head and smile foolishly in conversation with foreigners—saying *Jolly good* and *Merci* whenever he can slip them in."

With formidable resolution, she stood up. "But you are right. It would be best if *I* cross-examine the accused."

"Hold on," her nephew stammered. "Addison is not yet accused."

"A slip of the tongue," Aunt Lola said soothingly. "But do stop fussing, boy—and do stop splitting hairs. Just lead me to our number-one suspect."

Pepe shrugged and smiled with thin uncertainty as they left the villa.

At the Chief's house, Eduardo the Envious intercepted them with malicious brightness on the stairs. "So-o-o," he said archly. "The would-be detective falls back on a woman's assistance," bowing with mock-reverence to Aunt Lola. "*Salud,* senor. Despite your great years, you are looking well, I see."

Aunt Lola sniffed. "Regrettably, I cannot return the compliment. You look *terrible,* Eduardo—and no wonder. This slothful, unnatural life round your uncle's house will be the death of you. No man was born for such idleness. You should take a job."

"Truly," Eduardo said. "And I believe I know whose." He added with infuriating confidence, "Uncle Jose will be most interested in the way your nephew has botched this perfectly simple happening. I believe he will shortly seek a new deputy."

"He would do better to seek a new nephew," Aunt Lola said grandly. "Come, Pepe, we have work to do."

Pale and gaunt in too-tight jeans, Jay Addison stood by his door on the studio-landing. "I am tired of this uncertainty," he said tensely, in bad Spanish. "Please ask your questions and have done with it."

Aunt Lola beamed and motioned Addison into the studio. Pepe followed bleakly. The talk had already switched to English and he was floundering—no more than an occasional phrase made sense. He watched as Addison indicated the window from which Beaumont had fallen, the easel on which his last canvas—a view from the window—still rested, the dead man's scanty effects: paints, brushes, clothing, a camera, a writing-case. He had been correct, Pepe thought—the idea of theft as a murder-motive was unthinkable.

He began to regret confiding in Aunt Lola. She was so set on making drama out of what was more than likely a cut-and-dried case of death by misadventure. Addison, admittedly, *did* seem somewhat flustered by her questions, but this was hardly surprising. No man found it easy to talk of the death of a friend.

Pepe observed that young Addison wore spectacles with extraordinarily powerful lenses. Perhaps this accounted for the general fuzziness of his painting technique. Beaumont's solitary blueprint-sharp picture of San Jaime's waterfront shone brilliant among the turgid blues and grays of Addison's work.

Aunt Lola finally shook young Addison's hand. "Many thanks," she said. "If necessary, we shall consult you again."

Addison went out shakily and closed the door.

"Well?" Pepe asked her. "What's his story?"

"He insists it must have been an accident. Addison says he left the studio at 3 P.M. yesterday and returned at midnight. He can prove this—he spent the intervening time with friends."

"Then we'll have to believe him," Pepe said relievedly. "I'm glad. With the formality of questioning him taken care of, I would be quite happy to go ahead and set a date for the inquest."

"Not so fast," Aunt Lola said thoughtfully. Glancing again through Beaumont's writing case, she took a mirror from her bag and held it a moment against a green blotter. "Nephew, I'm not at all satisfied with this young man. In the first place, he was far too eager to fix the time of death as after 5 P.M.—long after he himself had left here. Doctor Alvarez estimated the critical moment as between 3 and 6 P.M. But such fixings are approximate. There is no reason why Beaumont should not have fallen—or been pushed—at, say, 2.55. Only five minutes outside the established range, but enough to enable Addison to have been here when the death occurred and with his friends from three o'clock onwards."

She crossed to Beaumont's painting on the easel. "Come and see this. Addison made a great deal of the fact that Beaumont was a photographic realist — that he refused to distort facts, to leave anything out, in transferring the world, as he saw it, to his canvas. Now, in this painting, the hands of the cathedral clock, you will notice, show the hour as five. So, according to Addison, at that hour Beaumont must have been alive—in that he faithfully recorded what he saw from the window."

"It seems a minor point to me," Pepe said doubtfully. "Surely this clock-face could have been painted the day before yesterday, or even earlier?"

"Exactly." Aunt Lola was jubi-

lant. "My own view entirely. But Addison laboriously pointed out how the *paint* on the clock-face was still wet, while the rest of the picture was dry—proving Addison claims, that this was the last detail of the canvas to be completed."

She fitted a black cigarette in her crimson holder. "Still, as you say, it is a minor point—and minor points don't help us. Addison insists that death was accidental—that Beaumont probably over-balanced while reaching for those oil-rags on that wire outside the window. At the moment, we have no grounds for suggesting otherwise. There seems no sufficient motive for either suicide or murder."

There was a knock at the door. Pepe opened it to a tall stranger with an auburn beard and soiled suede jacket—obviously another foreigner, another bohemian. "Good morning," the man said in astonishingly pure Castillian. "My name is Alec Duncan. I was a friend of Martin Beaumont. I wondered if you would allow me to take care of such personal belongings as he left here. He was good to me when we met last year in Majorca and, in return, this seems the least I can do."

"Come in, come in, Senor Duncan," Aunt Lola urged excitedly. "I would prefer to converse with you in English, but since my nephew understands so little—and since your Spanish is exquisite—it is best we continue as we are. Sit down, Senor Duncan. My nephew is deputy Chief of Police for San Jaime and is conducting an inquiry into Senor Martin Beaumont's tragic death. Perhaps you can assist him. Did you know Martin Beaumont well?"

"Fairly well." Alec Duncan stroked his flamboyant beard reflectively. "I met him twice—two years ago in Madrid and again for a few weeks in Palma last August."

"Senor Beaumont," Aunt Lola said, "seems the type who . . . got around . . . as our American friends express it. I presume he earned enough from his painting to make such excursions possible?

"Quite the reverse," Duncan said firmly. "To my knowledge he never sold a picture. It was one of the great disappointments of his life."

He faced Aunt Lola candidly. "Beaumont's death has shocked me profoundly. I arrived from Barcelona this morning and heard about it at once. There are many disturbing rumors. Some say his death was an accident, others that he was cold-bloodedly killed. It is . . ."

"Knowing him as you did," Aunt Lola said gently, "what would be your own conclusion?"

"Suicide," Duncan said promptly.

"But *why?*" Pepe asked. "Merely because his pictures didn't sell? Because he was poor?"

"Because his pictures didn't sell—and because he was rich."

Aunt Lola's monocle popped like a champagne cork.

"Rich?" she said breathlessly. "Is there such a thing as a rich artist who has never sold a painting?"

"Beaumont was an artist for less than three months each year," Duncan said slowly. "For the rest he was a businessman—*tycoon* is the word, I believe. You see, right from childhood he had wanted to be a painter, but his parents forbade it. He was forced into the family textile firm—a firm that grew and, with it, his wealth and responsibility. But Beaumont took no pride at all in this achievement, and he never forgave himself for giving into family pressure and abandoning the life he'd always dreamed of. He was *ashamed* of his wealth —particularly when he came to know the financial straits of youngsters who'd given themselves to painting as he'd always wanted to do himself."

Duncan glanced thoughtfully at the waterfront canvas on Beaumont's easel and shook his head, sadly.

"Please go on," Aunt Lola urged him. "You say that for three months each year Martin Beaumont lived ...as a bohemian?"

"Yes, completely — always on a shoestring, and always incognito. Year after year he'd slip away from his Midland offices without telling anyone why—never writing letters, never receiving any. He'd bury himself in some artists' colony in France or Spain — painting hard and talking shop to his heart's content with those he met there. Artists accepted him as one of themselves, and this made him happy. They had no idea who he actually was."

Pepe said, "Then how do *you* know this—if he kept it so secret?"

Duncan grinned wryly. "We got drunk together once in Palma and the whole story came gushing out—the frustration, the bitterness, the guilt. Beaumont felt uneasy about his wealth—and, because he was a realist, knew that his art work lacked distinction. He had taken up painting too late in life—a meticulous but uninspired craftsman."

Duncan indicated the blue-gray blur of Jay Addison's pictures on the studio walls. "There's more real spontaneity and talent in any one of those—tentative and clumsy as they are—than in anything Beaumont ever painted. And Beaumont would have been the first to admit it."

"But," Aunt Lola said, perplexed, "is this really enough to drive a man to suicide?"

"You haven't heard it all," Duncan said. "Beaumont was a bachelor, with no relatives he specially cared for. On his death, his estate was to be divided among London art schools as scholarships for needy students. He told me this in confidence, of course, but there's no longer any need to keep faith with him. As I see it, suicide was a way

of making his money more immediately available—Beaumont's last chance to do something of consequence for the cause he loved best."

Duncan stood up. "Sorry to be so long-winded," he said. "But it's best you should know." He looked around the studio. "I'd be glad, when the inquest's over, if I could come back and gather Beaumont's things together. No doubt the British Consul will take charge of them after that."

"Of course," Pepe said. "I'll be glad to assist you when the time comes."

Aunt Lola took Duncan's arm and led him to the landing. "A thousand thanks, senior, for this absorbing information. It will considerably facilitate my nephew's work."

"I wish you success," Duncan said. "But to me it's a plain—and very noble—case of suicide."

He went out and Pepe said thankfully, "Well, the knot unties itself at last. We can now go ahead with the inquest."

Aunt Lola shook her head abstractedly. "Not so fast, nephew," she said. "The plot thickens, that's all—the plot thickens beautifully..."

And Pepe's heart despaired at the blood-hound glint behind the monocle.

Three days later, to Pepe's panic and confusion, Police Chief Sagarra returned from the mainland. Eduardo the Envious had phoned him, urgently pointing out that, by bungling and needless delay in the Beaumont case, Pepe and his aunt were bringing San Jaime's police department into frightening disrepute.

Pepe himself saw some truth in this. After her talk with the bearded Duncan, Aunt Lola seemed almost to lose interest. "Patience nephew," was her answer to Pepe's protests as the days slipped by without achievement. "For the moment there is little we can do," refusing point-blank to elaborate. "I have my own pet theory on Beaumont's death—but cannot yet substantiate it. We must"—confusingly slipping into English—"Sit tight and hold our horses."

Aunt Lola certainly appeared relaxed enough, but any idea Pepe had of holding those meaningless horses was shattered by his Chief's return.

"Completely and wildly preposterous," Jose Sagarra stormed when Pepe met him on his first morning back. "A foreigner falls from a window—a classically simple case of accidental death which you allow to drag on in this criminally infantile way." Networked veins on the Chief's balding head flushed purple. "Do you realise, boy, that there are *still* sensation-hunters out there? —outside my own home?—gawking up at what you, in your crass stupidity, have convinced them is

the scene of a crime. *What* crime? Where is the slightest evidence of a crime having been committed? Where is the *motive*—even if Beaumont *was* rich in his own country?"

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Chief," Pepe Villangomez said contritely. "But Aunt Lola—"

"May *Lucifer* take your Aunt Lola! What right had your meddling Aunt Lola to interfere in the first place? I could lock you up for revealing official business to... to persons unauthorized." The Chief smiled thinly. "I might as well tell you, boy, that you've let me down badly. A Police Chief must feel confident to deputize his power when circumstances call him away. And I frankly confess that I no longer have faith in you. Once this chaos is disposed of, I intend appointing a new deputy. My mind is made up."

Pepe said mournfully, "Eduardo, I suppose."

"And why *not?* Eduardo has a discerning mind—and a splendid knowledge of English. *Eduardo* will never need rely on elderly females to interrogate foreigners for him." He slapped Pepe's shoulder in dismissal. "Not that I hold it against you, boy. Let's just say you're in the wrong job... a square Pepe in a round hole." He laughed inordinately. "And police work's not everything. Have you ever given a thought to the catering trade, for instance?"

The Chief's door crashed open and Aunt Lola exploded between them: mantilla askew, monocled left-eye blazing. "Morning, Chiefey. Bullying my poor nephew again? I'd take it gently if I were you—unless you're very sure of your ground."

"I'm sure of *mine,*" Sagarra flustered. "How about you?"

"Never surer. Look, Chiefey... I quite understand that you're anxious to settle this Beaumont case. So are we all. And now seems as good a time as any. Is Senor Addison upstairs?"

"I believe so."

"And Eduardo?"

"Yes."

"Then bring them both to the dead man's studio and we'll worry this thing out. It was a complicated puzzle to begin with, but I believe I have the solution."

The Chief balked furiously, then shrugged and went sulkily out.

Pepe said, "What in heaven is going—?"

Aunt Lola silenced him with a radiant smile. "You may take my arm," she said firmly. "We must make our entrance in grand style, Pepe."

In Beaumont's studio, Jay Addison scowled behind fat-lensed glasses, Eduardo the Envious leaned arrogantly against the window from which Beaumont had fallen, Chief Sagarra fidgetted impatiently and cleared his throat. "So, madame"—to show that he

also knew French—"you have our attention. Produce your solution, as you call it, and let's bring this fantasy to an end."

Imperiously in the centre of the room, Aunt Lola straightened her mantilla, gripped her monocle in a Charles Laughton attitude and surveyed the "court"—it was clear she saw the studio as that.

"There were," she began, "on the face of it, gentlemen, three possible explanations of Martin Beaumont's death — accident, suicide, murder. Call it woman's intuition if you wish, but from the start I favored murder." She paused dramatically. "I am now in a position to prove it."

She crossed to the waterfront picture on Beaumont's easel. "The deceased, you will notice, was a realist. Nothing of the visible world is distorted in his painting, nothing is modified to fit an imaginary design. Now, gentlemen, if you will kindly give your attention to the face of the cathedral clock in this—Martin Beaumont's ultimate *opus.* It clearly shows the hour as five. When I first looked at this clock-face, it struck me as being completely in harmony with the rest of the canvas—the same fussy attention to detail, the same clinical record of facts."

Chief Sagarra said tersely, "The *point,* if you please, madame. I have a pressing engagement with his honor the mayor and he can't be kept . . ."

"The point," Aunt Lola said steadily, "is that this clock-face—despite its superficial claim to precision—could *not* have been painted by Martin Beaumont. Consider the real clock through the studio window, gentlemen. It has Roman numerals. This painted replica has Arabic. Martin Beaumont would never have mis-rendered actuality to that extent."

As the men turned uncertainly to the window, Aunt Lola said slowly in English, "Being short-sighted, Senor Addison, there is no point in your looking. If you could not see the clock when you completed this painting—some time after Martin Beaumont died—there is no reason why you should see it now."

Abruptly, Addison hurled himself towards the window, but Eduardo grabbed and firmly pinioned him from behind.

"*Really,* madame," the Chief spluttered. "This is all far too flimsy. Surely the question of who painted the clock-face is somewhat frivolous."

"Taken alone, yes," Aunt Lola said blandly. "I have always regarded it so. Beaumont was probably pushed from this window a little before three o'clock and it was really too naive of Addison to build his alibi on such a crude attempt to fix the time of death as after five—when he himself was absent from the studio. Still, it was this clumsily tampered-with canvas

which first prompted me to suspect him."

"All the same," the Chief said heavily, "if you have nothing more concrete to offer us, we'll be duty-bound to let this tense young man go free."

Aunt Lola regarded him sternly through an icy monocle. "I shouldn't advise it—unless you want another corpse in your alley. Do you think he was after *air* when he sprang for the window?" Calmly she opened her handbag. "To turn then, to more concrete things. I have just now received a communication from Martin Beaumont's London solicitors. It informs me that, three days before he died, Beaumont added a codicil to his will — bequeathing, on his death, ten thousand pounds to Senor Addison. It seems that Beaumont regarded Addison as perhaps the most promising artistic talent he had ever encountered. He wanted to guarantee the boy's financial future and, to set Addison's own heart at rest, told him what he'd arranged. Addison promptly decided to accelerate the whole process. And he *had* to kill when he did—Beaumont was to leave next day for London. It was that afternoon or never. Addison wasn't prepared to wait perhaps thirty years for such a windfall."

The Chief said incredulously, "Then there *was* a motive. Well, now, madame... This puts a completely different complexion on things. But how did Beaumont's solicitors come to send you this crucial information?"

"I telegraphed them. Their address was on the blotter of Beaumont's writing-case. Alec Duncan told me that on these bohemian retreats Beaumont neither wrote nor received letters. The fact that he *did* write one from San Jaime—the otherwise unsoiled blotter revealed it—could only mean something important. Just *how* important, we now see. But I could do nothing until firm information on the codicil arrived."

All this had been said in Spanish and Pepe never knew how much of it Jay Addison understood. Perhaps the lot. In any case, he had broken down completely and was sobbing uncontrollably on Eduardo's shoulder.

The Chief smiled broadly and took Aunt Lola's majestically extended hand. "Madame Lola, I salute you as an investigator of genius." But the smile faded when he turned to Pepe. "The same cannot be said of your nephew. He has revealed himself as incompetent and I very much regret, senora, that he will shortly be out of a job."

"Not so fast," Aunt Lola said warningly. "Our picture is not quite complete—it is varnished, but not yet framed. Tell me, Chiefey, did the late Senor Beaumont ever ask you to witness—to sign—something for him?"

"Beaumont? Not that I recall. Certainly nothing of consequence. Oh, wait . . . I remember now. There *was* a document . . . something to do with British Customs regulations, so he said."

"Well," Aunt Lola said quietly, "since he didn't want to reveal the true nature of his financial position, the white lie was understandable. But didn't you read it *yourself,*" Aunt Lola persisted, "to make sure?"

"Er—no," The Chief stammered. "You see, it was all written in English."

Aunt Lola pursed her lips. "Since both you and Eduardo have a reputation as English scholars, I must say this rather puzzles me. And Eduardo *also* witnessed this particular document—of which I now possess a photostat. Would you care to know what you both so lightheartedly gave your signature to that day?"

The Chief and Eduardo were silent, so Aunt Lola went crushingly on:

"It was this very codicil to Beaumont's will. It was, in short, the very *motive* we've been searching for—a motive that you and your equally gifted nephew had actually held in your hands."

Eduardo grunted and tightened his grip on Addison. The Chief just glared.

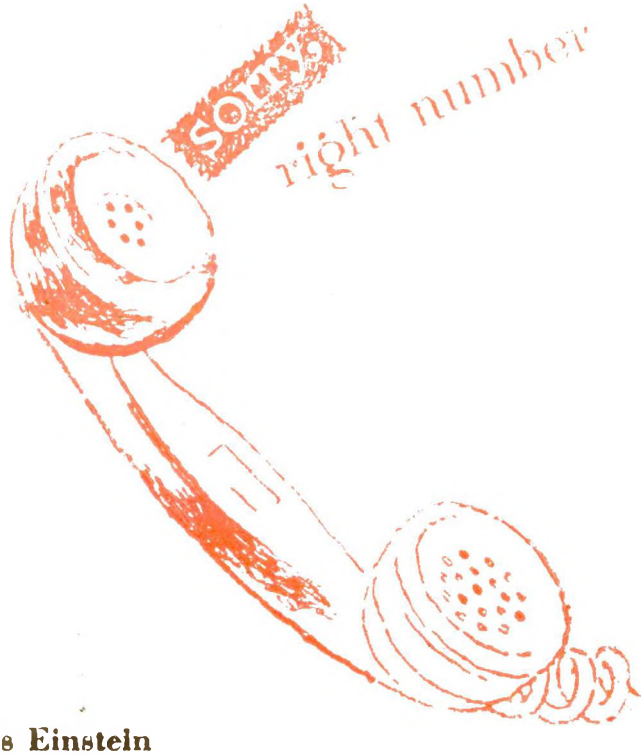
"Still, Chiefey," Aunt Lola purred winningly, "I'm ready to let sleepings dogs lie—if *you* are. We'll make a bargain. My nephew keeps his job and gets a twenty-five per cent increase in salary. In return, he and I will say nothing of the way your frightening ignorance of English has hindered the Beaumont inquiry. Is that agreed?"

The Chief nodded miserably silent.

"Splendid," smiled Aunt Lola. "Well, gentlemen, I leave you with the accused. Oh, and Chiefey . . . You say you're about to see the mayor. Since I will need to give principal evidence at Addison's trial, would it not be diplomatic to have me appointed to some honorary official post so that my words carry weight? Why not deputy-deputy Police Chief of San Jaime? I throw out the suggestion for what it's worth—you might just *care* to consider it."

Aunt Lola dipped her mantilla jauntily and her wink was somewhat exaggerated. "I must now collect a new Agatha Christie from the bookshop," she said. "Adios, gentlemen. At your service always."

Telephonic communication, as we all know, is just a bit of pantomime or play-acting. The idea of speaking to individuals miles away partakes of utter fantasy. If you disagree, you have obviously never been on what euphemistically is termed a party line.



by Charles Einstein

CONSIDERING that they'd never met them, the Sloanes knew a great deal about the Martinsons. It was inevitable that they should, because for the past twelve years they had shared the same party-line telephone in a rural area where the houses were spread out and people could pick their friends, even if not the co-users of their telephones.

Though neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sloane ever purposely listened in when the Martinsons' phone was in use, there had been by now literally hundreds of times when, picking up the phone, they had heard one or the other of the Martinsons talking. Occasionally, when Mrs. Martinson talked for an hour or more during the course of a single call, Mrs. Sloane might pick up her receiver four or five times in a

weary effort to put through a brief call of her own. "Will you *please* stop listening to my conversations?" Mrs. Martinson would snap. You could usually hear the sound of the other party's phone being picked up when you were talking—unless the other party was very quiet about it.

And, in truth, the Sloanes got to be quiet about it, over the years. It was habit by now; you did not want to pick up the phone, for no matter how legitimate a purpose, for no matter how brief a period of time, and have that shrewish Mrs. Martinson chew you out. So the Sloanes picked up their telephone softly. And, over the years, got to know the Martinsons—and to dislike them very much. Mrs. Martinson was a battleax of the old school, and Mr. Martinson was gruff, unpleasant and uncouth. To the Sloanes, it seemed the best thing that could be said about the Martinsons was that they were well matched.

But finally, late one Saturday afternoon, it suddenly appeared that not even this was true. For Ed Sloane, picking up the phone to make a call—picking it up softly, out of inevitable habit—heard the unmistakable voice of Mr. Martinson saying: "So my wife dies. It's not the end of the world. She's outside now. We can talk."

"I just wanted you to know," a woman's voice said, "what a serious thing you're doing."

Ed Sloane's eyes widened.

"Its going to be in her food. She'll never suspect."

"Poison is poison," the woman's voice said.

"Only when somebody guesses. And nobody's going to guess, are they?"

"No," the woman said. "It's still murder, though. We shouldn't be talking—"

"By tomorrow morning," Mr. Martinson said, "it'll be death due to natural causes." He laughed. "Nothing more. Nothing less."

Frozen-fingered and silent, Ed Sloane hung up the phone. He went into the kitchen where Betty was and poured himself a stiff drink.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

He told her.

"My God," she said. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," Sloane said. "He's going to do it at supper. There isn't much time."

"You've got to call the police," she said.

"I suppose so."

"What do you mean, you *suppose* so? Maybe I think Mrs. Martinson would be better off dead, too—but that's not for us to decide."

"I know. But suppose that conversation wasn't— Well, I mean, if we get the police out there, what will happen? Martinson will deny the whole thing; we can't prove it . . . unless they actually find the poison, and I don't know how likely

that would be. They'd say we'd been listening in on their phone calls for years and causing trouble and this and that—and you and I'll be in a real jam."

Mrs. Sloane shook her head. "I don't care. You can't just sit there."

"I'll call the police," Sloane said dimly, and strode to the telephone.

What he heard when he picked it up—lifting the receiver violently this time, without thought to being quiet about it—was Mrs. Martinson's voice. Obviously, she had come into the house from outside, and was now jabbering away on the phone.

"... and, wait just a minute, Dorothy," she was saying, "there's somebody—on—our—line. Will you *please* hang up this telephone?"

Sloane cleared his voice. "Mrs. Martinson," he said. "This is Mr. Sloane. I'm afraid this is something of an emergency."

"Oh?" Mrs. Martinson was querulous. "So that's it now. A new one. Would you mind very much, so long as you're listening to my private conversations which are, by the way, protected by the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, telling me the nature of your so-called emergency?"

"Look," Sloane said to her, "somebody's going to be murdered."

"Oh," Mrs. Martinson said, her voice in mimicry. "Somebody's going to be murdered. Who?"

"You."

"What?" Mrs. Martinson said. "Well, I— Did you hear that, Dorothy?"

"I think he's drunk, whoever it is," the voice named Dorothy said. "But, honey, if he says it's an emergency, don't you have to give up the phone? Couldn't he make trouble for you?"

"It is just as illegal," Mrs. Martinson said triumphantly, "to pretend that an emergency exists, as a means of getting the other party to relinquish the telephone. What have you got to say to that, Mr. Snoop?"

Sloane said, "Mrs. Martinson, listen, you—"

"Get off my line!" she shrieked. *"Get off!"*

Slowly, Sloane hung up the phone. His wife came out of the kitchen and said, "Well?"

"It's out of our hands now," he said. "I did what I—" A look came into his eye. "How long have we been on the party line with them?"

"Twelve years," Betty said.

"Twelve years is a long time," Sloane said. "Is supper ready?"

It is a truism that mice will beat a path to that mouse trap which is better. And so it stands to reason—or does it?—that murderers generally should strive to improve the weaknesses in their methods, especially those involving getting caught.

BETTER THAN MURDER

by O. H. Leslie

"It's his meekness I hate most," Beverly said.

Dr. Jory didn't meet her eyes. "They say the meek will inherit the earth."

"So will Arnold," the woman answered, crushing out her cigarette in the doctor's ashtray. "Six feet of it, to be exact. It's the only way, Paul, believe me."

The doctor, a thin, solemn man, handsome in a frail European manner, disentangled the woman's hands from his neck, and rose from the sofa. He walked to the cold fireplace of his apartment and stared into the hearth, not needing the hypnotic ballet of flames to create a pensive mood. He had plenty to think about, but his mind was a disorderly tangle of fears and hopes and desires. He looked back towards Beverly Whitman on the sofa, the most beautiful woman who had ever touched him or been touched by him in turn, and who had entered his quiet, orderly

bachelor's existence the way lightning entered a dry forest, leaving behind a fire that was difficult to bring under control. A dangerous fire; Dr. Paul Jory knew that now. Dangerous.

"The thing's impossible," he said finally. "I've told you that already, Beverly. We'll have to work it out some other way."

"Like what?" she said, gently prodding. "Like what, Paul? I'm open to suggestions, you know that. Arnold may be a coward about everything else, but he's not afraid to fight for me. Or maybe that's another example of his weakness—he's grown so dependent upon me that he'd die before giving me up. Well, then he'll just have to die."

"But if we could just *talk* to him—"

"Out of the question. I've told you a dozen times, Paul. Arnold made it quite clear when we were married, I could never leave him without a fight. And you know what a fight means."

Dr. Jory snorted. "And the money's that important?"

The woman sighed, and then stretched languorously on the sofa.

"Look at me, Paul. You know what I am, and so do I. I'm a house cat, with thick white fur, with a shiny blue ribbon around my neck. I couldn't be anything else, even if I tried. I couldn't live the kind of life you want me to. The faithful little doctor's wife, in the cozy little house down the street . . . not me, Paul. Ever since I was a child, I could count on having money and money comforts. I was a stray cat for awhile—when Father died and there was all that tax trouble, but that didn't last long. I met Arnold." She lit another cigarette. "I didn't enjoy being a stray cat, Paul. I'll do anything not to be one again."

His face was pained.

"I'm a good doctor, Beverly . . ."

"But not a rich one."

"You put it so damn bluntly! Sometimes I think—"

She laughed. "You think you'd be better off without me? Then say the word, Paul, and I'll walk out the door."

Angrily, Dr. Jory snatched a figurine from the mantle and threw it against the bricks of the fireplace. Then he whirled and said:

"All right, go ahead! I'm not that far gone yet. I'll do a lot of things for you, Beverly, but not that. I won't kill a man—"

She hesitated, for a moment; he thought he had gained a victory. Then she got up, smiling, and located her shoes beneath the coffee table. She was just slipping the white fur stole around her shoulders when Dr. Jory rushed towards her and imprisoned her with his arms.

"No, Beverly. Wait a minute."

"Wait for what? I set the price too high, and you turned me down. That's your privilege."

"If we could talk it over—"

"Bargain? Compromise? There isn't any, Paul."

His hands plunged into her cascading blonde hair like a man who had found gold.

"I can't get along without you, Beverly, not now. But I'm a doctor, don't you see? The very thought of *taking* a man's life, deliberately—"

"Why, Paul?" She looked at him steadily. "Arnold's your patient, isn't he? Haven't your patients ever died?"

"That's different—"

"No, it's not. That's what I've been trying to tell you all night, but you wouldn't listen. I've thought of a plan, a good plan. You won't have to kill Arnold. I have something better than murder."

He gaped at her, fearful, yet hopeful.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking about it a long time. Did you suppose I meant for you to walk in and kill Arnold with a gun? Did you think I wanted us both to hang?" Her eyes shone. "No, Paul," she whispered. "You won't have to kill my husband. If you do what I say—he'll kill himself."

His week went badly. Fortunately, he wasn't burdened by too many patients. His practice had grown more and more limited since he had met Beverly Whitman; he had dropped patients in order to find the clandestine hours in which they could be together.

On Thursday morning, his nurse, Miss Buhler, entered with her brisk preamble to the day.

"Mrs. Macon's coming in at ten," she said. "Mr. Fine called and asked if he could change his appointment to Tuesday; I said all right. And Mr. Arnold Whitman would like to see you whenever possible. I made a tentative appointment for eleven-thirty. Is that okay?"

"Yes," Dr. Jory said, gripping the arms of his chair. "Yes, that's fine, Miss Buhler."

His ten o'clock patient was a nuisance; Mrs. Macon's imaginary heart murmer brought a surly lecture to his lips. The matron looked shocked at his outburst; when she left the office, he had a feeling it was for good.

He waited nervously until Miss Buhler said:

"Mr. Whitman's here."

Arnold Whitman came in, buttoning and unbuttoning the jacket of his well-tailored suit.

He was a heavy-set man of fifty-two. There were trademarks of prosperity all over him, but he didn't have the easy confidence that years and wealth should have given him. His eyes were the quickly-alarmed eyes of a child, and his mouth was constantly prepared to make the shape of fright.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Whit-

man," Dr. Jory said gruffly. "It's been some time. Been keeping well?"

"I don't know. That's what I wanted to see you about. It's my stomach."

"Oh? Digestive troubles?"

"Maybe," Whitman said, wetting his lips. "I don't know what it is. But lately, I've been having the most terrible pains, here . . ."

He touched his paunch, wincing in recollection.

Dr. Jory surprised himself. He reacted normally, professionally, even though he knew that his patient's complaints were trivial, even though he realized that the pains were not symptomatic of organic trouble. They were simple cramps, induced by the harmless but annoying chemical which Beverly had been adding to her husband's diet.

But he went through the whole business: the medical quiz game of questions and answers, the routine physical check, and finally, the grave advice:

"It may not be anything serious, but no use taking any chances. I think we'd better run you through a barium series."

"X-rays?" Whitman's eyes rounded.

"Yes. We'll do it tomorrow, at ten o'clock. Is that all right with you?"

"If you think it's necessary—"

It was, Dr. Jory told him. It was painful, but necessary, he told himself. Beverly had made it necessary, and no matter how much his conscience rebelled at what he was doing, he knew he would see it through.

She called him that afternoon.

"He's green," she said, in tight tones of contempt. "He's absolutely green with fear. Arnold's always been a hypochondriac, always ready to believe he was dreadfully sick. Now he's so scared he can hardly talk."

"All right," Dr. Jory said.

"When will you tell him?"

"I don't know. Perhaps in the afternoon, after the pictures are made."

There was silence at the other end. Then a whisper.

"You know something, doctor? I love you."

Whitman showed up promptly at ten, his body, if not his mind, prepared for the X-ray series.

It was over at noon.

"When do you think?" Whitman asked him. "I mean, when do you think you'll be able to know something?"

"Hard to say. I'd like to study the pictures, of course, and have another internist check me out. It's possible that I'll be able to tell you something this afternoon, around four. If you wanted to drop by then."

"Yes," Whitman said. "I'll do that."

There was only one patient committed for that afternoon, but Dr. Jory couldn't face even that one.

He had Miss Buhler postpone the appointment, and then sent her home for the day.

At four, Whitman returned.

The doctor showed him into the office, and closed the door behind them. He didn't say anything for awhile, recognizing the dramatic value of silence. He let Whitman sit and wait and squirm, but still didn't speak.

"Well, what is it?" Whitman said, finally, his voice touched by panic. "Did you find anything wrong?"

Dr. Jory looked at the pictures on his desk. They weren't very good X-rays; he hadn't been at his technician's best. But they were good enough to depict the normality of Arnold Whitman's insides.

"Dr. Jory," Whitman prompted, his voice hollow. "What's wrong with me?"

"Mr. Whitman, there are two kinds of physicians—the kind who believe in protecting their patients against the truth, and the kind who believe in telling them everything. I belong to the latter school; so I won't beat around the bush. You're a mature, intelligent man—" He bit his tongue. "And I think you'd *want* to know the absolute truth. Isn't that right?"

Whitman's mouth opened, wordlessly.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," Dr. Jory said slowly, "but you're a very sick man."

The lips began to work, ineffectually. The throat of Arnold Whitman fluttered, but managed to create only a bleating sound.

"The X-rays are conclusive, I'm afraid. But in a case like this, I felt obliged to consult another authority. I've had them examined by some colleagues, and they all concur in their opinion."

Whitman made words at last.

"How—how bad?" he said. "What can be done?"

Dr. Jory shook his head.

"That's the worst part. It's far too late to do anything, Mr. Whitman. Surgery is out of the question. The best we can hope to do is keep you comfortable until—"

"Comfortable?" Whitman said, in a voice that rose into a wail. "What do you mean? What are you saying?"

"I warned you that I would be frank, Mr. Whitman. But you'll have to begin seeing to your affairs at once. I'm afraid you don't have much time . . ."

"Time? Time?" Whitman shrieked. "Are you telling me that I'm dying? That I'm going to die?"

Dr. Jory nodded sadly. "There's no help for it. In another month, perhaps two weeks . . ."

"No!" the man screamed, getting up from the chair and looking wildly about the office. "No, that can't be true! I feel all right—I feel better—"

The doctor said nothing.

Whitman stared at him, waiting

for his face to change, for his cold eyes to show warmth. When nothing happened, he sank slowly back to his seat and put his head on the desk.

Then he began to sob.

It was agony for Dr. Jory; he wanted to reach out and touch the man's shoulder, tell him the truth. But he was too enmeshed now, too far along. And he was fascinated, caught in the grip of his own evil power.

It was almost five minutes before the head lifted from the desk. The altered face of Arnold Whitman, already whitened like the face of a corpse, looked at him.

"Will there be pain?" he said hoarsely.

"I'm afraid that can't be avoided completely."

"I can't stand pain, doctor. You know that. I can't stand pain."

"We'll try and help all we can. But drugs can do only so much . . ."

The man threw himself forward, grasping the doctor's shoulders, his ruined face close against him.

"You've got to help me!" he cried. "You've got to help me, Dr. Jory. Please—"

"I'll do all I can, Mr. Whitman, believe me. But you'll have to help yourself, too. You'll have to have courage . . ."

That night, alone in his apartment, Dr. Paul Jory wondered if murder wouldn't have been easier than what he had done. If Whitman's death was the only solution, then a clean bullet would have been simpler, less trying, than what Beverly had asked him to do.

And then another thought came. What if she were wrong? What if she had misjudged her husband?

He wanted to pick up the phone and call her. It wouldn't be difficult; he could always pretend he was inquiring after the state of his patient. Yet he looked at the silent telephone and did nothing.

It was almost eleven when he lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

It was Beverly's voice.

"This is Dr. Jory," he said carefully. "I—I'm calling to find out how your husband is, Mrs. Whitman."

"It's all right," she said, in her lover's voice. "He's asleep."

"Did he tell you?"

"Yes."

"How is he taking it?"

Her answer was cool, detached. "Just as I said he would."

He swallowed hard. "I have to see you, Beverly. I'll go crazy if I can't see you."

"This is no time, Paul. I'll have to stay with him. I have to be the loving wife, you know that."

"I can't stand being alone. I keep seeing how he looked when I told him . . ."

"Don't feel so sorry for yourself. I've had him on my neck all night."

"Beverly, please."

She sighed.

"All right, Paul. He took those sleeping pills you gave him, so I suppose I can sneak out for a little while. But remember I can't stay too long."

She arrived at midnight. She looked different, in a way, he couldn't define. She looked older around the eyes, thinner around the mouth. Yet somehow, she was more beautiful than ever.

He held on to her desperately, until she broke away and went to the sofa. She lit a cigarette, and studied him.

"You look as scared as he was. But you needn't be, Paul. I know dear little Arnold, and I know that it will be all right. He told me himself, not more than a year ago, when his mother died. She was in bad pain the last month; he swore he'd kill himself before he suffered that way. And that's what he'll do."

"But how do you *know?* It takes a certain kind of courage to commit suicide. And you're always telling me what a coward he is."

"He's the right kind of coward, don't worry about that. You'll see. Either he'll overdose himself with those pills you gave him, or he'll take more direct action."

"What kind of action?"

She blew smoke at the ceiling.

"There's a revolver in the bedroom. It's my guess he'll use that. It's faster, surer."

Dr. Jory turned away. "This is terrible, Beverly. It's worse than murder."

"No, doctor. Better. It leaves us both free and unhampered, and rather rich. Murder couldn't do that for us, could it?" Her voice softened. "Now come over here, Paul."

He came to her, but recoiled at her touch.

"What's the matter?" she said icily.

"Nothing." Then he went into her arms, and forgot everything for awhile.

Half an hour later, Beverly said:

"I'd better go home. In case he wakes up and has any ideas. He might leave a note or something—I want to be sure and see it first."

"We must be careful, Beverly."

She kissed him.

"You're the doctor."

He was awakened at four A.M. by a ringing telephone. The sound wasn't alarming; early morning calls were part of his life.

He picked the receiver up, and a gruff voice at the other end said:

"Dr. Paul Jory?"

"Yes."

"This is Lieutenant Klaus, of the Police Department. Do you have a patient named Arnold Whitman, doctor?"

"Yes, I do."

"I hate to ask you this time of night, doctor, but would you mind coming over to his house now?"

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

"I think you better come out, doc. I'll explain when you get here."

He dressed hurriedly, feeling no emotion, trying to pretend it was nothing more than another emergency night call. He didn't trust his night driving; so he hailed a taxi.

It wasn't a great distance to the Whitman's duplex apartment. When the cab pulled up at the curb, he saw an ambulance and a prowl car flanking the building awning. He took his black bag from the seat, and hurried into the lobby.

A uniformed patrolman admitted him into the Whitman apartment.

It was crowded. He couldn't identify the people in it, or the roles they were playing in the affair. There were two internes, two police officers, three men in mufti. One of them, a stocky man with a bulldog chin and pale eyes, came up to him. "You Dr. Jory?" he said. "I'm Klaus."

"What's happened?" the doctor said casually. "What did you want me for?"

"Your patient requested it, doc. Said he'd talk when you got here. Would you come with me?"

He followed Klaus into the bedroom. Arnold Whitman was sitting on the bed, his plump hands in his lap. He was wearing pajamas, and looked remarkably calm.

"Okay," Klaus said easily. "Here's the doc, Mr. Whitman. Now will you tell us why you killed your wife?"

Dr. Jory's eyes went from the face of Arnold Whitman to the sheet-covered form on the bedroom carpet. His legs gave out beneath him, and Klaus had to rescue him and guide him to a chair.

A giggle came from the bed.

"I knew my wife hated me," Arnold Whitman said, his eyes glassy. "She treated me like dirt. Only I never had the nerve to do anything about it. But now I had the nerve, didn't I?"

"Go on," Klaus said roughly a frown on his face.

The man in pajamas giggled again.

"I had the nerve to do what I did, Lieutenant. Because it doesn't matter any more. You can't hurt me. Nothing can hurt me. The doctor knows why."

Klaus turned a stony gaze in Dr. Jory's direction.

"All right, doctor," he said softly. "You tell us why."

It's not whether you get or lose the loot, but it's how your modus operandis. This is the code by which Ruby Martinson, boy master criminal, lives. Once again I predict he will be named rookie criminal of the year—and deservedly.

by Henry Slesar

I USED to think that my cousin, Ruby Martinson, could do nothing more to surprise me. At the tender age of twenty-three, he had (1) committed an audacious robbery, (2) operated as a confidence man, (3) attempted burglary, and (4) plotted a series of the most ingenious crimes in the annals of the American underworld. Now, technically, Ruby never made crime pay a nickel, and the bulk of his diabolical plans never left the drawing board. But I knew, in my faint and rapidly-beating eighteen-year-old heart, that Ruby Martinson was the Evil Brain of the Century, and as his only confidante and sole possessor of his guilty secrets, I knew there was no crooked mile which Ruby wouldn't walk.

THE ORDEAL OF Ruby Martinson

But what I never believed possible was that Ruby's granite heart would ever soften for a woman. I knew that Dorothy, his girl, exerted an uncanny influence over him, but I never suspected that it was great enough to make Ruby give up the greatest haul of his criminal career. Yet that's exactly the case, and every time I think about it, my head aches and the middle finger of my left hand throbs like a voodoo drum. You'll see why, when I tell you what happened.

It started on a day like all other days, when Ruby and I met after work in Hector's Cafeteria on Broadway. I looked forward to these meetings, to seeing Ruby's oversized head with its violent red hair, the big eyeglasses perched on his small nose, magnifying the freckles on his cheeks; to hearing Ruby blueprint some new caper, like knocking over the Chase bank, or kidnapping R. H. Macy, or swindling Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Smith—separately, and then enmasse. He looked particularly excited that day, but there was something peculiar about him, too. I couldn't tell what it was until I sat down, and realized that Ruby was chewing gum.

"Hey," I said. "Since when do you chew gum?"

He snickered, and kept on chewing. Then he took a pack of spearmint out of his pocket and popped another stick into his mouth. He chewed like a cow in a hurry.

"What gives, Ruby?" I said, certain that there must be method in his madness.

Still Ruby didn't answer. Then he put up his hand and removed the pink blob from his tongue. Swiftly, his hand dropped beneath the table, and came up empty. It was a pretty disgusting exhibition, and I told him so.

"That's what you think, he chuckled. "Maybe you don't know it, kid, but that little gesture's gonna make us dough."

"What little gesture?"

"That chewing gum bit. You and me are gonna clean up with the spearmint. I got the whole caper worked out."

"What caper?" I squealed. While I enjoyed taking the listener's role in Ruby's criminal plans, I continually dreaded being made an accomplice. "You're not getting *me* into another scrape," I said. "I got enough trouble. I got to find myself a job and—"

"You won't need a job," Ruby sneered. "Not for a long while." He bent forward and whispered hoarsely. "You and me are gonna knock over a jewelry store."

I gasped.

"Cut that out. We're not gonna heist it; this is something better. I've been casing this place for a week, and it's a perfect set-up. It's called Zachini's, over on Lexington Avenue."

"But, Ruby—"

"Shut up and listen. The whole thing's as easy as falling out the window. I'll do all the hard work; all you gotta do is pick up the merchandise. You see what I did with the gum?"

I nodded.

"Well, that's what I'm going to do over at Zachini's. I'm gonna walk in there, ask to see some jazzy diamond rings, and stash a hunk of spearmint under the counter."

"But why?" I said.

"Don't be a dope. That's not *all* I'm gonna stash under the counter. When the clerk's not looking, I'm gonna slip one of the rings under there, too. It'll stick to the gum. You get it now?"

I still didn't, but Ruby exhibited his usual quiet patience.

"You're the dumbest jerk in the country," he said, punching my forearm. "I'm gonna stick one of the rings under the counter and then walk out. Even if the guy notices one of the diamonds missing, he won't be able to find it on me. Then all we gotta do is go back there and pick up the haul. Get it?"

I got it now, especially about the personnel Ruby had in mind for Phase Two of his plan.

"You mean me?" I said. "But Ruby, what if they catch me?"

"Catch you? Why should they catch you? You're not doing anything. You're not even *lookin'* at rings, you dope. You're just dropping in to ask for directions or something. Meanwhile, you get

your hand under that counter and —bingo!"

"No," I said, using my favorite word. "No, Ruby, I can't do that. It's too risky—"

He glared at me. "All right. So maybe you want to do the *first* job. Maybe *you* ought to start chewing gum." He shoved the spearmint package towards me, and I recoiled as if it were a loaded revolver.

"No, Ruby," I pleaded. "Not that."

"Well, it's one or the other, kid. Make up your mind."

I twisted and squirmed and argued and cajoled, but of course, it was in vain. Ruby was my Svengali, and even after several horrible experiences as his confederate in crime, I knew I didn't have the will power to resist him.

"Okay," I said finally. "I'll handle the second part."

"Good!" Ruby clapped me on the shoulder. "Then we'll meet here tomorrow, and talk it over."

"Gee, Ruby, I gotta look for a job tomorrow—"

"So look for a job! Who's stopping you? Just make sure you're at Hector's around five-thirty. That's all."

I nodded, mournfully. When Ruby offered me a stick of gum, I took it and chewed it fast, a nervous, abnormal fast.

The next day, my heart wasn't in my job-hunting. I kept thinking about Ruby, sitting at a cozy desk in some nice peaceful business office, and I wondered why he just didn't settle down and enjoy it. Ruby was an accountant, two years fresh from City College, and according to his mother, my aunt, the GREATEST accountant in the solar system. Ruby's mother was just like my mother. I mean, I was out of work just then, but my mother would tell anybody that I was the GREATEST unemployed person in the world. I would have given a lot for a job as good as Rubys, but the way I felt that day, my chances were pretty slim.

But life's funny, you know? The first Help Wanted ad I answered was for a packer in a scarf company, and the fat man in charge took one look at me and said: "Okay, kiddo, you'll do." The job required no technical skill (my specialty) and it was boring but simple. I stood at a long table with four girls and an old guy, and packed whispy scarves into narrow white boxes all day long. I didn't mind the old guy, even though his breath smelled like lighter fluid, but the girls giggled all the time and made me feel like I had forgotten my pants or something.

Anyway, I met Ruby at Hector's that night, but before I could tell him about my new career, he said:

"It's all fixed, pal."

"What's fixed?"

He smiled slyly. "The jewelry caper. I went into Zachini's at noon, and had a look at their best diamond rings. Some pretty fancy

rocks, all right. The clerk was a real goon; he didn't see a thing."

My eyes went so wide they began to tear.

"You mean you did it?" I gulped. "Already?"

"Sure, why waste time? First I slipped the old spearmint under the counter. Then I asked the guy to show me the stuff. The second he looked away, I had the biggest hunk of ice under the counter; he never blinked an eye."

I began to blink myself.

"N-n-now what?" I trembled.

"Are you kidding? You know what. You're going to Zachini's right now, before closing time."

"Me?" I said, in a lovely falsetto.

"Yes, you! We can't afford to waste a minute. I'll draw you a layout of the store, so you can put your hands right on the ring."

He took a napkin from the table and began doodling. I watched in fascination and horror as he made a neat blueprint of the shop, so perfectly detailed that even I couldn't mistake the location of the diamond-studded chewing gum.

I bleated some more protests, but Ruby was in no mood to be denied. It was hopeless, of course. I paid for my coffee and crullers and went out into the street, heading for the jewelry store. It was a simple enough plan. All I had to do was walk in, step up to the counter, put my hand where the gum was, remove the ring, ask the guy for some street directions, and then walk out again. At six-thirty, I was to meet Ruby at his girl's apartment.

I arrived at ten minutes to six, but it took me another five minutes to get up my nerve and open the door.

The clerk was a smooth-looking type, with hair like shoe polish. He smiled when the door jangled, but he took one look at me in my crummy sports shirt and his face changed. I said: "Can you tell me where the post office is?"

He frowned. "What do you think this is, an Esso station?"

I put my hand on the counter top and ran it along the edge until I touched something sticky.

"Gee, I'm sorry," I said. "I just thought you might know where the post office was."

"Two blocks north," he yawned, looking at his fingernails. "Turn left on Lexington."

My hand touched the metal surface of the ring. I got it between my fingers and tugged. The gum resisted and I began to sweat.

"Boy," I said, looking through the glass-topped counter. "Sure got a bunch of nice rings there." My fingers were getting all clotted together, and for a wild moment, I was afraid I would be pinned there like a fly.

"A little expensive for you, sonny," the clerk said snootily.

Finally, the ring was in my palm. I put both my hands in my pockets and strolled towards the door.

"Thanks a lot," I said.

"You're welcome," the smoothie answered. "Next time ask a cop." I was almost glad that I was walking off with his merchandise.

I didn't glance at my prize until I was six blocks from the scene of the crime. It was a beauty, all right —a chunk of diamond the size of a small doorknob in the center, with flat slabs of diamond all around the surface of the ring. It weighed a ton, and probably cost a trillion dollars. I'd never seen anything like it.

It was too early to meet Ruby at Dorothy's house, but I was too nervous to walk the streets with the loot in my pocket. I decided to go there and wait, figuring that Dorothy wouldn't mind. That was the kind of girl Dorothy was. A real sweet type, pretty in a kind of middy-blouse way. She was a schoolteacher, and hardly the type of moll you'd expect the world's greatest criminal to have.

Just as I expected, she welcomed me cordially. We sat around the living room and chatted for a couple of minutes, and then I went into the bathroom for a closeup of the ring. Just to get a better look at it, I slipped it over the middle finger of my left hand and held it up. It flashed colored lights like a ballroom chandelier. What a rock! I stared at it until I heard the front doorbell jangle, and knew that Ruby had arrived. Then I pulled the ring off.

That is, I tried to pull the ring off. The damned thing was stuck. I've got funny hands, with long skinny fingers and knuckles the size of pool balls. It just wouldn't budge, but I didn't get panicky or anything. I remembered how my mother used to take her wedding ring off sometimes, with soap and water. I ran some water into the sink, and lathered up. The ring still didn't move. I kept yanking at it until my finger got all red and sore.

But it didn't come off.

Well, you never saw anybody go to pieces the way I did in Dorothy's bathroom. I thrashed around the little room like a psychotic wrestler, trying to pull that lousy diamond ring off my finger. But no matter what I did, it stuck under my knuckle like it was glued there. I got so panicky that I almost bawled in frustration, but the panic didn't help. I mean, that ring was *stuck*.

Finally, not knowing what else to do, I shoved my hands into my pockets and came into the living room. Ruby was on the sofa, listening to some highbrow record Dorothy had placed on the turntable, and when I entered, he gave me a raised eyebrow in the shape of a question mark. Dorothy looked at me, too, and said:

"Why, what's the matter? You look sick!"

"I'm all right," I said weakly.

"Yeah," Ruby said icily. "What's

wrong kid? Everything come off okay?"

"Not exactly," I gulped. "Could I see you in the bedroom a minute, Ruby?"

We excused ourselves and went into Dorothys boudoir. Ruby closed the door behind us, and I told him what happened. At first, he looked relieved when he realized that the caper had been successfully completed; he didn't think there was any problem about the ring being stuck on my finger. But when he started to yank at it, I howled in pain.

"Cut it out!" he said sharply. "We'll use some soap—"

"I already tried soap," I said desperately. "Nothing works, Ruby, nothing!"

"Don't be stupid!"

We went into the bathroom, and I proved it to him. By this time, Dorothy was getting pretty curious about what was going on, and started asking questions. Rather than get her suspicious, we returned to the living room, and I kept my hands in my pockets for the rest of the visit.

Well, I hate to think about the remainder of that night. For two solid hours after we left Dorothy's, Ruby yanked and twisted and tormented the middle finger of my left hand until I was whimpering for mercy. I'd never seen Ruby so upset about anything; all his brilliant cunning seemed to desert him at the sight of that glittering rock glued to my finger. I thought sure he'd come up with some crafty scheme for getting it off, but I guess he was too overwhelmed by the whole thing. It was the biggest haul of his evil career, and it made even his great criminal intelligence totter.

Finally, Ruby gave up in disgust.

"But don't worry," he said threateningly. "We'll figure something out. And for God's sake, keep that ring out of sight!"

He didn't know what he was asking. Keeping that gleaming stone out of sight was like trying to hide a searchlight in my pocket.

I sneaked into the house that night. In bed, I kept twisting and turning the ring in the vain hope of getting free of it. I thrashed around all night, even in my sleep, and my mother thought I was coming down with the fits for sure. I have an uncle who had a fit one night, and woke up in the morning to announce that he was going to shoot the first police horse he saw. They had to put him in some kind of home, and my mother never got over it.

When I woke up the next day, my first thought was to call up the scarf company and tell them I had a heart attack or something; the prospect of reporting to an $18-a-week job with a trillion-dollar ring on my finger was more than a little disturbing. But I knew I couldn't malinger on my second day; it would cost me the job for sure.

So I put on a pair of fur-lined gloves and went to work. I know it sounds a little stupid, wearing fur-lined gloves in midsummer, but they were the only pair I owned. But when I got to the scarf company, I realized I couldn't pack those filmy things with gloves on, so I had to take them off.

For the first ten minutes, nobody noticed anything. Then the girl next to me, a black-eyed type named Maria, let out a shriek.

"Looka him! Ain't that *adorable?*" She covered her mouth and started to gasp and giggle at the same time.

"Cut it out," I growled.

"Isn't that *sweet?*" another girl said. "He musta gotten engaged."

"Ain't that nice," Maria said. "We'll have to give him a shower, huh, girls?"

Luckily, the fat guy who ran the place came over and wanted to know what all the squealing was about. He looked at me funny when they told him, and backed away like I had some kind of disease or something. The rest of the day was awful; I never heard so much giggling in my life. It was like working in a tickle factory.

That evening, I met Ruby at Hector's and said:

"You gotta do something, Ruby! I can't go on like this!"

"Shut up!" he said angrily. "It's all your fault, you dope. We'll just have to figure something out."

"Look, can't we file it off?"

"We can't take the chance of ruining it. It's got all those bagettes around it; it'll take an expert to file it off, and experts ask too many questions. You'll just have to wear it until I think of an answer."

"But, Ruby—"

"I said shut up!" Ruby said, and I knew he meant it.

I went home early and stayed in my room. About eight-thirty, the telephone rang and it was Ruby. He wanted me to meet him at the corner of 43rd Street and Seventh Avenue, and I hurried over there, hopeful that his great brain had at last arrived at a solution. I was to be disappointed, however. There was somebody else with Ruby, a seedy-looking old guy with a greasy felt hat. Despite the warm weather, he wore a windbreaker with patches on the elbows. To tell you the truth, he looked like a bum.

Ruby said: "This is Mr. Feener. He's in the diamond business."

Mr. Feener shifted his feet uncomfortably, and looked up and down the street. "Okay, okay, let's go. I ain't got all night."

"Show him," Ruby said, and yanked my left hand out of my pocket.

Mr. Feener took one look at the ring, and then hauled me towards the street light. It was very undignified. He put a jeweler's loop in his eye and started his examination. I felt pretty silly, let me tell you. Then the old bum muttered:

"Not bad, not bad. Nice blue-

white specimen. Not bad at all."

"How much?" Ruby said, licking his lips.

"Well, I dunno. I think maybe I could manage fifteen hundred." His eyes went crafty. "Who knows? Maybe even two grand, if I talked to the right people. But that's my top price."

"No dice," Ruby said. "You'll have to do better than that."

Mr. Feener yanked my finger to his eyes again, ignoring my yelp of indignation.

"Twenty-five hundred tops," he said. "That's my final offer."

"Make it three," Ruby said.

"Twenty-seven," Feener said.

"Twenty-eight."

"It's a deal," the old guy sighed. "Only you'll have to get the ring off his hand. I can't sell the kid, too."

Ruby was practically hopping up and down with excitement by this time, and I was a little bug-eyed myself. Twenty-eight hundred dollars! It was a fortune. It was practically Ruby's yearly salary.

Then Ruby drew Mr. Feener aside, and they went into a huddle. All of a sudden, I began to get scared. I had been merely annoyed until then, having to submit my finger to Mr. Feener's inspection, but now I was scared. What if there *wasn't* any way to file the ring off? After all, weren't diamonds the hardest substance known to man? What if Ruby was going to do something *really* drastic?

They came out of the conference, and I heard Ruby say:

"Okay, then. We'll just have to cut it off."

That was all I needed to hear. I started to shake like a palsied marionette, and took off down that street like the devil was after me. I think I would have preferred the devil; the idea of Ruby Martinson chasing me, with his horrible evil mind fixed on that twenty-eight hundred dollars, was far more terrifying. I think I broke the four-minute mile making my getaway, and I didn't stop running until I thought I was going to drop dead.

Then I started to think. I couldn't go home—Ruby would be sure to find me there. There was only one sensible course, and that was to throw myself on the mercy of Dorothy, Ruby's girl. She was the only one I knew who might have the power to temper Ruby's evil determination.

Dorothy was practicing on the piano when I arrived, and she looked surprised to see me. One look at my face must have told her I was in trouble, and she started asking questions.

"You've got to help me," I stammered. "It's Ruby—"

"Ruby? Is he in trouble?"

"No! It's me that's in trouble. Look—"

I pulled my hand out of my pocket and showed her the ring. She backed off as if temporarily blinded, and then came closer. At

first her face was blank, and then she giggled suddenly.

"Why, it's lovely," she said, stifling a smile. "But don't you think it's a little—well I mean, a boy your age—"

"It's not *my* ring," I said hastily. "It's Ruby's. It got stuck on my finger and I can't get it off. No matter what I do."

"Oh," she said, examining it again. "It *is* beautiful. And you say ...Ruby bought it?" She started playing with the curls on the back of her head.

"Yes," I said miserably. "Ruby bought it. But now he's going to cut my finger off."

"He's *what?"*

"I *know* he is, Dorothy. I heard him say!"

"Oh, that's silly! Ruby would never do such a thing."

"You don't know him," I said gloomily, for a moment tempted to spill the whole story of Ruby's ghastly secret life. "He'll do *anything* to get this ring. It means a lot to him."

"It does?" Dorothy said coyly, twisting my hand around to get a good look at it. "Why should an engagement ring be so important to Ruby?"

"A what?" I said blankly.

"It's certainly lovely," Dorothy crooned, her eyes going all mushy. "It's the loveliest engagement ring I ever saw."

"But, Dorothy—"

"And you really can't *blame* Ruby for being upset. It's not every day that he buys an engagement ring, is it? But don't worry about getting it off. Come on with me."

She took me by the hand and led me into the kitchen. Then she opened the refrigerator door, and stuck my hand into the freezer compartment.

"You just stay there a minute," she said, "and I'll be right back. Don't move."

I did what she said, feeling like an idiot. When she returned, there was a jar of vaseline in her hand.

"It's the warm weather," she explained. "It makes your finger swell. So first we freeze it, and then we use a little of this."

She took my hand out of the freezer; by this time my finger was a beautiful shade of blue. Then she smeared the gooey stuff all over it, and the ring slid off, slick as grease.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and rubbed my aching digit. But then I saw Dorothy slip the ring onto her own finger, and shouted: "Don't, Dorothy!"

"Oh, it's all right," she said. "I just wanted to get used to the feel of it."

"Could—could I have the ring please, Dorothy?"

"I'll return it to Ruby. Don't worry about it."

"But Dorothy—"

"I said don't worry about it," Dorothy said, in a voice colder than the freezer. Then she turned away from me.

There was nothing else I could do except go to the door and leave. She didn't even hear me say goodbye.

I didn't see Ruby until the next day. I walked into Hector's, and there he was at his usual table, but there was something about his expression that was definitely unusual.

"Hi, Ruby," I said timidly.

He didn't answer. He looked straight ahead, sipping coffee.

"Gee, Ruby, I'm sorry about last night—"

"Forget it," he said curtly.

"Did you see Dorothy? Did you get the ring back?"

"Yeah, I got it."

"Gee, that's good," I sighed. "I was worried there for awhile. Did you get the money from Feener?"

"No. I gave the damn thing back."

"You *what?*"

"I put the ring in a package and mailed it back to Zachini's."

"Gave it back?" I repeated stupidly. "But why, Ruby?"

He turned on me savagely.

"Because I couldn't give Dorothy a hot ring, that's why. I couldn't get my girl into a jam, could I?"

"No, I guess not."

He sat silently for a full minute, and then he pulled out a velvet box.

"What's that, Ruby?"

He flipped it open. There was another ring inside. It had only one diamond, and it was no bigger than a beebee shot. It was sort of cute, but nothing like the first ring.

"You took *another* one?" I said.

"No," Ruby growled. "I bought it."

"Bought it?"

"For Dorothy. We—we got engaged last night."

"Engaged?"

"Yeah. Don't ask me how it happened. When I went up to see her, she threw her arms around me and —aw, what's the difference." He looked moodily at the shiny beebee-shot ring. "It was Dorothy's idea that I return the other ring. She said we couldn't afford a ring like that. She said we ought to put the money into the bank or something..." He snapped the box closed. "Anyway, that's what I did."

"Gee, Ruby," I said, overcome by the depth of the tragedy. "I'm sorry. I mean—congratulations."

He muttered something under his breath, but I couldn't hear it. Of course, I knew what had happened was all my fault. I sure hoped Ruby wouldn't hold it against me. After all, there are a lot better enemies you can have in this world than the Greatest Criminal Brain of the Century.

That newspaper which would dare feature today's news tomorrow might very well start a trend. While it was at it, it might eliminate what is known as the gossip column. Frankly, such columns are murder. And sometimes lead to it.

END of a Columnist

by Arthur Hoerl

ON HIS thirty-fifth birthday Terry Wyley wrote his last copy for the paper. Everyone who knew Terry understood why he quit. He never made any explanation and out of

respect no one ever asked him. But everyone knew.

The only thing, no one knew the truth.

Terry was at his office on the east side, in the building that his New York outlet had put up a few years ago. Newspaper buildings get old quickly like those who work in them. The smell of ink and sweat might have something to do with the aging process.

It was almost two in the morning. That was the usual time Terry finished his copy for the following day's issue. He wrote a column about people famous and infamous (syndicated coast to coast by the Hass outfit) that recorded their successes and their foibles with an ironic humor that no columnist had ever matched. It was a talent wasted on trivia. Until you considered the six-figure income it hatched yearly.

He put the copy in the usual place in the file and locked the file. Ellen would copy it clean in the morning for Grayson, the paper's editor, and send a duplicate to the syndicate office. Terry stood at the file and lit a cigarette. He was thinking that in a week he'd be thirty-five. But he looked forty and sometimes felt like fifty. But that was all going to change. Within days he could number, he was going to start living a normal, well almost normal, happy life.

He went to the window and looked out, from the twenty-sixth floor, over the city which never slept. Part of it, the part he liked best, he had in the palm of his hand. A nice feeling.

He picked his soft felt, shapeless hat (Terry's trademark) and his coat from the chair where he'd dropped them. It was time to go home, to the apartment on Sutton Place he called home. Tanaki would prepare the nightly warm milk (the potion seemed to soothe him to sleep), another day would be ended, and he'd be almost a year older.

Before he reached the door it opened and a man came in, a stranger to Terry, and shut the door behind him. He was the kind of man you wouldn't remember, the negative personality so prevalent in the human species. He had all the features, but none made any impression. His eyes, probably blue, were tight like those of a person in anger.

"I'm going to kill you, Wyley, and after that I'm going to kill myself."

He spoke without raising his voice and took a pistol from his pocket without a flourish.

There was no doubt of it; this was not a friendly call. Terry realized he did not dare make a false move.

"I suppose I ought to know why I'm going to die," and Terry tried to make it sound casual.

"I'm Albert Merton," as if that explained everything.

"Should I know you?"

Merton's reply hit Terry hard, a shocking revelation that churned his insides as if his stomach had suddenly been twisted out of shape. Merton was speaking like a man spitting out phlegm that was choking him.

"You know me for five thousand dollars worth. The blackmail I paid to keep the story out of your dirty column. What was the story about? I'll tell you. About my wife—Laura. You found out more about her than I knew, that she was running to an apartment on Park Avenue. Running there yesterday, the day before, the day before that. For five thousand dollars, you wouldn't let the world know she was a chiseling, two-timing tramp. But you forgot one thing. *I didn't want to know about it.* I was happy the way I was. I love her. Can you understand that?"

"Listen, Merton."

"You listen to me. I told her I paid you off. I told her it didn't make any difference what she did, I loved her. Now there's one thing more I have to tell *you.* She said with me knowing what she was, she couldn't stay, with me knowing what she did, she had to leave me. She walked out. I love her and I didn't care what she'd done, but she walked out. You know now, Wyley? The five thousand I can laugh at. I've plenty. But I haven't got Laura any more. And on account of you."

"Tell me one thing more," Terry asked.

"I've told you everything."

"No. You didn't hand me the money. How did I get it?"

Terry had to know. In all his life he had never taken a dishonest dime. His father had taught him honesty, while raising him on the salary a man makes running an elevator.

Terry had to know.

When Merton explained how it was done, Terry saw how much it was in character with the nightly tragic comedy he was shackled to.

The method was too simple. Merton got instructions to drop in at the Vesper Club, the exclusive night spot, at exactly nine o'clock, wearing a brown topcoat with the money in old twenties sealed in an envelope in the topcoat pocket. After leaving the coat at the checkroom, he was to go to the bar and stay there at least an hour. After that he was on his own. If he reneged in any single step of the plan, he wouldn't get another chance to buy off.

The night Merton made the payoff, he left the Vesper in exactly one hour. The envelope he'd left in the topcoat pocket was gone. Merton said he was sure the checkroom girl hadn't been involved. She was too dumb to hold up a match if you needed a light.

Terry listened and the ache in

the pit of his stomach stayed there.

"Merton," he said when it was all told, "I don't know if I can convince you—"

"You can't."

"You've had your say, let me have mine. I didn't get your money. The information I dig up isn't for sale. Not by me. There are others who may put a price on it. And I'll find out who it is, and I promise you they'll go to prison for as long as the law allows."

He talked for a long time before he saw that Merton was wavering. The gun which was pointed at Terry slowly dropped to Merton's side.

"Will you let me write something?"

Merton nodded.

Terry took a stapled book from his desk. He wrote a check, tore it from the book, and pushed it toward Merton. Merton put the gun back into his pocket.

"I want to take the loss, not you," Terry said.

Merton picked up Terry's check for five thousand dollars. "I don't want this," he said bitterly. "This isn't what I came for. This isn't—"

"Take it. About Laura . . . I'd go and tell her you were ready to commit murder because she left you. It might make her think a little differently about you."

Merton's head dropped. A sound that might have been a sob escaped from his throat. He sat down and Terry went to a cabinet and poured a drink. He took it to Merton who gulped it. Nothing more was said. Merton rose and went to the door. He stopped there, took the pistol from his pocket and laid it on a table near the door. Then he went out.

Terry picked up the gun. It was fully loaded. He emptied it and put the gun and the shells in the table drawer, and went back to his desk.

He had to know.

As he worked on the puzzle, he remembered a bit of information he had picked up the night before. He had paid a hundred dollars for it to a small-time hood who had to get away fast. Terry felt he couldn't use the information; so he had decided to forget it.

But now it might be the bait he needed.

He put a sheet in the typewriter and wrote the word *confidential.* That meant that only three people were to read what was on that sheet, the three legmen who dug up and confirmed (and when possible got affidavits) the information that went into Terry's column. Then *confidential* items were filed away in a locked box in a locked file and forgotten. The legmen were kept up on these items, so that they'd know the subjects that were taboo.

When Terry finished typing, he read what he had written.

Confidential. Maury Shepp has reason to know who shot and killed

Detective-sergeant Garrett, June 23, on San Juan Hill while the officer was investigating narcotics traffic. Eye-witness J.K. will deny if questioned by the police.

That was the bait.

The three legmen would read it tomorrow. Al Franks, one-time private investigator, longest on Terry's staff. Nine years. Roger Hoff, who had spent ten years with the F.B.I. before he joined the staff, eight years ago. Eugene Salters, a former assistant district attorney who had helped in the prosecution of Murder, Inc., had been seven years with Terry. Terry did not try to guess which one might take the bait.

The ache in his stomach had not abated.

The next week, which should have been gay, would be acrid as bitter almond.

It wasn't his secretary Ellen's fault. Only two days before she had become the cause for gayety. For more than two years Ellen had been within arm's length. She was 25, with the beauty of a girl growing into a woman. Her eyes were deep blue and large and they seemed always to be smiling at you. Her hair was bright copper which is more beautiful even than gold. Ellen had adjusted to Terry's unshaped hours, to his faulty typing, to the endless details, and gave the office an appearance of normalcy. He might never have guessed how she had grown on him, if she hadn't worked late that night.

She was almost ready to leave when Terry came in, earlier than usual. One of those days he felt fifty. He insisted, at that hour, on taking her home.

She had a small apartment on East 56th. It had the feeling of home, restful, comfortable. Terry stretched out on the lounge and felt the balm of relaxation as he watched her prepare a little supper.

He called her and when she was close he reached for her hand and then she was half-kneeling beside him. They needed no words. He held her tight in his arms. What was between them flowed like muted music from each to the other. All he said, in a low voice, was, "Ellen—this has been for a long time, and just now I found out."

From the first day, following that night with Albert Merton, the week of waiting was difficult. Al and Rog and Gene had seen the confidential item. So the bait was on the hook.

But added to the torment of that first day was the problem of Joan. Terry had to be honest with her, had to say the words that would turn five years into the ashes of memory.

He went to her dress shop which was just off Fifth Avenue, late in

the afternoon. He waited in the little office behind the shop until the last customer had gone. When she joined him, he could find no soft, pretty words to help him tell her. How can you make the truth lie?

"Joan . . . Joan, I'm going to hurt you."

She didn't say anything. She waited, her eyes never leaving his face. She saw pain in his eyes.

"I'm going to be married."

Her heart probably skipped a beat, but it didn't show on her face or in her voice.

"Who is it, Terry?"

"Ellen . . . I don't know how I can explain."

She wanted to cry, but that would have to wait until he was gone.

"You don't have to, Terry," she said. "And how I feel about you hasn't changed."

They talked for awhile. It was not easy, but not a harsh word, not a cruel word or a bitter one.

During the week, the news spread about the early nuptials of Terry and Ellen. He pushed back any attempt at celebration. First, he knew, there would be a tragedy.

Every night that week he was at the Vesper Club and sat always where he could watch the checkroom. The counter opening was small and most of the room beyond was out of view. The checkroom gave on a small alcove which was fronted by three telephone booths. At their rear they formed a short corridor wide enough only to accommodate a door at the deep end of the checkroom.

Five nights, nothing. Then on Friday, Al Franks came in and Terry saw him chat with the checkroom girl whose name was Milly. Terry noticed that Al showed more than a casual interest in the girl, but he finally went to the bar.

At nine o'clock Maury Shepp came in. He checked a brown topcoat and went to the bar. He played it straight and never left the bar. Half an hour passed, forty-five minutes, fifty. Nothing happened in the checkroom that Terry could see, except that it was a busy place at that hour. Another fifteen minutes went by. Terry watched the end of the narrow corridor where the phone booths stood, until someone walked quickly out of the corridor and went through a nearby door which led to the Vesper kitchen.

Terry had his answer.

He sat staring at the kitchen door and did not see a man leave one of the tables, did not see Shepp join him for a moment. The man hurried into the street, while Shepp got the brown topcoat at the checkroom and found the sealed envelope was gone.

Terry looked haggard, like a man in tragic indecision. It was Ellen he had seen hurrying out of the cor-

ridor and through the kitchen door. *Ellen.*

Slowly it became clear. As Terry Wyley's secretary, Ellen had entry at any nightclub—their office, kitchen, checkroom. It was very simple. All the angles straightened out.

Now Terry had a heartbreaking job to do. That night he had to make the decision that would cut down his bid for happiness before it had a chance to start. He knew when the police took over, which they would, the whole rotten business had to come into the open. For Ellen, prison. Maury Shepp would take his first step toward the chair.

He walked to the bar and asked for a double scotch. Dan, the bartender, was sure he had heard wrong. Terry never drank hard liquor. But when Dan asked, Terry repeated, "A double scotch!"

He drank it at one gulp. It throttled his breath and felt like a small fire inside him.

Then he went out of the Vesper on his way to face Ellen.

When Terry's cab reached Ellen's block, it was held up by a traffic officer. Terry got out and saw there was a sparse crowd being held in line by two patrolmen. In the block three prowl cars were parked. At the entrance to Ellen's apartment a body was lying. Not far away on the street were two others.

Perhaps Terry knew before he talked with Lt. Mayer whom he often met on his nightly rounds. There wasn't much to tell.

"A prowl car was cruising Madison and came up in time to see those two pumping bullets into the woman. She was dead before she hit the pavement. Maybe you know her. An odd thing—we found a sealed envelope in her purse, filled with copies of your column cut out of the newspaper."

"I knew her . . . my secretary." The life had gone out of Terry's voice. Instead of money, he thought, the payoff had been bits of paper and death. "Who were the men?" he asked.

"Maury Shepp and one of his sudden death boys," the Lieutenant said. "They'll go to the morgue."

So there was no one alive who knew the truth, no one except Terry Wyley.

But everyone thought they knew, and understood why Terry quit the paper. What saddened his friends most was that no one ever again saw Terry sober.

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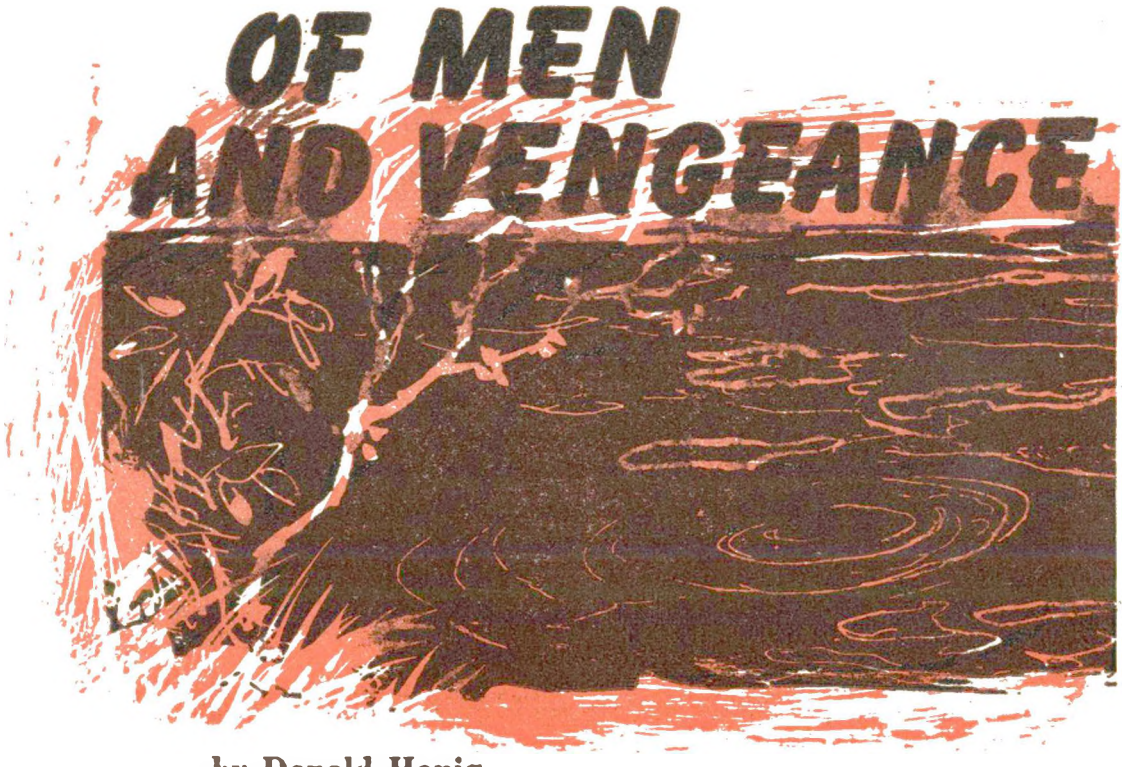
OF MEN AND VENGEANCE



by Donald Honig

A MAN COULD FORGET, he could forget almost anything, but no day could be safe from what this man had experienced as a boy, from the sudden vivid brightening of the old remembering. As he strove to forget, so the child he had been had striven to remember, to retain, as if in an effort of self-flagellation. David was twenty-five now; the memory had been ticking remorselessly within him for nearly eleven years.

The boy had remembered because the hurt had been inflicted against him, and the hurt, rising and ebbing with time, had remained stubborn and vindictive, and a constant agitation to the man, panting for revenge.

He had been fourteen and, as much as fourteen could be, in love. His love had been a schoolboy idyll, the courtship conducted shyly and wistfully. The little girl, Estelle, had been very pretty, with long yellow hair and a bright, demure face. David of course had not wanted any of his friends to know where his affections were falling, so he planned secret meetings with her, mostly in her backyard where they sat and played games on the lawn or climbed high

"Don't hold a grudge too tightly, unless you're in love with her." I've always considered a good song title. It is, after all, both tender and obscure. And, like our story, it suggests a moral of sorts.

into the pear tree (often she would hide from him up there), or sat on the embankment behind her yard and watched the freight trains go by. He was in love that summer, he would never forget it, it had been a dream woven of sun and grass.

Grim remembering and panting revenge concerned that dark cloud-massing afternoon toward the end of the summer, when he had agreed to meet her in the backyard. (Her parents would be away that afternoon, she had told him, so if the rain did come they would be able to sit in the house and play her phonograph). So, undaunted by the massing black rainclouds that were threatening to inundate Capstone at any moment, he had run from his house to hers, running through the side streets under the leafy elms and oaks that were swishing massively in the strong rushing wind. There was a faroff drum of thunder as he ran into the alleyway leading into her backyard. He called her name.

Even before he saw her, he saw the man crashing through the scrub trees and knotted intricate bramble behind the house, which stood on the crest above the freight

tracks. He caught the man's face in profile—it was a dark swarthy face he had seen about the neighborhood—and instantly the word, the name, *Keller!,* flashed, almost involuntarily across his mind simultaneously with the lightning which split the black clouds with a white stabbing. The thunder crashed overhead now and a few drops of rain struck swiftly with loud splats. The man disappeared over the embankment, a fleeting falling figure, as David yelled, "Stop!" He saw her then, lying on the grass, and for a moment it all seemed like a joke—her head was turned toward him and her eyes were fixed upon him and it was all very tense and unreal and he was about to utter her name when the lightning flashed again and made her eyes gleam like sequins and the thunder broke with a booming fall. She did not move as the rain struck her in noisy, blinding sheets. From below, in low grumbling, he heard the passage of a freight train.

He ran home, terrified. When he burst into the house, soaking wet, his parents mistook his tears for rain. He ran upstairs and sat shivering in his room, trying to remember what he had seen, trying to see it again so he could believe it. He went to the telephone and called the police, holding the receiver in both hands against his ear, listening to the buzzing which was broken off by a voice.

"Hello?"

"Hello," he said. "I want to tell... about Estelle Sampson. A man killed her this afternoon..." The words frightened him. He pushed the phone down on the cradle and ran back into his room.

He said nothing further to anyone. He was afraid that he would be implicated. (His youthful imagination, conjured up all manner of persecution for himself, particularly when it became apparent that Keller had got away.) When—because he had been her friend—the police came to his house to talk to him, he said he had not gone to Estelle's house because of the imminent thunderstorm, that he had started out for there but the rain had intervened and he had gone back home. And he denied having made the phone call. They believed him and the little girl's murder went unsolved. The broken brush behind the house, where someone had recently run, was the only clue. Also, the Sampson house had been ransacked, and the police surmised that the little girl had surprised the intruder as he was leaving and for it paid with her life.

As he walked mournfully and cautiously in the streets during the next few weeks (and not without the beginnings, like a dark foreboding, of guilt and complicity) it became apparent to David that Keller, who before had seemed present everywhere, had gone.

His love became like a little tomb in his mind, a tiny inscribed stone,

enduring before his eyes like a true stone endures before the trees. It became like something beatified and asleep inside of him.

For awhile there was great excitement in the neighborhood. His classmates (school had begun soon after) chattered incessantly about the murder, but David remained aloof from all the talk. Then it all gradually faded and people began to forget. But in David's mind it remained cruelly vivid. He could not stop thinking of what had happened. It seemed to him that it had ruined his life. It hung among his thoughts like a black cloak, creeping into his sleep, threatening to become an eternal and integral part of his existence. And a sense of guilt haunted him, lengthening across his soul like an infinite shadow. As he grew older he realized that he had willfully suppressed his own better judgment at the time of the murder, when he had not told the police what he had seen.

He remained in Capstone, living with his parents. After high school he took a job in one of the factories in town, working on a machine, first as a helper then as cutter. Because there was little variance of duties for him and he stood all day in one place, he found he had little to think about except the past, and, more specifically, the one thing that had so thoroughly dominated his past. He became mired in the job. After work he went straight home. His week ends became part of his routine, monotonous and unvarying. Because his moods were so singularly depressing, he was constantly seeking solitude in which to contemplate them.

He seldom went out with girls. Never again did he feel with a girl that complete rapport he had felt with Estelle. He seemed unable to foment new love, and so his heart continued to dwell upon and nurture the old. Gradually he let it evolve into the dimensions of stark tragedy. (At times he even preferred this kind of solitude and isolation to the companionship of the few friends he had.) Because his home was so close to that of the dead girl's and because he was continually encountering her family on the street, there was little chance of the incident fading from his mind. Over and over, that day with all its attendant darkness and thunder and fear would be rekindled in his mind. As year fell upon year his feeling of guilt worsened, became more complicated, finally demanding of him the resolve: *If ever the chance is given me, I will kill him.*

It might have gone on like that forever, this bitter stabbing from the past, had he not seen Keller again. David had been walking down Grant Avenue, shuffling aimlessly through the afternoon shoppers (and, ironically, he had been thinking about the little girl that morning, having passed her father

and mother on the street) when, passing Pete's Capstone Restaurant, he glanced in through the window and saw the dark stony face that he had not forgotten and would never forget, that had been blasted into his brain eleven years ago. He stopped dead and gazed at Keller as intently and as uninhibitedly as though Keller were not looking back at him from the booth. It was incredible, like something that had materialized from the darkest nightmare, sitting there before him in mute and stony confrontation. As they stared at each other, Keller's head lifted, just a trifle, a light coming into his eyes, enough to make David, hurrying away now with a cold, flustered and shocked feeling, think, *He knows I know. He knows that I was the one.*

That evening David sought out his friend Roy who had recently graduated from the police academy. He found Roy sitting alone at a table in Marshall's Bar. He joined him at the table, pulling his chair far in, sitting close against the table.

"Roy, do you remember Estelle Sampson?" he asked.

"That sounds like somebody we went to school with," Roy said.

"It is—or was. She was the little girl who was murdered. It's quite awhile back, more than ten years now."

Roy nodded. "Oh yes," he said. "I remember that. She was found strangled or something. And I don't think they ever found out who did it, did they?"

"That's it. That's the one. Well I need some legal advice."

"Don't tell me you're going to make a confession at this late date," Roy said with a laugh, picking up his drink.

"Yes, it is a confession of sorts," David said thoughtfully. "I know who did it, Roy. I've always known."

Roy sipped his drink and put the glass back down, his eyes fastening curiously upon David's face. "You do?"

"I saw the man."

"When?"

"At the time, and then—after all this time—again, today. He's back in Capstone. Do you remember a man named Keller? He was always sort of a hanger-on who floated around town. I think he was even an ex-convict."

"I remember him. He was sort of a shady fellow. Yes, he's back in town. I've seen him."

"Why did he come back? What do you think made him come back?"

"Now slow down," Roy said, lighting a cigarette, frowning at the smoke for a moment. "Let's go about this in an orderly manner."

David told him the story of that dark rainy day, of finding Estelle lying dead in the yard and of seeing Keller fleeing through the trees and disappearing over the hill, of

running back home and, except for his anonymous phone call, never saying a word to anyone.

"And now he's back," David said, his voice intense, puzzled. "Why? For what?"

"If all you say is true," Roy said, "you'd still have a hard time going about proving it. Are you that positive he's the same man you saw running through the trees on an overcast day ten years ago? That's the first thing you'd be asked you know. Are you that sure?"

"Do you think I could ever forget?"

"Still, I don't think you could make it stick," Roy said.

"But something has to be done," David whispered intensely. "He's a murderer. He killed that little girl. You don't remember her like I do. She was the most beautiful little thing..."

Roy expelled smoke across at him. "It would never stick. You'd be letting yourself in for something unpleasant, something that you wouldn't be able to finish."

"All right then; then let me tell you something. It might be too late for the law. But that man remains a murderer. He's still a murderer. I don't care if this is fifty years later. Nothing can change that. Maybe I couldn't make it stick, but remember this—*I* know what he did. And I'm just as guilty for not speaking up at the time. Don't you think that's been haunting me all my life?"

"Don't do anything foolish, Dave. As far as the law is concerned he's done nothing wrong. You would be held responsible for anything you did to him."

"But you don't understand. He's back now. He might disappear again tomorrow and never come back. This might be my last chance."

"You're that sure he's the man?"

"Of course. I saw him running through the trees."

"Then how would you explain his running away like that when he's got only one leg?"

"One leg?" David asked, incredulous.

It was true. He saw Keller the next day, going up the avenue on crutches, his right leg gone below the knee.

For the next week or so he kept seeing the man on crutches. Keller seemed to be on the avenue every minute of the day, either standing somewhere or else moving along in smooth, effortless hops. David would watch him; Keller would stare back at him, their eyes locking, staring moodily at each other.

Why has he come back? David kept asking himself, the question haunting and recurrent and unanswerable. Why, after all this time would he risk coming back? The man certainly knew that someone had seen him, had shouted at him that day. Was he that contemptu-

ous or that confident or that indifferent?

The more David saw him, the more the need to avenge the little girl and assuage his own burning conscience surged within him. If the police were powerless to dispense justice at this late date, then he would do it himself. Keller could disappear again, overnight, and then it would be too late.

Familiarizing himself with Keller's habits, he learned that the one-legged man drank beer nightly in Jim Carson's tavern down near Mount Branch cemetery, sitting alone at a corner table. At midnight Keller would leave, walking slowly down the avenue, far down to where he had moved into an abandoned shack near Newtown Creek.

David waited in the shadows that night, trembling with the action he had resolved. Once he realized that he was going through with it, his heart almost burst with excitement, almost as though he could not believe it. All the sorrow and guilt from all the years had risen like the ghosts of his outraged innocence, chanting the death song in his heart. And now that excitement was inside of him in a frenzy that was nearly uncontrollable.

He drew back into an alleyway as the door of Carson's opened and Keller appeared there, coming out, twisting on his crutches to shut the door behind him. Then the swarthy man — thinner now than he had been when David had seen him crashing through the brush behind Estelle's house those many years ago—began walking, his one leg and his crutches skipping him rhythmically forward, his arms moving like rowing. David let him reach three blocks ahead and then separated himself from the shadows and began following, standing his coat collar up against the chill night, walking close to the buildings, his eyes fast upon the slow-moving, patiently hopping man ahead.

They passed the cemetery and went through the business district, passing the houses and the stores, moving into Capstone's dark industrial end, coming to the warehouses and brickyards and the dark haunted factories (many of which had shut down after the war). They crossed the freight tracks, passing a pair of abandoned box cars that rose like mountains in the mist that was coming stealthily in, a cold wet breathe clouding the night; it made David move to a block behind. He could hear the steady, inexorable tap of Keller's crutches. *He knows I'm following,* he thought. *He must know.*

Keller crossed the street, swinging himself carefully over the glistening cobblestones, going through the mist like a phantom, like the last of a maimed and crumbled race. He went through an empty lot, carrying himself into the weeds. David crossed and followed into the lot, softly, listening for the

sound of the crutches on the soft, damp earth. But he heard nothing. Keller was gone. David stood still, squinting in the mist that was folding and unfolding around him in a slow, tantalizing mass. The creek was just ahead. He could see the faint outline of the drawbridge, could hear, from far down the dark malodorous water, the lonely owl-cry of a barge. He moved slowly toward the creek, his hand moving the weeds aside like a wand.

"Yes?" The voice came coldly out of the mist, followed by the man himself, coming forward on his crutches that seemed almost alive the way they supported him.

David stared at him, feeling terror and anger, and it was like a long-threatening specter had suddenly been incarnated before him.

"You've followed me a long way," Keller said.

"Longer than you think," David said, lifting his hands from his coat pockets.

"Why?"

"You know why."

Keller studied him for a moment, carefully, leaning his full weight forward on the crutches. "You must have been a young boy at that time," he said.

"But I've never forgotten."

"Nor have I."

"You came back here. Why?"

"Why shouldn't I have come back if I chose? What has an innocent man to be afraid of?"

"Innocent?"

"Does that surprise you?"

"I saw you there."

"You saw me running. That was what you saw. Do you remember that?"

David stared at the whiteness that was Keller's face, beginning to feel an uneasiness, something that he wanted to believe but did not know if he would be quite able to.

"That little girl was dead when I got there," Keller said, his voice strangely cold now, bitter. "She must have fallen from the tree. I never touched her. I was in the house—I was guilty of that—and I heard a thud in the yard. When I came out I saw her. Then you yelled. So I ran."

"You must have run far."

"It looked very bad. Even you believed that I had done it, didn't you?"

"Then all these years..." David said. "I thank God now that I never told." It was incredible. He felt it in his heart, then all through his body—the recession and the melting of the heat and the vengeance, feeling it expiring in his veins. Suddenly, after all these years, he could forget. He shook his head in disbelief as for the first time in ten years there was no tension in his body.

"So you think it's over?" Keller said.

David looked at him, at the face in front of him in the mist that

was gazing with a heaviness, almost a deadness.

"So you think it's as simple as that?" Keller said. "You asked me why I came back. I came back to find the man whom I knew would seek me out. I knew that if you were still here you would come to me."

"You hoped I would come to you?"

"Oh yes, I hoped very much. I came back to make amends with you. You shouted that day. You made me run. You made me go through the trees and over the hill. You made me panic and lose my footing and go rolling all the way down to the tracks where the train was passing. I caught the train all right, but it caught me too. I had no choice but to hold on, even though part of me was being mangled."

David looked down, at the stump of Keller's leg.

"But I . . ." David never finished. There was the sudden lifting and arcing of a crutch that came smashing against the side of his head. He toppled back, felt himself suddenly spilling over the embankment, rolling halfway down. He could hear the sluggish dark water lapping below, and then, in his stunned, blackening consciousness, heard a furious scratching as the now crazed Keller appeared above him, grotesque and terrifying in the mist, hopping on a single crutch, falling forward with a fury and urgency as though he had fallen a thousand miles, flinging the crutch like a spear as he fell, the crutch hitting the soft damp earth next to David's head and sliding down into the creek. Keller fell on top of him and they rolled down into the creek, thrashing the black water as they struggled and went under, Keller's strong prehensile fingers closing around David's throat.

David felt the waters rising all around him, Keller upon him like a great and swarming fish, pressing him down. He felt the water crushing in his lungs. His arms were around Keller's neck. They locked inextricably in the depths below the healing, slow-passing water that moved on as dark and as eternal as forgetting.

The circles vanished from the water, and into the dark, like some strange and lonely relic, the crutch swam alone with the laggard tide toward the East River.

As we all know, the first duty of a hospital is to smell like one. This will not, however, keep the well from visiting the sick. In fact, I have known lonesome persons who have had themselves hospitalized merely to draw company.

Great Men Can Die

by John Murray

"KEEP that whining she-dog out of here?" Maxwell St. John roared, crashing his fist on the bed tray and making the hospital dishes clatter. "If I hear one more blubber out of that woman, I'll burst my stitches. Understand me?"

Miss Cassidy, the day nurse, looked shocked. "But Mr. St. John, I should think you'd be *glad* to see your wife. I mean, she was waiting for hours—"

"Really, Max," Herb Devon said, from the foot of the bed. "The least you can do is *see* Agatha. She's been worried sick about you since she heard of the operation; flew all the way in from Kansas City."

St. John lifted his bullet-bald head from the pillow to glower at Devon. The glower was famous. It could be seen regularly, frozen by the portrait camera, on the back of thick, wordy novels that were invariably classified by literary critics as "American masterpieces." It could be seen by clubwomen from Albany to Pasadena, thrilling them from the lecture podium. It could be seen any day that week, in the front section of the nation's newspapers, beneath headlines that read: AUTHOR MAXWELL ST. JOHN UNDERGOES SURGERY.

"I don't care if she walked here from Bulgaria," St. John muttered. "I haven't seen her since the separation, and I don't intend to see her now. As a matter of fact, I don't want to see anybody. I'm even getting sick of looking at *you*."

Devon, his closest friend as well as his literary agent, stiffened noticeably. He was accustomed to St. John's bad temper, but his own concern over the author's illness had worn his nerves into ultra-sensitivity.

"Very well," he said coldly. "I'll go if you want."

"I do want. I want you to go and stay away until I call you. And as a matter of fact, I may *never* call you. And as for you, Madam—"

Miss Cassidy trembled. "Yes, Mr. St. John?"

"You were hired to be a source of comfort to me, but you're a disgrace to your profession. I want you to admit *no one* to this room, understand? If the President and his entire Cabinet wants to see me, I want you to throw them out. I don't want to see anybody I don't *have* to see."

"There's a dozen people downstairs," Devon said. "A lot of your old friends, Max. You're not being very courteous."

"I don't *have* to be courteous, thank God. That's the privilege of genius, isn't it?" He laughed abruptly, and then winced at the pain he caused himself. "I'm *suffering!*" he bellowed. "Can't you idiots understand that? Dr. Duncan still has me on the critical list. I could *die*. What do I care about visitors."

"You don't have to see anyone," Miss Cassidy said solicitously.

"You're damn right I don't. Who the hell's down there, anyway?"

"Sam and Bella," Devon said. "Leonard, Ralph Cummers, that funny little Higgins man you used to like so much—"

"Higgins?" St. John boomed, propping himself up again. "Why

didn't you tell me *Higgins* was here? There's the only man on the face of the earth worth seeing—"

Miss Cassidy said: "Who is Higgins?"

Devon frowned distastefully. "Nobody."

"Don't listen to him. Higgins is the steadiest, brightest candle in this dark, naughty world—"

"He's Mr. St. John's number one fan," Devon explained. "Or number one sycophant, depending on your point of view."

"Stop showing your ignorance, Herb; it embarrasses me. Willard Higgins is a true devoted admirer, the only *genuine* admirer I have. If I were a praying man, he'd be the only name I'd think of mentioning to God."

"He must be something, all right," Miss Cassidy mumbled.

"Something? He is everything! That man has given his *life* to me and my work. And why? Because of a true devotion to genius, that's why; not for any personal gain. There's no *percentage* in it for Higgins, is there, Herb?"

His agent flushed, and started for the door. "I'll be going," he said. "If you want me for anything, you can—"

"I do. I want you to send Mr. Higgins to me, at once."

"But Mr. St. John," the nurse said, "I thought you didn't want—"

"You heard correctly, I want nobody. But I'll see Higgins, and I want to see him *alone*."

"All right, Max," Herb Devon sighed, and left the room.

Willard Higgins entered a few minutes later. He was a small shabby man with a moustache that had never become more than a smudge beneath his nose. He talked as if battling a perpetual cold, and he had a habit of bouncing his fingertips together. He greeted the invalid in hushed, hospital tones, but Maxwell St. John roared: "Higgins, you old milktoast! Nice of you to come see me!"

"How are you, Mr. St. John? I can't tell you how sad I was to hear about your illness—"

"It's a plot, Willard, the whole thing's a dirty Bolshevik plot. That nurse out there, Miss Cassidy? She's really a member of the OGPU." He bellowed with laughter at Higgins' bewildered face, and then clutched his side with a groan. "Oh, Willard, they cut out the best parts of me."

"Are you all right, Mr. St. John? Do you want the nurse?"

"No, no, I'm fine. So tell me what's new, Willard. How's the Maxwell St. John fan club?"

"Well, you can imagine," Higgins said briskly. "I've written letters to all the chapter presidents, on an emergency basis. There's some talk about starting a gift fund for you, but I said no. I know how you feel about all those cut-glass vases and things."

St. John chuckled.

"But I have to admit," Higgins said shyly, "I did want to bring you a little something myself. It's nothing very much, but you know how grateful I am to you, for everything—"

"You don't have to be grateful, Willard. You're probably the only real friend I've got."

"Oh, don't say that, Mr. St. John. Why, the whole world's your friend." He pulled a small package from his pocket and undid the thin blue string. There was a box inside, and inside the box, a brown suede bag. From the bag, Higgins produced a cigarette lighter with porcelain sides depicting a hunting scene. "It's not much," Higgins said again.

"Not much?" St. John said, "why this is very nice of you, Willard." He turned it upside down and saw a tiny white sticker with 5.98 written across it. "You shouldn't be spending your money on me, Willard; I know how rough things are for you."

"Things haven't been too good," Higgins admitted. "But I don't really mind, Mr. St. John. As long as I have your friendship. That's the important thing."

"You do, Willard, you do," Maxwell St. John said, yawning widely. "God, I'm still dopey from all those pills. Mind if I just close my eyes a minute?"

The great man shut his eyes and leaned heavily into the pillows. He lay silent for a few moments, and then said: "Willard?"

"Yes, Mr. St. John?"

"Fix this bottom pillow for me, will you?"

"Certainly."

Tenderly, Willard Higgins adjusted the pillow. The author still appeared uncomfortable, so he suggested: "Suppose I take this pillow away, Mr. St. John. You might feel better."

"You're right, old friend."

He sighed again, and folded his hands over his stomach. He began to breathe heavily.

"Are you sleeping, Mr. St. John?" Higgins whispered. "Do you want me to go?"

"No, no, stick around, Willard. Want to hear more about the fan club . . ."

"Yes, Mr. St. John."

"Only true friend I got," St. John mumbled.

"Yes," Willard Higgins said. He sat motionless on the chair beside the bed, holding the second pillow in his lap. When the deep breaths became snores, he bent his head closer again and whispered: "Mr. St. John?" When the author didn't answer, he stood up and lifted the pillow over the bullet-like head, and brought it down slowly until it almost touched the open mouth. At the last second, he pushed hard until the face was completely submerged. Tensing every muscle in his thin arms, he held the pillow so tightly pinned on both sides of

Maxwell St. John's head that the author's muffled, terror-stricken cries were no more noticeable than the hiss of steam in the hospital room's radiator, or the click of heels outside in the corridor, or the intermittent traffic sounds from the street. When St. John stopped thrashing and went limp, Higgins released the pillow cautiously, and stared at his handiwork. Then he bent his head swiftly to the author's chest and listened. Satisfied at the silence, he threw himself towards the hospital room door, crying: "Nurse! Nurse! *Nurse!*"

Martin Lefcort bit his lip as he leaned forward to examine the contents of the worn suitcase on his desk. He picked through the documents delicately, as if not wanting to damage a single scrap of the precious paper. Then he looked across the desk at Willard Higgins and smiled, the smile of a satisfied business man.

"Well, that's quite a collection, all right," he said. "I didn't know anyone in the world possessed such a huge file of St. John memorabilia . . ."

"It's taken many years," Higgins said solemnly. "Mr. St. John became quite a good friend of mine, and wrote me often." He bounced his fingertips together. "If I could just ask what you think they're worth . . ."

"Oh, we can't be sure, Mr. Higgins. But it'll be a good amount, I promise you that. You remember what I told you the last time you were here?"

"Yes," Willard Higgins said distantly. "I remember. You said these papers would be worth five times as much money after Mr. St. John's death."

Lefcort sighed. "True," he said. "True and tragic. How sad to realize that he is no longer with us . . ."

"Yes," said Willard Higgins, Maxwell St. John's number one fan.

MAN ON A LEASH

by Jack Ritchie

I GLANCED at my watch and frowned. "All right. I can give you ten minutes."

Renolds was a tall, sharp-faced man with yellow-brown burning in his eyes and he claimed to be one of the reporters on my newspaper. "The Journal," he said, "has functioned as a watchdog for the public ever since it was founded sixty years ago."

I selected a cigarette from my case. "You could have told that to my editor. He loves compliments. Get to the point."

His face told me that he was mentally skipping several paragraphs and finding a foothold closer to his subject.

"This entire county is metropolitan," he said. "And we have a quite competent police force of over 3,000 men. Yet we still tolerate the anachronism of a Sheriff's Department with its force of twenty-five deputies."

"If you've been reading the newspaper you're supposed to be working for," I said, "you might have noticed several editorials about that."

Renolds shrugged that off. "But simple duplication of law enforcement isn't the worst part of it. The entire Sheriff's Department is a political plum, a protection racket in uniform. It actually thwarts the regular city police in the performance of their duty."

He slapped his fist on his open hand. It made a small sound.

It has been rumored that should you scratch a newspaperman, you would find nothing below the surface but facts. Judging by those in this story, I would even be most reluctant to scratch the Miss in charge of "Letters from the Lovelorn."

"We've got to do more than write editorials. We've got to split this thing wide open."

His face was darkish red, as though he harbored a permanent fever. "The Sheriff's Department runs the County Workhouse and we all know what goes on in there."

I lit my cigarette. "Perhaps."

He nodded. "Of course you do, Mr. Troy. It's Sheriff Brager's private mint. He gets rake-offs on the food and kick-backs from the guards. A prisoner lives like a dog unless he has a friend on the outside to slip him enough money to buy favors. The guards are cretins who stay on the job for the graft they can squeeze and for the beatings they can administer with a smile."

"There was an investigation about two years ago," I said. It came to nothing."

Renolds snorted. "All that the investigating committee had to go on were rumors. It had no concrete facts. Brager cleaned up the place in a hurry and kept it that way for the month it was watched. The prisoners were too scared to talk. Brager saw to that."

He paced the floor. "Kangaroo courts run rampant. Brager uses the prisoners as a private work force. When they aren't working on his estate or on one of his pet projects, he loads them on trucks and rents them out to big farmers at four bucks a head. He pockets the money and they're lucky if they get a good meal out of it."

I leaned back in my chair and watched the cigarette smoke. "Apparently you intend doing something about it."

Renolds nodded vigorously. "I'm going to get myself arrested."

I examined my manicure. "For vagrancy, no doubt. You're going to write an inside story about your experiences in the workhouse. Good for you. See Frank Harrison. He's the editor of this paper and he's the man you should have seen in the first place. There was no need to go over his head. I regard my time as valuable."

Renolds held up a hand. "Mr. Troy, I plan nothing so simple. And I thought that the fewer people who knew about what I'm going to do, the better. And that goes for Mr. Harrison." A thin smile came to his face. "An exposé of conditions would make a good story, no doubt, but I intend to destroy the reputation of the sheriff and his department with something more final, more drastic."

Renolds' smile seemed to be self-congratulatory. "I am going to have myself arrested for murder."

"Whose murder?" I asked.

His smile increased by an inch. "Yours."

I shifted in my chair.

Renolds giggled slightly. "Of course I don't actually intend to murder you. I merely want it to look as though I did."

I relaxed. "Thanks," I said dryly.

"But it's going to look like murder to Brager," Renolds said eagerly. "Don't you see it, Mr. Troy? Brager and his department haven't had a major case since anybody can remember. All they do, when they do anything at all, is to arrest a few speeders, pick up vagrants, and raid the shanties near the railroad yards for their work force. Then something big like this comes along and it's laid in Brager's lap. An important man is murdered and Brager has the confessed killer right in his own jail. He'll make the most of it. He'll see that his picture gets in all the papers. He'll take credit for everything."

Renolds paused dramatically. "And then the bubble bursts. He finds himself with no murder and no murderer. He fell for a fake murder and a false confession. The entire public's attention will be focused on him and once that occurs every rotten thing in his department will find an eager awake public demanding that something be done."

"Perhaps," I said. "But why choose me as the murder victim?"

"Because you're an important man, Mr. Troy. And we need all the publicity we can get. You own this newspaper, the largest in the state. You come from a nationally known family. Your father served in the Senate for over thirty years until his death three years ago. And now you are entering politics too; following in his illustrious footsteps. You're running for governor, but everyone knows that the governorship is just a stepping stone to bigger things."

"You're sure about that?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. "Your future is unlimited."

I ground out my cigarette. "In other words, you want us to frame Brager?"

He shook his head fiercely. "I wouldn't call it a frame-up. Not when we're dealing with a man like Brager. We're performing a public duty."

I looked out at the skyline for a moment and thought tiredly of the half a dozen short speeches I was scheduled to make that day. I turned back to Renolds. "If you have any intelligence, you must realize that I couldn't participate in any scheme like that."

Renolds put his fingers on my desk and leaned forward. "In a sense, you won't be involved at all. I simply ask that you disappear for three or four days. Go on a hunting trip where there are no communications with the outside world. No radio, no television, no newspapers. And see that no one knows where you have gone or even that you decided to go."

His fingers left wet marks on my desk. "When you come back you will be shocked and horrified that the world thought you dead. You knew absolutely nothing about me or what I had done. I was simply

an opportunist who somehow discovered that you would be away and took advantage of that fact."

The entire scheme was ridiculous, but I felt a trace of curiosity. "Let's hear the details."

Caution veiled his eyes. "Do you agree to go along with me?"

"I'd have to know more about it first."

He shook his head. "I can't tell you more unless we come to an agreement."

I looked him over. "You must have a good reason for wanting to get Brager. Something more powerful than civic duty."

His mouth tightened and he said nothing.

I played with my smooth stone paper weight for a few moments and then looked up. "You'll have to give me a few days to think it over."

His face brightened with hope. "Certainly, Mr. Troy. I'll be back on Wednesday."

When he was gone, I took my private elevator down to the fourth floor. Frank Harrison's office was crowded when I entered. I waited fifteen seconds while it emptied and then took a chair.

Harrison brushed steel-gray hair away from his forehead. "All business stops when the owner makes his appearance. How long has it been since you've been down here? Two weeks?"

"I understand we have a reporter named Renolds," I said.

He nodded. "What about him?"

"You tell me."

He rapped ashes from his bulldog pipe. "He's one of the best men I have. When I assign him to something he covers it from front to back. He's the sharpest digger for hidden facts that I know of."

"What's wrong with him?"

Harrison's eyes flicked to me in sudden surprise. Then he almost shrugged. "There's hate burning inside of him for Brager. He works on it whenever he has time. Probably he knows more about Brager than Brager does himself."

"Why?"

Harrison seemed reluctant, but he spoke. "Renolds came to me from San Francisco about a year ago. Naturally I wondered why a top-notch reporter should suddenly pull up stakes and move across the country. So I checked on him."

I waited.

Harrison tamped new tobacco into his pipe. "Last year Brager attended a sheriff's convention in San Francisco. With him it wasn't business. We all know that. Just one big drunk. One evening his car ran over and killed a four-year-old kid. The boy was Renolds' son."

Harrison's eyes went to the half dozen men marking time outside the glass walls of his office and then back to me. "Brager got a fast lawyer and maybe a few other hands got some of his money. Some witnesses testified that the boy ran out from between two parked cars.

The same witnesses said that Brager was sober. The cop who did the arresting disagreed, but Brager got off."

He met my eyes. "Got any special reason for wanting to know?"

"Curiosity."

Harrison shrugged. "Which means it's none of my business." He folded his hands and looked at me. "I just can't figure you out."

"It isn't necessary."

He smiled slightly. "I get the feeling that there's something been riding you ever since you took over the paper."

I rose to go.

"I worked for the Senator for twenty-five years," Harrison said. "And the last three for you. Your father was a fine man."

"Yes," I said. "I've heard that for a long time."

He kept his eyes on me. "Your father trusted me completely. He let me run this newspaper without any interference."

"Have I twisted your arm?"

"No. But I'm sensitive and I get the feeling that you might, should you happen to suddenly get interested in this newspaper. I'm too much of a tired grandfather to quit now and get another job."

"I'm leaving for the day," I said.

He puffed his pipe. "I wish I could do that. It must be nice to have money."

It was a half hour drive along the lake shore and north. I went through the gates and up the curving driveway to the house that had been in our family four generations. I recognized the black Cadillac parked in front.

Brager was in the library mixing himself a drink.

"If you don't find my liquor cabinet versatile enough," I said, "I'd be delighted to run to the nearest tavern and fetch a bucket of beer for you."

His grin showed big teeth clenched on the cigar. "You're polite, as usual."

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing in particular. Occasionally I just like to look over some of the things I'm paying for. My real and human properties." He poured a double shot of brandy. "And don't tell me to worry about the servants again. I know they might do talking about us among themselves, but that's as far as it would go. They've been with the family so long, they're more worried about its reputation than you are."

He moved to the portrait of my father and lifted his glass in a toast. "The good Senator. He served the nation faithfully and honestly for thirty years and dipped into his capital in order to be able to do it." He indicated my grandfather's portrait. "And the worthy ambassador. Also a man of unquestioned honor and integrity and a royal spender in the major cities of Europe. He financed that with the family capital too."

Brager's heavy body stopped un-

der the smaller painting of my great-grandfather. "And here's the spade-bearded you-know-what who made it all possible. The old-fashioned nineteenth century tiger who clawed his way into the millions."

"Yes," I said. "A favorite of mine."

Brager looked at me and grinned. "The family fortune didn't amount to much by the time you got hold of it, and you weren't bred to be poor."

"I find it uncomfortable. Why this recapitulation?"

"I caught you just in time. You were down to your last ounce of credit. Practically a pauper."

I went to the sideboard and made myself a drink.

Brager savored his brandy. "We're going far, you and me. You've got the spotless reputation and background and I've got the money to finance you and the organization to get you rolling."

I added ice cubes to my glass. "What do you eventually want?" I asked dryly. "The Postmastership?"

He grinned. "I might at that. I've been thinking of cleaning up my public name. Ten or fifteen years from now there won't be too much eyebrow raising if I'm seen walking next to you."

"You've got a big stable-cleaning job to do."

He nodded amiably. "You're so right. Maybe I'll start with the Sheriff's Department. Make it a shining model for the whole country to admire." He sighed. "I feel kind of sentimental about the department. I got my start there, but now it's only chicken feed in my operations. I'm a rich man now, boy. One of the richest in the state."

His shrewd half-buried eyes watched me. "It wasn't an accident about me finding you. I was prospecting for a puppet and you were my strike. I watched you for years before I moved."

His laugh came from deep inside. He was enjoying this too much to stop. "You got rid of everything that could be turned into money and then you started on the newspaper. You must have thought you were selling the stock to fifty different men, but all the names were me.

"Now I own you, boy," he said. "Every last aristocratic bone. I've got you on a leash, and when I pull you've got to follow. Nobody knows that but you and me and I want to keep it that way. I even let you print the nasty stuff about me. It gives me a kick and keeps the good public from seeing that we got fingers in the same glove."

"Don't give me credit for the editorials," I said. "My editor is the crusader."

Brager regarded me critically. "In a way you ought to be thankful. Until I got hold of you, you were a nobody with famous ancestors. No one outside of that little circle you breathe in ever heard of you before. You had no ambition and you were

going nowhere. Now you're on the train, boy."

He shook his head. "I just don't understand you. The only reason you want money is so you can lead a certain type of life. Don't you want position and power?"

"It wouldn't be my power," I said. "And besides, I detest grubbing for it among people who sweat."

He thought about that and the body laugh came again. "And I get a kick out of it. It's blood, meat, and air to me."

I finished my drink and put down the glass. "I was wondering how you would take to the idea of having me as a son-in-law?"

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

I smiled. "Just a thought. Since we are evidently due for a long association, I had the idea that it might be amusing to make it a family affair. Why don't you introduce me to your daughter?"

His face splotched with anger. "If I ever see you near her, I'll kill you."

I raised an eyebrow. "How protective. But why? Wouldn't you want her to be the wife of a governor, a senator, or more?"

He glared at me. "I want her to be happy. That's what I want. And she wouldn't have a chance to be happy with you. You might look like a clean white God to everybody else, but I know what's really inside that hide of yours. There's only one person you give a damn about, and that's yourself."

I nodded. "Possibly you're right. And then there's also the fact that my entire brilliant political career would be jeopardized by such an obvious alliance."

I watched him pick up his hat. "I could use another five thousand," I said.

His eyes flicked over me. "You spend money like water. All right, I'll get cash and mail it tomorrow. But it'll be a thousand. Not five." He scowled. "Sometimes I wonder who's got who on the hook."

The phone rang a half hour after he left. It was Ellen Brager again.

"Yes," I said. "I haven't forgotten. But I have to appear at several meetings tonight. I'll try to get away before ten."

I met her in the same small family restaurant in the Third Ward. As usual, she had the table at the rear and near the kitchen. She was just over twenty-one, somewhat plain, and fifteen pounds heavier than the accepted fashion. I reflected once again that as far as intelligence went, she must have taken after her mother. The shrewd light in her father's eyes was but a dim reflection in hers.

"I've already ordered," she said. "I suppose I should have waited and let you do that, but they stop taking orders at ten. I wanted to make sure we had something to eat. I'm hungry."

"Of course, first things first."

"I hope you like fried chicken?"

I repressed a shudder. "Haven't I always?"

The proprietor brought us two steins of beer. He beamed. "Nice night. Ain't that right, Mister?"

"Lovely," I said. "Absolutely lovely."

After he went away, Ellen took a sip of her beer and then leaned forward, her chin in one hand. "You know what I'm thinking?"

"Not at this particular moment."

"I'm thinking of how it was such a coincidence that we met."

"Yes," I said. "A remarkable coincidence. Perhaps fate brought us together."

She nodded eagerly. "That was it. Fate. I never thought I'd meet anybody like you. Important, I mean, and society."

The fried chicken was brought to us and put down on the checkered tablecloth.

After a while, Ellen paused in her eating. "There are so many things I don't know yet about good manners in public, but I'm learning. I'm reading books and I've just hired Mrs. Jackson to teach me. She's real society too. She says she's giving me lessons as a hobby and contributing the money to charity, but personally I don't know. Her clothes ain't so new."

The name Jackson was completely unfamiliar to me.

Ellen touched her hair. "How do I look. Not too flashy?"

"A bit too much jewelry," I said.

"But it's real."

"No doubt, my dear. But that isn't the point."

"I want you to be proud of me some day."

I sipped the beer. "I'm proud of you right now, of course."

She sighed. "It's like Romeo and Juliet. Us two, I mean. Their families were enemies too. You have all those editorials in your paper about my father and here we are in love." She giggled slightly.

I wiped my fingertips with a paper napkin and then patted her hand.

Her face became serious. "Father's really a sweet kind of person."

"Some day I hope very much to meet him."

She shook her head. "But not now. I know what it would do to your political career if you were even seen with my father or even with me. And getting married to me right away would absolutely ruin it. That's why we have to meet like this. Secluded, I mean. For the time being."

I thought the chicken was underdone. "But, my dear," I said. "My career means absolutely nothing to me."

She smiled with superior feminine wisdom. "I appreciate you saying that, Roger, but one of us has to be practical. I know you probably believe that right now, but in later years you'll be sorry. I know you'll never say anything about it, but I'll be able to tell."

I patted her hand again.

She sighed. "If it were only simple like us running away and getting married. If only there was no politics. Then even if for some reason father wouldn't approve and should cut me off without a cent, it wouldn't matter because you've got plenty of money anyway."

"I suppose you're right about everything," I said.

She nodded. "We've just got to be patient and wait a little while. Father doesn't tell me hardly anything about his work, but he did say that he wasn't going to run for sheriff any more. All we have to do is wait a couple of years and then everybody will have forgotten about him." Blind loyalty stiffened her chin. "Not that Father has ever done anything bad, but people talk."

I left her at eleven-thirty. It had been a long hour.

Renolds came to see me Wednesday afternoon.

He probably hadn't been sleeping too well and his voice was tense. "Have you made up your mind?"

I played with the stone paper weight for a moment and then looked up. "Your son was killed by Brager's car?"

His eyes flashed. "How did you find out?"

"That's unimportant," I said. "Brager wasn't held. It was an accident. The boy ran into the street from between two parked cars. You're not the only one, you see, with a capacity for unearthing facts."

Renolds shook his head. "Brager was drunk and he was driving too fast. Much too fast."

"You were there and saw that?"

"No," he said tightly. "But I know it."

I selected a cigarette and thought over his scheme. The whole idea was ridiculous. And yet I felt a curiosity. I had to hear it. Perhaps it would help me. If it didn't, I could always back out. "I've decided to help you," I said finally. "It's up to honest citizens to get rid of Brager. One way or another."

He leaned forward eagerly. "All that you actually have to do is disappear for three days. No one must know where you are or even that you planned to go away. When you return, you simply explain that it was a sudden impulse on your part. You wanted to get away from the strain of campaigning for a few days."

"All right," I said. "And what will you be doing?"

He smiled grimly. "At about eleven tonight I'll appear at the sheriff's office. I will be disheveled and my clothes will be blood-stained. I will confess to having murdered you."

He let me think about that and then went on. "When the sheriff's men investigate, they'll find plenty of evidence to corroborate my story.

There will be blood stains all over the furniture in this room and they'll find the supposed murder weapon lying here with my fingerprints on it."

"But no body," I reminded him.

Renolds shrugged that aside. "I'll tell them I dumped it into the river. They'll drag for it, of course, and they won't find it. But they'll expect it to be discovered farther down the river. All we need however is a few days for them to make fools of themselves."

The whole thing is thin, I thought. So many things could go wrong. "And what would be your motive for killing me?"

"That's taken care of," he said. "I asked Harrison for a raise and he refused me. I knew he'd have to because I just had one a short time ago. But I'll tell the sheriff's men that I got angry and decided to go directly to you. We had an argument about it and you fired me. I lost my head and killed you."

It wouldn't work, I thought. But I saw something else and nodded. "It sounds all right to me."

"Yes," he said. "The details aren't too important."

But they are, I thought. They're the key to this whole thing.

"I'll be back here tonight at ten-thirty," Renolds said. "And we can make the final preparations."

I had three speeches scheduled for the night, but I managed to get back to my office suite five minutes before Renolds arrived.

He put the zipper bag he was carrying on a chair and opened it. He removed an opaque bottle of approximately quart size. "This is blood."

I looked at it. "Human?"

He seemed shocked. "Of course not. Where could I get that?"

I smiled. "There are detectable differences between animal and human blood."

There was a trace of petulance in his voice. "The sheriff's deputies will have no reason to doubt it is human blood. Not after my confession. I doubt if the department even has the facilities to make a test."

Another supposition, I thought. I sighed. "Very well. I'll take your word for that."

His eyes went about the room. "We need a murder weapon."

I pointed to the twin set of pokers in the stand by the fireplace. "Those seem appropriate."

He pulled out one of them. "Yes. They're quite heavy."

"About this matter of your being bloody and disheveled," I said. "Don't you think that's a bit overdone? Wouldn't it be much better if you simply go to the sheriff's office as you are and make a quiet, calm confession?"

He looked at me. "Do you think that's enough?"

"Absolutely."

He studied the furniture. "Now I suppose we ought to disarrange things here so that it appears there was a struggle. And of course we'll

have to spill some blood around."

"I'm going to have to remain here for another hour at least," I said. "There are a few things I must absolutely take care of before I can leave for a few days."

He seemed about to protest.

I held up a hand. "If we disturb the room now there's always the danger that someone might accidently wander in here during the next hour and spoil our plan. A cleaning woman, perhaps."

I took the bottle from his hand. "But I see no reason why you must remain here until then. I'll take care of everything just before I leave."

I glanced at my watch. "In exactly one hour, you give yourself up."

He hesitated.

"I am entirely competent to take care of matters here," I said firmly. "I suggest that you take a quiet drive for an hour."

It was difficult to determine whether he was relieved or reluctant to go.

I phoned Brager five minutes after he left.

Brager came within twenty minutes. "What's so mysterious that you had to make me come to you?" he demanded. "If it's a scheme to get more money out of me, you're wasting your time."

I waited until he took a chair. "Does anyone know that I phoned?"

"Of course not," he snapped.

I leaned against a corner of my desk. "You want power and I want money. That much is plain. I'm willing to get you that power, but the pay isn't sufficient and I don't like begging for money a bit at a time."

He grinned. "I'm crying about that."

"I require at least two hundred thousand a year," I said. "And that in regular installments."

Brager chuckled softly. "A man in the public eye can't be too big a spender. The voters don't like it. And don't be bitter about the little thousands I give you. They add up to fifty a year."

I folded my arms. "Then I may assume you intend to change nothing?"

"I like things just the way they are."

I sighed. "In that case I come to a second matter. I mentioned previously the possibility of a family alliance."

Anger flicked into his eyes. "You know what I said about that."

I picked up a sheaf of papers. "Then I move to subject number three. Look these over. You'll find them interesting."

He took the bundle and frowned at it. "What is this supposed to be?"

I moved to the fireplace. "Read and find out."

Brager's back was toward me. "This is just a financial report on the newspaper," he said. "And a year old at that."

"Turn to page twelve," I said. I

selected the poker which did not carry Renolds' prints.

Brager was still hunched over the report when I struck. He grunted as the iron bit into his skull, and pitched forward on his face.

I made sure that he was dead. Then I took the poker to the washstand in the next room and cleaned it. I returned it to the fireplace and with a handkerchief carefully removed its twin so as not to disturb Renolds' fingerprints. I smeared it with Brager's blood and put it on the floor beside his head.

I dimmed the lights, making the room almost dark and then put on my hat and topcoat. I slipped Renolds' bottle into my pocket and took the elevator to the floor below, where I knew there was an incinerator, and got rid of it.

Outside the building I walked to where I'd parked my car two blocks away and began the drive to my cabin in the mountains.

I could almost see the way things would happen.

Probably Earl Wittig, Brager's Chief Deputy, would be in charge of the case.

"It's peculiar," he would say. "First Renolds said that he killed you. When we investigated, we found it was actually Brager who was dead."

"Renolds admitted the murder?"

Wittig would look perplexed. "He changed his story to something wild, about you and him trying to frame Brager and the department."

"That's ridiculous," I would snap. "Why should I want to do something like that?"

Wittig's eyes would be guarded. "You and Brager weren't exactly bosom buddies."

If there were other people in the room. I would draw Wittig aside. "Do you believe everything you read in the newspapers?"

Wittig's face would show perplexity.

My voice would be low. "Brager's daughter and I intend to marry."

The information might take a few seconds to penetrate. Wittig's mouth would fall open slightly.

Perhaps I would wink. "Things aren't always what they seem on the surface, Wittig. I'm sure you understand that. Brager and I were actually the best of friends. But we thought it more . . . ah . . . convenient to keep that fact quiet. At least until after the election. You know what I mean?"

Wittig would break into an understanding chuckle. "I get it, Mr. Troy."

"I imagine that Brager probably came to see me and have a drink," I would say. "He often did that late at night when he could be sure we wouldn't be seen together. We would talk over business."

I would sigh. "Unfortunately for Brager I wasn't there, but Renolds was." I would be thoughtful for a few moments. "Perhaps it was dim in the office and Renolds actually thought he was killing me. Or is it

possible that he actually had a motive for killing Brager?"

"A good one," Wittig would say emphatically. "That and his fingerprints on the murder weapon ought to take him to the chair."

I would offer Wittig a cigar. "I suppose you're next in line for Brager's job?"

His eyes would light at the thought of it. "That's right. Somebody has to take his place."

"I hope we can be friends." I would smile. "In the same way Brager and I were."

Wittig would grin. "Why not?"

I arrived at the cabin at two-thirty in the morning and made a fire to drive out the dampness.

Ellen was alone now, I reflected as I watched the flaming logs. I doubted if it would be difficult to get her consent to marry me soon. At the most it might be a year.

I would probably still have to run for governor. If for no other reason, but to please her. I sighed at the thought of the remaining three weeks of the campaign.

I had no great desire to win the election. The governorship would be tedious.

When I married Ellen, I would take an immediate leave of absence. Perhaps we'd go to Africa. Yes, that was it. Then a hunting accident and the governor would resign his post and go to Europe to grieve and forget.

And live so well on his late wife's millions.

It was two days later when Wittig found me. I was sitting on the steps of the cabin cleaning my rifle.

"Mr. Roger Troy?" he asked.

I nodded.

He took the rifle out of my hands. "You're under arrest."

I smiled quizzically. "May I ask what in the world for?"

"For the murder of Sheriff Mike Brager. He was found dead in your office. We checked the prints on the murder weapon with Washington. They were identical to those taken when you were in the army during the war."

I burned my fingertips slightly when I ground out my cigarette. I looked up at Wittig. "What was the murder weapon?"

"You ought to know. A smooth stone paperweight."

The next words slipped out of me unintentionally. "What about Renolds?"

The name was strange to Wittig. "Who's he?"

I took a breath. "Nobody. Nobody at all."

"Would you care to make a statement?"

"No," I said. "Not until I see my lawyer."

But it was Renolds I really wanted to see.

I didn't know if he would actually come when I sent for him, but it may have been that he was curious to see what he'd done.

The guard brought him up to my cell door the next day. "Would you

like to be let inside, Mr. Renolds?" he asked.

Renolds shook his head. "No. This is far enough."

I waited until the guard moved down the corridor. "You became frightened and backed out? Isn't that right?" I demanded. "You came back to my office and framed me. You knew that my fingerprints would be on the paperweight."

He spoke quietly. "You tried to frame me too, didn't you, Mr. Troy?"

"I can drag you into this," I said harshly.

His mouth twitched slightly. "With some wild story? Are you planning an insanity plea?" He met my eyes. "You did murder him, didn't you?"

I glared and said nothing.

His mouth twitched again in what might have been a smile. "I just wanted to be sure. There was a remote possibility that it could have been someone else."

"I had no motive," I snapped.

"Perhaps one will be found." There was no question about the smile now. "I understand you are being thoroughly investigated as a result of several anonymous tips."

"They'll be able to determine that the murder weapon was a poker. Not the paperweight."

There was amusement in his eyes. "If the murderer had been content to strike only once or twice, that might have been possible. But Brager's skull was completely smashed. Perhaps by a dozen blows."

But that wasn't the way I'd left Brager.

The note of desperation in my voice startled me. "If I'd killed him, I wouldn't have left him in my office. I would have disposed of the body."

Renolds smiled. "You got panicky and ran away." He watched my face. "I wanted Brager to be dead and that's what happened. Things couldn't have worked out finer if I'd planned them that way."

My eyes widened.

Renolds touched the brim of his hat with a forefinger. "Goodbye, Mr. Troy. At least now you can stop worrying about being poor."

I stared at him. "How did you know about that?"

Renolds smiled.

I gripped the bars. "How did you know about that?" I demanded again.

But he was walking away.

Business is business and pigs, of course, are pigs. Another wise man has said that if angels were to engage in trade, they would tend to become somewhat less angelic. Our cast of characters is most suited for the drama that is commerce and industry.

Make ME an Offer

by Jay Street

THE sheets that had been cool and inviting only a few hours before were suddenly hot and clammy. Mort Bonner kicked them off the bed, muttering angrily. There was a moon, plump and full in the center of his bedroom window, and the light fell cruelly on his stocky figure. He took one look at the paunch it revealed, and rolled over with a groan. God, he was getting fat. And he complained about *her*.

The pillow was stuffed with imported goosedown, and it had cost plenty. But the pressure of his head had made it hard and uncomfortable. He punched it, savagely.

When his fingers began drumming on the end table near the bed, he knew that he was awake for good. But it couldn't be the room temperature. His bedroom, like

Jocelyn's, was air conditioned. No, it wasn't the temperature. It was something else that had pried him out of his dreams.

Then he knew what it was. It was a noise. Downstairs.

He propped himself up just enough to lift his ear from the pillow. It might be Jocelyn, of course, poking around the refrigerator in the kitchen, looking for some high-calorie tonic for her famous nerves. The noises sounded surreptitious, but that could be Jocelyn, all right, tip-toeing around like an overweight ballerina, not wanting to reveal her nocturnal hunger.

Mort sat up in bed. His toes dipped into the slippers on the throw rug, and he arose with a protest of the bed springs. He went to the door that separated their bedrooms, and opened it just a crack.

It was hard to remember just when and how they had decided on separate sleeping quarters. But when Mort saw the hilly mound of bedclothes that molded around the elephantine figure of his wife, he was just as glad they had. God! What happens to a woman after fifteen years of marriage? He looked guiltily at his own too-flabby flesh.

But if Jocelyn was still asleep—what was the noise below?

He squared his shoulders without any perceptible difference in his posture, tied a rose-colored bathrobe around his body, and went to the head of the stairway.

Mort paused there to listen. There were bumping noises.

It didn't occur to him to be afraid, until he was half way down the stairs. Then he remembered a casual reference on the 8:05. Something about a burglar. Who'd mentioned it, Hoffman? Somebody had been worried about it. Somebody had been buying new locks for their doors. He tried to recall the conversation, but the words escaped him.

Could it be a burglar, in his own house?

He thought about retreating up the stairs again, but couldn't make up his mind. Burglars carried guns sometimes. Could he afford to turn his back?

He began to sweat.

Then things quieted down, and he decided that the noises were due to some natural phenomenon. The house might be settling; he'd heard about that. But the house was ten years old. How long did it take for a house to settle?

Yet the noises had stopped. He completed the trip down the stairway, and paused at the entrance to the living room. There was just enough moonlight in the windows to paint vague streaks of light on the furniture.

He took a deep breath and turned the corner.

"Anybody in there?"

Something rustled.

"Who is it?" Mort backed up a step.

Then the light hit his eyes.

"Stay right there," said the voice behind the light. "Move an inch and boom."

It was a rough voice, and it was business-like. Mort froze like a jackrabbit in the glare of the powerful beam, and the perspiration on his face glittered. His hands went up in the air automatically; there was the assumption that the man's other hand held a gun.

"Step inside," the voice commanded.

He came further into the living room, and tried to make his dry tongue say something.

"Take a seat, pal."

"What?"

"A seat. Have a seat. You might as well take it easy."

The spotlight moved him towards the sofa. He sat on the edge of the first cushion his hand touched, and he cried out: "Take what you want! Take what you want and get out of here!"

"I didn't expect no company. But now that you're here, pal, why not make the most of it? For instance. You can tell me where the silver is—"

"In the buffet," Mort said desperately. "Take anything you want. Honest. I don't mind. I mean, we're insured against this kind of thing—"

"No kidding?" The voice held genuine interest. "That makes it nice all around, huh? Say, I'll tell you what, pal. Suppose we turn on a lamp and have a little chat?"

"A chat?"

"Sure."

Did he have a choice? Mort said: "All right."

The light in his face was switched off. Then a hand flicked a switch on the porcelain-base lamp, and Mort Bonner saw his burglar.

The man was short, small-waisted, in a blue-dyed Eisenhower jacket. He wore dirty sneakers and workman's gloves, and his pinched face had a look of alert interest. He might have been a jockey out of silks.

"Here we are," the little man said pleasantly. He placed flashlight and gun—a thick, snub-nosed thing with a gaping bore that sent shivers down Mort's back—on the table beneath the lamp.

"What do you want?" Mort said.

"Want?" The burglar chuckled. "Now what do you think? I want the best deal I can get, pal. And maybe it can be a good deal for you, too—"

"For me?"

"Sure. All you gotta do is help me make a good haul here, and you can collect a pile from the insurance company. It's done all the time. No kidding. I knocked over a guy's house in Flushing once, a real showplace. But he goes and reports about two grand more than I even lifted. And wouldn't you know he collected? I'm telling you, friend, this can be a good deal."

"Anything you say," Mort an-

swered. "Only take what you want and leave."

"You don't get it, pal. I'm trying to make a deal with you. I mean, you can make a good thing outta this. I think you can even take it off your income tax."

"Please—"

The burglar looked perplexed. "Look, I'm trying to be helpful. I want to make a deal. Give me credit, will ya. We both stand to make somethin' outa this."

"I don't want any deal!"

"No? But maybe I do." The little man moved irritably. "I thought this town was supposed to be full of smart guys. All the Madison Avenue bigshots." He spread his hands pleadingly. "Look, I don't wanta walk off with a mess of spoons and stuff. Fences ain't what they used to be. You help me out, I'll help you. Now what do you say?"

Mort's fear was beginning to leave him. The burglar's arguments had a familiar ring to them; they weren't much unlike the talk he often heard at business lunches. One hand washing the other. You help me and I'll help you. Let's put one over on the fat boys. You take a load of defective merchandise at my price, and chalk it off as a tax loss . . .

He cleared his throat. "Well—maybe we can come to, uh . . . terms."

"Ah!"

"But you may not like my idea—"

"Let's have it, pal. I'm open to suggestions."

Mort rubbed his chin. "Well, you're right about the spoons and stuff. We got a bunch of silverware about fifteen years ago, as a wedding present. From my wife's mother. Ugliest junk you ever saw. And we don't keep much cash around the house—oh, maybe fifty bucks. My wife has a fur coat, but that's in storage. She's got some jewelry, but even *I* don't know where the hell she keeps it . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. So?"

Mort scratched his head. "I'm trying to think. The only real dough we have is in the checking account—"

"Uh-huh." The thin face hardened. "None of that stuff. I ain't acceptin' no phony checks."

"Wait a minute. You don't even know what I'm driving at."

"Okay. What?"

"If you did me a favor, I might be willing to write a check that would *have* to be good."

"Nuts."

"No, I mean it. I can arrange it so that it would be impossible for me to stop the check. Not without getting myself into a jam."

The burglar squinted. "That sounds interesting. What's the proposition?"

Mort leaned back against the sofa, and wished he had a cigar. "You may not be interested, of course. It involves a little more than burglary. I've often thought

of engaging a professional for this kind of thing—"

"Well, I'm a pro," the burglar said defensively. "I been breaking and entering since I was sixteen. I been booked four times, and did a year at Leavenworth."

"Well . . . I didn't mean a professional *burglar*. I mean somebody with more scope."

"I done lots of things! I worked the numbers in Jersey. I pulled a couple of heists out on the Parkway. Listen, you can ask anybody—"

"You don't understand." Mort clasped his fingers under his chin. "I was thinking about somebody who carries a gun and means it."

There was a pause. Then the burglar said: "Oh. You mean like knockin' somebody off. Well, I don't like to brag—" He stopped, and his eyes narrowed. "You married?"

"Exactly."

The little man looked doubtful. "I dunno. I put a couple of guys away in my lifetime. But I never knocked off a dame. That ain't my specialty."

"Well, I said you might not be interested—"

"I didn't say no, did I? I'm just waiting for the terms, understand? You don't just rush into a thing like this."

"Of course not," Mort said briskly. "First of all, how did you get in?"

"Through the window."

"Was it open?"

"Naw. But I unlocked it. Cut a hole in the pane and put my hand inside. Why? You didn't hear it, did you?"

"No. I didn't hear that."

The burglar smiled proudly. "I didn't think you would."

"Then it's a real professional job? I mean, if the police were to investigate, they could be *certain* that a professional had done the thing?"

"I should hope so!" The thin lips pouted.

"Good. I wouldn't want them to get the wrong idea. Then the rest is simple. My wife's bedroom is up the stairs, first room to the left. She's a heavy sleeper. It would be a cinch to enter her bedroom, point your gun, and—"

"Uh-uh." The man shook his head. "Too risky, firin' a shot. And besides . . ." He looked at the floor, somewhat sheepishly. "The gun ain't loaded. I don't take chances on a simple job like this. It ain't worth it."

"Hmm. Well, you could do it some other way. You could smother her, for instance. She sleeps on a big goosedown pillow. Would that be all right?"

"Yeah," the burglar said musingly. "A pillow's good. Then you don't get a lot of screamin' and yellin' . . ."

"Fine. Then you could tie me up, or even hit me over the head. Not too hard. Then you can take a few things, for whatever they're worth. I wouldn't mind that."

The burglar paced the floor, his small hands on his hips.

"I dunno. It *sounds* okay. But it kinda makes it tough to work the neighborhood anymore. You get what I mean? It's a pretty good territory."

"A fat check would make it worthwhile. Wouldn't it? And you can always pick another community. How about Scarsdale? They're even richer than we are . . ."

"Scarsdale's tough," the burglar said, shaking his head. "I dunno. Make me an offer."

"How about a thousand dollars?"

"Are you kidding? A grand for a deal like this? How much do *you* stand to make, pal? The old lady got dough?"

"Not a dime," Mort growled. "I swear it. I married her for her looks—"

"A grand's no good. Why, with luck, I can make that in a month of B and E's."

"All right. Make it two thousand. After all, I'm really making it simple for you. I should get a break on the price."

"Five grand would be more like it?"

"Five?" Mort gasped. "You can't be serious about—"

"Sure, I'm serious. Look, pal, I gotta live, too. Prices are up. And you know how much tax I paid last year?"

"You pay tax?"

"Sure. Think I want the Feds after me? I pay tax."

"Thirty-five hundred," Mort said flatly. "That's my final offer."

The burglar seemed to be adding something in his head.

"Well, let's say I can pick up three hundred bucks on the silver and stuff. No, better say hundred and fifty. That would make it thirty-six fifty . . ." He looked up sharply. "This ain't no joint account or anything?"

"Positively not. My wife has her own account. My check will be perfectly valid. It *has* to be. You could always get me into trouble for reneging on our contract."

"Okay, okay," the little man said.

There was a small leather valise against the wall beneath the window. He picked it up and brought it to the table; then he deposited the flashlight inside. The gun went into his right trouser pocket.

"You'll do it?" Mort Bonner said, holding his breath.

"Yeah, I'll take the job." He jerked his head towards the doorway. Stairway out there?"

"Yes," Mort said eagerly. "Just go straight up. First door to your left."

He followed the burglar out.

The man in the abbreviated jacket put the valise on the first step, and then went silently up the carpeted stairs. He didn't look back once.

Mort waited until he was at the door of the room before he left the hallway. Then he went back into the living room, and located his humidor. There was a semicircle

of brown cigars inside. He took one out, lit it, and settled into a chair near the fireplace. He puffed grandly, pausing now and then to listen for sounds of activity on the floor above. There was nothing but silence.

The cigar ash was half an inch long before he became restless.

He got up, tapped the cigar over the fireplace, and went to the window. The moon had floated to the right, but it was still plump and imposing. He tried to make out the face that was supposed to be in the markings on its surface, and detected a distinct resemblance to Jocelyn's own fat features. He smiled a bit, and took a deep puff.

The cigar burned another half inch, and his restlessness turned to concern.

"What's taking so *long?*" he asked himself.

As he went up the stairs, he thought: *Inefficiency.* And he chewed his cigar angrily.

He paused at the door of Jocelyn's bedroom, listening. He could hear movement inside.

Mort pushed open the door.

There wasn't much light. But he could make out the figure of the burglar standing by the bed, looking down at the hilly mound of bedclothes, and there was a white pillow in his hand.

"What's happened?" Mort whispered.

"It's okay," the burglar said.

Mort stepped inside. He looked down at the still figure of his wife. Then he bent over her, and said, very softly: "Jocelyn?"

The lightning hit hard and fast. Jocelyn's moon of a face exploded into a brilliant nova. Mort caught one glimpse of the gaily-colored throw rug beside her bed before his face struck the floor. Then he was being rudely revolved by somebody's hand, and another white moon was descending towards him, until it became gray and black like the deepest waters of the sea, like a silent wave closing over him.

The woman sat up.

"Is it done?" she gasped.

"Yes, ma'am." The little man dropped the pillow to the floor. "Sure glad we talked things over first."

"So am I," Jocelyn said earnestly.

She went to the chest, pulled open the top drawer and took out her checkbook.

MANY WOMEN TOO MANY

by C. B. Gilford

His name was Willis Mack, and he sat hunched in the straight-backed chair, staring directly ahead, but unseeing. He did not seem more than half the size of the beefy-faced detective who sat next to him. The handcuffs no longer coupled them, so that now, after being such bosom companions during the trip, they were individuals again, separate, alone, scarcely interested in each other any more.

The grizzled guard, old and shrunken in his blue uniform, came out of the door and closed it after him. "The warden will see you in a minute," he announced. He spoke to the detective, not to Willis.

The guard seemed to be a sort of receptionist-secretary. He had a desk there in front of the warden's door, but he didn't seem to have much work to do. He didn't go back to the desk. Instead he strolled toward Willis, stopped finally about six feet away from him. He gazed down at him with lackadaisical curiosity.

"Murderer, isn't he?" he asked. Of the detective.

"That's right," the detective grunted.

"He looks harmless."

"He didn't give me any trouble."

"Murderers are foolers though. Lots of times they look like this one here. Look like they wouldn't hurt a fly." The guard was loquacious. Probably he didn't have too many opportunities to talk to people. "But I don't go by their looks. 'Cause their record is against 'em. 'Cause I always say if they can get violent once, they can get violent again."

"Oh sure," the detective grunted. "Can't afford to take chances with 'em."

The guard bent down a little, putting the palms of his hands on his knees, so that he could gaze more closely into Willis' face. "By the way," he wanted to know, "how many did this one murder?"

Willis looked up, and it was he who answered. "Just one," he said.

"Why don't you pick on someone your size?" was a query frequently put to me as a child. Frankly, I couldn't find non-adults who equalled me physically—or otherwise. This disparity between tormentor and victim enters most importantly in this taut marital drama.

"A woman." And to the guard's obvious surprise, he smiled . . .

. . . But there had been many women in his life, Willis reflected. There had been the little girls first, giggling and squealing piercingly. He had been the only boy in a dancing class full of them. And then the women came, one after another, in a seemingly endless procession. So many, in fact, that it was hard to remember all of them. That was odd in itself, wasn't it? Already they had begun to fade, to seem a little unreal. Not much more than mere names now.

Stella, for instance. Stella Vecker. She'd been one of the first, hadn't she? One of the early ones who had given Willis a foretaste of what his life was going to be like.

He had had enough experience with others, even previous to Stella, to be able to spot her type. In Stella's case, however, his sharp ears had been enough to warn him.

"Now tell me," Stella had asked another girl on her very first day in the office, "which of the men are married and which are bachelors. I have principles, you know. I wouldn't try to break up a home to land the best man in the world."

They were conversing in whispers, but they were just two desks behind him, so that Willis could hear every word. He tried not to listen, as an ostrich will put its head in the sand.

"The men here are just about all married," the other girl said.

"Oh dear." Stella sounded glum. But then she perked up. "But there are some bachelors, aren't there?"

"There's one."

"Which one?"

"Willis Mack."

Stella was silent for a long time. "You mean . . .?"

"That's right. Him."

They were undoubtedly engaged in pointing. Willis could almost feel the sharp nails on the tips of their index fingers.

"I wouldn't even count him," Stella said.

"Well, he certainly ain't much," came the agreeable answer.

Willis felt hopeful. If that other girl would just be vehement enough about it, she might convince this Stella of the accuracy of her opinion.

"He's so little," Stella said.

"Heavens yes."

"I never could stand a man who was smaller than I am. I'll bet I'm twenty pounds heavier than he is." Then she added hastily, "And I'm certainly not big and fat."

"He's ugly too," the other girl pointed out. "He's not old, but look at that hair line. He's one of those they call 'prematurely going to bald.' And those awful glasses don't help any."

Bless your heart, Willis said silently to that other girl. If she succeeded in discouraging this Stella, he would send her a box of candy anonymously.

But that box of candy was never bought, never sent. "You know something?" Stella said. "I don't know what it is... maybe it's his size... but there's something boyish about him..."

"Boyish? Willis? With the receding hair line?" Valiant attempt, but a lost cause.

"Oh, you can't judge a book by its cover," Stella answered sagely.

Well, that was the way it began, and Willis knew from that moment the fate that lay waiting for him in ambush. He did not know the time, place, or method of the attack, but he was certain there would be one. When it came, it was as well planned and as swiftly executed as a panzer onslaught.

Stella Vecker had started working there on a Monday. During the week she got introduced properly to Willis and began greeting him by name every morning. Other than that, she committed no overt action. But he knew she was only biding her time. Because he caught her eyeing him at least thirty times every day. There was in her eyes the benign, patient look of the vulture. But then whenever he caught her at it, she would hastily glance away with a guilty little smile. By Thursday she had added a maidenly blush to the routine. And the offensive began on Friday.

It rained all day on Friday. Stella watched the weather through the window, and in fact seemed more interested in it than in Willis. A fact which puzzled but did not comfort him.

When five o'clock arrived and Stella departed with her umbrella, Willis definitely breathed a sigh of relief. The rain had interfered with her plans somehow, he thought, and I am safe for the week end. But he dawdled anyway, to make sure she was out of the building. He left at five-thirty, finally, overconfident and unaware. She was waiting for him down on the sidewalk under the marquee.

"Why, hello there, Willis," she said brightly, as if surprised to see him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked stupidly.

"I was hoping the rain would stop."

"Why? You have an umbrella."

"And I see you don't, Willis!" Her eyes fairly glowed with the light of Chrisitian charity. She entwined her arm with his in an inescapable grip. "You can share mine!"

They were off. Where, he didn't know, but certainly not in a direction he had chosen. He was completely her prisoner. They were about equal in height, but she was certainly the heavier and brawnier. It would not have been gentlemanly for him to struggle there on the street. And as they went along, he found his meager strength waning. Enclosed with her in that little tent whose roof was the umbrella and whose walls were the pelting rain, he had to breathe and live in an atmosphere that was all and only Stella. Her perfume and the exhalations of her generous body choked him. The warmth and closeness of her brought out sweat on his forehead. Nausea rose inside him, and he might have fainted ignominiously in some gutter running with rain water.

So it was that he was actually grateful and ready to settle for any compromise situation, when she guided their steps into the little restaurant with the dim lighting.

"This is a cozy little place," she explained. "I've been coming here every evening after work. But I just hate to eat alone, don't you, Willis? And I know you must eat alone. Because I've heard you're a bachelor. What do you think of this as a place to eat? We'll go Dutch, of course."

He was too sick to argue, too anxious to find a place to sit down. and he was doubly grateful when Stella chose to sit opposite him in the booth rather than next to him. In a choice of evils, he preferred having her staring at him rather than enduring her physical contact.

And she certainly did stare. Her broad, round, white face hung there like a moon in the shadowy dimness of the booth. She was placid, now that she had him captured, and her heavily lidded eyes drank him in like he were the first course on the menu.

She chatted gaily through the meal, never stopping it seemed, but managing to eat voraciously. He watched her helplessly, the mouse appalled by the appetite of the cat.

"So you're a bachelor, Willis." She got around to it again, finally.

"Yes," he choked.

"You know, I just can't understand that. How old are you, Willis?"

"Twenty-nine."

He was sure that she hesitated for just an infinitesimal moment, and just as sure that she was older

than he was. "Oh, that's a nice age," she said then. "But just imagine, almost thirty, and no lucky woman has snared you yet. That's just amazing, I think."

He was about to explain that he didn't want to be "snared," but she had gulped down her mouthful and was ahead of him. "You're very appealing to women," she said, "did you ever realize that, Willis?"

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly be..."

"Oh yes, you are, sweetie. You just don't understand women. Oh, I know there are lots of low types of women who are impressed by wide shoulders and muscles and Roman noses and curly hair, but they are low types, Willis. The high type girl like me looks for different things in a man. Do you know what those things are, Willis?"

Despite himself, he was fascinated by her approach. He had to shake his head and murmur, "No."

She leaned her ample bosom across the table in her enthusiasm, and the moon face hovered right in front of his eyes. "I like a man who is high-minded... and hard-working... and quiet... and gentlemanly... and there's one other awfully important thing..."

He couldn't help asking the question. "What?"

"I like the kind of man who *needs* a woman."

Willis suddenly felt like fainting again. The huge moon filled his field of vision and swam in front of his eyes. It became a mother-image, dominating, devouring. "I don't need anybody!" It came from within him as a scream, but filtered out as a frightened whisper.

"Oh yes, you do, sweetie. Someone to cook for you and put a little meat on those bones."

"Food doesn't mean anything to me," he gasped out. "Sandwiches ..."

"And take care of your clothes. I'll bet you have holes in both your socks right now."

"Of course I do. But what difference...?"

"And someone waiting for you when you come home at night, someone you can watch television with."

"I hate television. I like to read. I'm in the middle of *The Last of the Mohicans*..."

"Someone you can talk to."

"I don't want to talk. I like to think..."

She smiled at him, grimly jovial, unimpressed. "That only goes to prove," she said, "that you have too many bad habits."

The grotesque meal at the restaurant was only the beginning, however. Coyly, yet with relentless purpose, Stella wove the web. Next stop was a movie. Willis found himself standing in a line to buy tickets, toying with the idea of slipping into the crowd and losing himself somehow, but without the nerve to attempt it. Then he was plunged into the fetid darkness of

the theater's interior, squeezed into seats so close together that he had to touch shoulders either with Stella or a much more enormous lady on the other side.

He shivered and the panic of claustrophobia seized him. He had the feeling of a man who had been thrown into a black pit where serpents lay in wait for him. Then the serpent came, and there was no escape. Stella's hand, traveling his sleeve, groping for his hand. A warm serpent, pudgy, perspiring, deceptively soft.

"Oh, you naughty boy," Stella whispered out of the gloom. And she giggled.

How had he endured those awful three hours? How had his heart survived such a prolonged period of mortal terror? He would have welcomed an immediate cessation of its beating.

Then terror piled upon terror, torture upon torture. Riding in the cab with Stella. Her fat hand clasping his, her shoulder against him, her breath hot upon his cheek. Getting out. Walking up the steps. Pausing at Stella's door.

"I'll bet you want to kiss me good night," Stella said.

No, he screamed, I would rather die. But the scream only rang through the cavern of his skull, echoing and re-echoing. It never reached Stella. He didn't kiss her. And yet he did. He must have. She arranged it somehow. Their mouths came together. Hers was horribly red, horribly wet, horribly soft, like jelly. Without opening, her lips nevertheless sucked him in like quicksand, till only the hard wall of her teeth stopped further descent...

...He could still shudder at the memory of Stella all right. Because that memory was so especially clear. But there had been many others.

He had escaped Stella in the only possible way. That Friday night, back in his own apartment, he packed two suitcases. His trunk which would have held his most precious but less necessary possessions, he had to abandon, because he dared not leave a forwarding address with the landlord. He likewise abandoned his job and his accrued salary. He took the suitcases, bought a train ticket, and fled.

That was the beginning of his period of wandering. He held all sorts of different jobs, mostly in offices. Once, however, he was reduced to dishwashing in a hotel restaurant, because there was some difficulty about his references. But wherever it was, the ending was always the same. The appearance of some motherly woman on the scene, her gradual attraction to him, his ignoring her—always futile—and then the pounce. Then ignominious flight, and starting all over again.

It went on like that. For the best years of Willis' life. Some of the women were better than Stella, some worse. Some more clever, some less. Gradually, he grew more adept in dealing with them. Sometimes they never got close enough, as Stella had, to lay a hand on him. Like a suspicious wild thing, he was off and traveling before the hunter was really set to spring.

And he would have grown to peaceful old age, perhaps eventually losing his devastating charm, if it hadn't been for Fern Crenshaw.

Fern was just smarter than the others, that's all. She actually succeeded in deceiving Willis. She was a widow. Therefore she had previously had a man to fuss over and mother, and having lost him the year before, she desperately wanted another. Willis didn't realize that. She fooled him into believing she was all cut up and mourning for her first husband. So Willis let down his guard. With fatal consequences. Not figuratively speaking. Really fatal.

Fern Crenshaw was rich. In fact, she owned, since the death of Mr. Crenshaw, the real estate company where Willis worked. She came down to the office frequently because, as she said, she was lonely. Since Willis attributed this to her devotion to her dead husband, he took no alarm. Besides, Fern was tall and spare, and definitely not the buxom type Willis had learned to associate with frustrated motherly affection.

That type was, however, present on the scene. Celestine Carter by name. Celestine was Stella all over again as far as looks were concerned, but not at all like Stella in strategy. Where Stella had been over-eager and headlong, Celestine was devious and patient. But Willis, who knew all the telltale signs by this time, kept an eye on her and decided not to leave until he had to. Except for Celestine, Crenshaw's was a nice place to work.

Fern Crenshaw must have been keeping an eye on Celestine, too. Because, as it turned out, when Celestine made her move, Fern was as aware of it as Willis was.

Celestine, for all her patience, wasn't clever in the long run. She merely maneuvered the office Christmas party into a kissing game, and then maneuvered Willis into kissing her. Or tried to, that is. While Celestine was blindfolded, Willis slipped out of the office, took a taxi home, and packed his bags. He kept the taxi waiting outside while he packed, then rode in it to the railroad station.

Fern Crenshaw was there waiting for him.

He was both surprised and ashamed of himself when he saw her there. After all, he was an ungrateful employee running off without giving the proper two weeks' notice. So he was too shocked, too scared, to run off. When she gave

him an imperious nod, he walked over to her, still carrying his suitcases.

"What's the meaning of this, Willis?" she wanted to know.

"I'm leaving," he blurted.

"All on account of Celestine Carter?"

He was too surprised at that to reply with a single word.

"I might as well admit, Willis," she went on, "that I know a lot more about you than you realize. I've had you investigated, as a matter of fact. So I happen to know that you've run out on quite a few jobs. And I also happen to know the reason. So I have a proposition to make to you, Willis. You'd better sit down first."

Obediently, automatically, a man in a trance, he walked to the nearest bench, deposited his bags, and sat. Fern Crenshaw followed and sat down beside him, close enough to be heard when speaking in a low voice, but not nearly close enough to touch him.

"I'm asking you to marry me, Willis."

He sat there frozen, staring, but his mind, under the impulse of terror, was beginning to function again. Where to run . . . abandon the suitcases . . . hop a freight . . . thumb a ride . . . hole up in some slum dive . . .

But her voice droned on, and part of him listened to what she was saying. "I'm not in love with you, Willis Mack. Don't mistake me on that score. I'm still devoted to my dear departed Horace. But marrying you would be quite convenient for me. I need a certain amount of companionship and someone to accompany me to public functions. Also I think you could assist me in the affairs of the Crenshaw Realty Company. So it would be entirely a business arrangement, Willis. Let me assure you of that.

The terror in him subsided a little. She seemed to be completely sincere and genuine. Despite himself, his mind began to explore the possibilities of Fern's proposal. Then came the clincher.

"Being married to me, Willis, would have another important advantage to you. These silly women like Celestine and all the ones before her would stop chasing you . . ."

He had been wrong in marrying Fern Crenshaw, of course. He had no one to blame but himself, however. He should have known better. He should have known not to trust any woman. He should have known that beneath the skin, whether taut and full or loose and wrinkled, they were essentially all alike. Devils.

Marrying Fern was indenturing himself as a lifelong slave. It was a slavery that was complete and utterly degrading. And there was no escape from it.

Not that he hadn't tried. He remembered that attempt well. It had

been a bit clever than his usual. Hitchhiking to the next town. Then a bus going in an opposite direction. More hitchhiking. Finally a plane headed for Mexico. And there at the airport the two burly private detectives whom Fern had hired. That was his first and also final attempt.

Fern hadn't wanted him to help her run Crenshaw Realty. She did that very well all by herself. She merely wanted someone to listen to her tell how clever she was in the masculine business world. She hated men, he found out. And especially she hated the late Horace Crenshaw. Mostly she seemed to want a husband so she could revenge herself on Horace's sex, for all of poor Horace's crimes.

And she didn't want him for companionship, whether at home or in public. She wanted someone to insult frankly at home and more politely and subtly in public. She was happiest, however, when she was humiliating him in front of other people. The more the merrier. She had plenty of ammunition. His thinness. His awful glasses. His meek manner. His bald head.

It was entirely out of resentment then, entirely out of a desire for freedom for its own sake, that Willis accepted the attentions — whenever he could — of Sarah Treadwell.

Sarah was their next-door neighbor— if the person occupying the ten acres next to your ten acres can be called a next-door neighbor. She was also a rich widow. But she wasn't like Fern in build or manner. She was like Stella and Celestine and all those others. Sarah was full-bodied, full-faced, and full of maternal love for Willis despite his marital ties.

"Willis," she would say to him across the fence between their acreages, "why do you go on living with that old spider? You hate her, don't you?"

"Yes, I hate her," he'd answer, truthfully enough.

"Then why don't you and I run away together, Willis?"

Would I be any better off, he'd ask himself. "Well, I don't know about that..."

"Kiss me, Willis. Please kiss me."

He would have liked to, in the hope that his wife would be watching from a window. But he couldn't bring himself to touching his own lips to Sarah's big, red, heavily lipsticked mouth. He'd have to be content with his wife's seeing him talking to "the other woman."

And it was that "other woman" who was responsible for what happened on that fateful day. The day when his wife, Fern, finally caught him chatting with Sarah Treadwell.

"Willis, come into the house!" Fern's eagle-like scream shattered the peace of the woodsy acres.

Horror-stricken, he realized then that he had gone too far, been too bold. Cold fear gripped him so tightly that his teeth began to chat-

ter. "She's seen us," he told Sarah.

"I'm glad," Sarah answered. "Then you can go in and tell her that you're leaving her. I'll go and pack a suitcase. One suitcase is all I'll need..."

"No . . . don't do that . . . I can't . . ."

"I'll protect you from that harpy, Willis. Wouldn't you rather have me than her?"

Ye gods... how could he answer that?... was there any choice? Was that his only escape? From the bony talons of Fern to Sarah's fat, suffocating embrace? He was a man balanced on a knife-edge, with a pit yawning on either side of him? To whom should he leap? To the tiger or to the boa constrictor?

"Willis!"

The command was too terrifying to be ignored any longer. He turned from Sarah and ran. He didn't stop running even when he got inside the house. Fern wasn't in the kitchen. He ran all the way into the living room. And he found her there.

Taller than himself, dressed all in black, her arms folded across her chest, her face dark as a thundercloud and her eyes flashing lightning from out of it, she was a figure to frighten a better man than Willis Mack. Willis came to an abrupt, panting halt. The room was silent except for the sound of his labored breathing. His nemesis did not seem to breathe at all.

"Well?" she asked finally.

He had no answer to such an all-inclusive question.

"I know how you feel about women, Willis. You were talking to that creature out there just to make me unhappy, weren't you?"

"No!" he lied desperately. His mind tried to anticipate her, to discover what revenge she was already devising for him.

She began to pace, back and forth across his vision. Her brows lowered, indicating she was in deep thought. Probably thinking just the things he thought she was thinking. He watched her, unhappily awaiting her next move.

"Ungrateful pup!" she spat at him several times, in the brief pauses while she turned to pace in the opposite direction.

It was at one of those times that he noticed it, the fact that she was pacing back and forth across the throw-rug in front of the fireplace. The fact that the throw-rug covered an area of highly polished wooden floor. The fact that each time she stepped from the floor to the rug, the rug slid a little. Not much, just a little. So little that, concentrating on something else as she was, she was completely unaware of the tiny movement underfoot.

What if that rug took a really big slide? Just as she had one foot on it and the other foot not on anything at all? Would she fall? How would she land? What part of her would hit? And how hard? Would

her head hit first, for instance? And would it by any chance strike one of those huge, jutting andirons?

Visions. Lovely visions. Of Fern's head resting in a pool of blood against one of those andirons. And beyond that . . . freedom. If only he were the man to stoop and give that rug a little jerk at just the right moment . . .

"Willis!"

"Yes . . ." He swallowed hard.

"Yes *what?*"

"Yes, my love." The words choked him.

"Willis, come here to me."

She was standing motionless now, a little to one side of the fireplace, off the rug, both her feet on the polished, shining wood. But she was beckoning for him to cross the rug to her.

"Willis, come here."

Glancing at her hands suddenly, he saw them clench into fists. His fear of her had always been of a physical sort, but now it assumed a new dimension. Her fists were clenched to strike him.

"Willis!"

Well, he would not allow her to strike him. He had suffered all other possible indignities, but somewhere one must draw a line. He would not submit to a beating. And certainly not by a woman.

"No," he said. And his voice sounded almost calm, almost strong.

He was already backing away warily when she moved. Like the tiger he always likened her to, she sprang toward him, right fist upraised. And it was the very suddenness and energy of that movement which was her undoing. Her foot hit the rug, which skated out from under her like a bar of soap on wet tile. Both her feet flew up, and her head smashed down with the same sickening speed. Down on the jutting andiron.

And there she lay. A lovely vision. Her head resting in a pool of blood. The most beautiful red he had ever seen.

But best of all, and the final, loveliest touch of all—it had been an accident, and he hadn't had to commit a murder.

It was then, as he stood there, with the smell of blood in his nostrils that was the smell of freedom, that he hard the pounding on the front door. And the voice of Sarah. "Willis, let me in! I've come to rescue you!"

The vision changed. Sarah now. All Sarah. With her fat arms, and her fat cheeks, and her fat lips. Like Stella. Like all the other women whose names he couldn't remember now.

He didn't hesitate a moment. His decision was swift, and the execution of his plan sure and practical. He had to tug at Fern's body a little to get her head away from the andiron. But he had the strength of sudden courage. When he had pulled the body a little aside, he took his handkerchief and wiped all the blood off the andiron.

He got some blood on himself, but that was all right. Then he picked up the poker, grasping it by the handle, and he rubbed the business end of it into the fatal wound in Fern's skull. He applied the tool until it was nicely smeared with blood.

"Willis, let me in!" Sarah was calling from outside.

He carried the poker with him when he went to open the door. And he still carried it when he flung the door open and stood there in the threshold and confronted the astonished Sarah.

Poor Sarah. The look on her face was positively comical. And especially the way she looked at the poker, and then over Willis' shoulder into the living room, and to the fireplace, and to what lay in front of the fireplace.

"Murder!" She screamed as she fled the scene. "Murder! Help, police!"

He let her go. He just stood in the door and waited . . .

The door opened and the grizzled guard said, "The warden wants to see you now."

Willis Mack rose stiffly from the chair, and walked into the office. He walked straight to the desk and stood there waiting to be told to sit down.

He wasn't. The warden, a bulldog of a man, glanced up at his new guest with an unfriendly frown. "You're Willis Mack?" he began.

"Yes, sir."

"You murdered your wife, huh?"

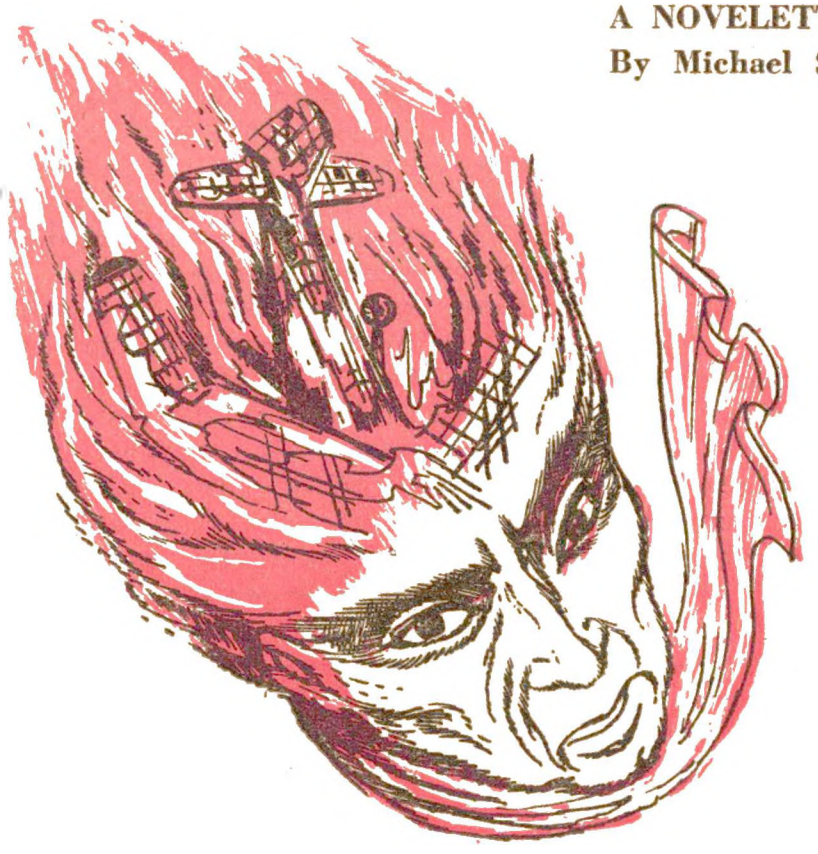
"That's right, sir."

"Sentence of ninety-nine years, is that right?"

"That's right, sir," Willis agreed, and he smiled. "I'm forty-one now. I guess I can depend upon being in here the rest of my life, can't I?"

THE WIDE AND STARRY SKY

A NOVELETTE
By Michael Shaara



This is a tale of those who go up in the sky in planes. Not satisfied with the customary hazards of snow and sleet and hail, bullets have been added to the mixture. Then, obligingly, gravity takes over.

HEMMINGE sighted the Cessna from an altitude of 9,000 feet. It was rising slowly up toward him, coming in from the west, lifting to cross the bare rock mountains between Dawson and Cedar Creek.

When Hemminge saw it, it was still so far as to be only a faint winged speck against the white ground haze, but Hemminge had very good eyes, and Hemminge had been watching for it, for any plane. He circled with great care, his heart pounding. He did not think the Cessna could see him, but he was going to make certain. He circled slowly to the east, making sure that he would come down on the Cessna from out of the sun.

It was a magnificent day for flying. The air was clear in all directions over the black hills, clear and still. The ground haze was thick and white, but that was all the better; it drowned the land in a soft steamy ocean, blotting out everything but Hemminge and the Cessna and the mountains which rose up out of the mist in great black wedges. Hemminge went into his dive, his heart beating violently, but his hands steady and his mind clear. Nerves of iron, Hemhinge thought, you must keep nerves of iron. The hand mustn't tremble now like it did the other time, when you nearly botched the job and missed and almost let him get away. No. This time you must be clear, and calm, Hemminge thought, as Sunday morning, Easter Sunday. He was picking up speed now, swiftly, easily, gliding down the sky in one long silent swoop, boring down on the Cessna like a sleek, silent arrow. Remember, Hemminge told himself, keep the mind clear and the hand steady, remember the plane will kick to the right when you fire and correct for that, remember that you are faster than he is and must guard against overshooting, and remember to recover quickly, because he must not have time to use his radio —but now the Cessna was rising up toward him with exploding suddenness, and he centered it in his sights in the last instant and began firing from a long way off. The bullets reached out in gleaming streams and went into the Cessna, exactly into the cabin, exactly between the wings where he had aimed them. And then they had time to stitch forward quickly across the motor cowling and chew at the propellor before he had to lift his own plane slightly to keep from collision, diving on past the Cessna in a roaring split second, but even so he could see it beginning to wobble.

He pulled out of his own dive in time to see the Cessna begin to fall. It was smoking, but not yet really burning. It fell leaving a long slow smudge in the sky and Hemminge swung to follow it down, his heart beating even more wildly now with the joy, the exultant joy of the kill. He did not think

that there was anybody alive in the plane, but decided to make sure. He bored in once more on the Cessna and gave it a long burst, the coupe de grace. He pulled up then and circled and watched it fall, beginning to burn at last. And when it went in, he circled sadly and gave a grave, proud, tender salute, the victorious airman to his fallen enemy. He turned off at last and opened his plane up wide, heading for home. He felt very fine. It had been a good clean kill.

"At least they were dead before it hit the ground," Harry Ball said.

Captain Lockwood had nothing to say.

"Isn't it about time they got the bodies out?" Ball asked.

Lockwood shook his head. "Need a torch for that. Have to wait until tomorrow."

Ball stared up into the sky. Night was coming, but more than that, there was wind and heavy rain. Off in the west, black clouds were rising; he could see lightning flashing and heard the rolling growl of thunder. He looked down again into the mangled cabin and said, "One of them was a woman."

Captain Lockwood looked at him. There was no expression on Ball's face. He was a young man. He had been a State Trooper for less than five years, but he had long since learned the law officer's quiet, calm, silent look, and nothing showed on his face, but what he wanted there. Yet Lockwood could tell that he was moved.

"They must have been just going off on a vacation," Ball said.

The plane had come down in a box canyon about thirty miles due east of Cedar Creek. It had been sighted early that afternoon, but there was no road into the canyon. Army helicopters had to be flown down from the air base upstate. There had been a doctor in the first copter, but he turned out not to be necessary. The other copters had carried men from the Sheriff's Department and the State Police, and a man from the Civil Aeronautics Authority. They were gathered now on the floor of the canyon in the growing dark. Nobody was saying much and two of the army men had made a fire out of brushwood, and the light of it flickered weirdly across the jagged wreckage of the plane. The army men wanted to get out of there before the approaching storm came down, but nobody else was in a hurry. They were all looking at the plane.

The plane was no longer a plane, but only big ripped shards of silver metal spread all over the canyon floor. The Cessna had been entirely metal; it had not burned very much, but had come down into the rocks like a bomb. There was nothing recognizable except here and there the flat surface of a piece of wing, or tail, and it was these that bore the bullet holes. An army man

had been the first to notice the bullet holes. Nobody else quite believed him until they saw the holes themselves. The main evidence was one door of the plane, the right door, which had been hurled away from the wreck only slightly damaged. There was no doubt that the holes in the door were bullet holes.

The door was lying now at the feet of Harry Ball. He was staring at it rather than into the crushed bloody mass of the cabin. Ball had seen many an auto wreck and some even worse than this, but still, this one jarred him. He did not yet know why. Afterwards he would figure that it was probably because he was a pilot himself, in his spare time. He was a tall man with a slightly bent nose in a rugged, patient face. There was that about him, the tall, blue-eyed look, that had made some of his buddies give him the nickname "High Noon." He towered over Captain Lockwood. He stood without saying anything, feeling a weird, peculiar disgust. Lockwood did not say anything either, and after awhile they were joined by Jack Biancoli of the CAA.

"They're bullet holes all right," Biancoli muttered, still stunned.

"What are you going to do?" Lockwood said quietly.

Biancoli shook his head. "Listen," he said earnestly, "you think it was murder? Or do you think somebody's just gone nuts?"

Lockwood shrugged. "Can't tell yet. We're checking on the two in the plane. But I don't think we'll come up with anything. It figures to be a nut. It has the *feel* of a nut. You know what I mean?"

"It sure does," Ball said.

"Well," Biancoli gestured vaguely with his hands. "What can you do for me?"

Lockwood remained silent. He was a slow, thorough man and he had not yet had time to focus on the problem. After a moment he said:

"You ground everybody in the state. We'll get help from the Air Force, help search for the guy."

"Can't do that," Biancoli insisted grimly. "Can't ground everybody; businessmen would raise hell. And how do we even know he's from this state? Might be registered anywhere, even Canada. I can't even guess what make plane he's flying. Could be anything from a Cub to a converted pursuit—"

"No," Harry Ball interrupted. "The killer must have been flying a light plane."

"Why?" Lockwood said.

"Well, trying to shoot down a little plane like this from a real fast plane like a converted army job is harder than it looks. A regular fighter's much too fast, it couldn't turn with a real small plane. It'd have one sweet time trying to get a shot at any little plane if the little plane had warning—"

"*If* the little plane had warning," Biancoli muttered.

"It still figures to be another light plane," Ball said, "for other reasons. First, those were thirty calibre bullet holes—"

"You fly, Harry, don't you?" Lockwood said suddenly.

Ball nodded.

"Got your own plane?"

Ball shook his head.

Lockwood went on looking at him thoughtfully, then said, unexpectedly, "Good," and turned back to Biancoli.

"First we check the mental hospitals," Lockwood said. His voice was firm; he had studied the problem and was beginning to shift into high gear now. "Find out if there's a record of anybody anywhere who had delusions about being a war ace. Next we alert the Air Force and ask them to post a couple of squadrons high up over this whole area. Then we try to blanket the area with radar, radioing the Air Force to come on down and look if any plane starts making suspicious moves. In the meantime, we start checking planes for evidence of weapons. Another thing, if this guy has a gun in his plane he's flying from a private strip. That ought to be easy."

"How about checking the gun itself?" Biancoli said. "There must be a record . . ."

"No dice. There must be thousands of unregistered machine guns in this country. No way of checking. But there aren't too many private strips."

"I hope to God you're right."

"There's one thing. You'll have to figure whether or not you want to issue a warning to all pilots."

Biancoli started. "What?"

"If this is a nut he'll be up again, looking for somebody else. If we can pass this off to the papers as just another wreck, not let anybody know we found the bullet holes, the killer'll be maybe a little less cautious about coming out again."

Biancoli blew a breath, rubbed his face nervously.

"Otherwise," Lockwood went on, "the nut might just possibly pack up and leave for somewhere else. Take the gun out of his plane and ship it to another state, and start all over. And we lose him."

"Sam," Biancoli said, his face turned suddenly strange in the dim light of the fire, "listen—"

"It's your choice."

"No. Listen. This has been nagging me. I didn't—last week two planes crashed in these mountains."

Harry Ball felt a sudden chill.

"They were both little Cubs," Biancoli said. "They both burned. The weather was perfect; we couldn't figure why they went in. We inspected the wrecks, but we couldn't do much out here, in the hills. But listen, we weren't looking for bullet holes."

Lockwood nodded.

"All the fabric was burned," Biancoli said. "We never saw any bullet holes."

"I think you better check again."

"It could be that this one nut got all three of them."

"It could be," Lockwood said. "My God."

"A nut is a nut," Lockwood said. "With a nut, you never know. But he'll be up again looking for somebody else, that I guarantee you. You check on those other two wrecks. In the meantime we'll"—he stopped abruptly, turning to glance at Ball. He thought for a moment, then swung back on Biancoli.

"We can try a trap," he said. "We'll get some private planes and have them fly back and forth over these mountains. If this joker comes out again our boys will have radios and the Air Force will be waiting up high, in jets." He swung back to Ball. "Harry," he said, a very faint smile in his eyes, "you seem interested. Want to volunteer to fly?"

"Yes," Harry Ball said.

Under the wide and starry sky, dig the grave and let me lie. The phrase was running through Hemminge's mind over and over and over again, the silent peaceful beautiful words soothing and smoothing the mighty pain in his head. He was lying on a cot on the screen porch in the darkness of night. It was raining heavily, blowing down through the screen on him and he was soaked through, but he did not mind it. The cool water on his face dulled the pain, the pain, which was all he could think about. All through the rain there was wild white lightning, but Hemminge could not see it. His eyes, whether open or closed, saw only the strange glowing jagged lines that were a part of the headaches, had come with the headaches for as far back as Hemminge could remember. The pain was always bad, but the pain of this one was enough to drive a man out of his mind. I'll go mad, Hemminge thought, I'll go mad. Under the wide and starry sky, under the wide and starry sky . . .

Yet the headache was going away. In the midst of the pain he could sense the slight lessening, the nerves quieting, dulled now before the awful pain they could no longer feel, and Hemminge began to be dazedly grateful. Earlier, the pain had been so bad he had been sick to his stomach. Under the wide and starry sky, he thought, remembering at the same time the misery of that sickness. But the headache was definitely going away. The fact that he could think proved it was going away. But under the wide and starry sky, dig the grave—there, now even his vision was coming back. He had just seen a flash of lightning.

He lay for another hour on the couch. The pain was not gone, but it was bearable; compared to what it had been, the pain now was nothing. But he was exhausted. He lay

on the couch until he had some energy; then he stumbled on into the kitchen and made himself coffee. On the way into the kitchen he had to go through the living room, and there almost tripped over the body of his wife. Looking down at her, suddenly the vision of her bloodied head hit him with a shuddering knife blow in the chest. The memory of what he had done to her blossomed stark and murderous before he could shut it out. But he did not want to think of it, and so he did not think of it. Toodle oo, toodle oo, he thought, and that was the end of it. He made his coffee and went wet and dripping back out to the porch.

The rain was letting up. In one of the last flashes of lightning, he saw his plane perched blue and lovely, alive, on the strip by the house. A wave of love for the plane came over him, a proud, gentle love. He raised his coffee cup toward the plane. Thee and me, he thought lovingly, we are one flesh. He drank the coffee and lay down.

But the trouble with lying down was that you always thought too much. You are pretty far gone, aren't you? he told himself, in a burst of brutal clarity, but mercifully that faded away and his mind went back to the muddied fragments of poems and dreams and sweet violent visions that were all that was left of him now, Arthur Hemminge, a small fat man with graying hair, not yet fifty years old.

Now he could no longer stop himself from thinking. Visions passed through his mind like black flak bursting around a dying plane. My father was a proud and virtuous man—vision of his father in a fine flying uniform—and now I'm a pilot too, Hemminge thought, and wouldn't he be proud now—but *hate, hate,* Hemminge shuddered with hate for his father. And he could admit it now, what a wonderful feeling to roll and revel in the hate for his father—who did not want me or anything or anybody, but the fine proud talk about flying, and, and . . . Before other memories of his father Hemminge's mind halted, and swung off down the dark halls of his life, passing the mother he had loved who was dead, and the son he had loved who was dead, and now even the wife, and my God, Hemminge thought, what I love is all dead. And visions now arose of great planes sweeping through the sky like black vultures, and Hemminge began to cry.

I had a father, Hemminge thought, and I had a son, and . . . and now I've gone mad.

He knew that, from time to time. The most horrible moments of all were when he could see himself clearly, when he could no longer blot himself out and bury his mind in visions. It was peculiarly horrible the way it had happened—things seemed to reverse themselves, not like you expected it to happen at all. First the pains

and the visions and the weird flowing feeling, especially at night. During those you knew you were going insane, but did not know what to do about it. Then the electric pinging sensations that came and went, and periods of total blackness, from which you awoke with sweating horror wondering what of all those things you had dreamed was real, and what wasn't. And then gradually, but with increasing swiftness, the true breakdown, the orgy in the mind, and the last muffled cry for help, and after that nothing, nothing, the shadow world and the red figures all around you and death, from which you rose in brief bright flashes of clarity and saw yourself as you had become, the clear tragic moments which were the most horrible of all not only because of what you had become, but because there was no longer any possibility of help, of cure, you were this mad thing here and would be this mad thing until you died. Under the wide and starry sky . . .

In psychiatric clinics you can find many beautifully written, clear and clinical reports of just what things it took to drive a certain person mad. In the case of Arthur Hemminge, the prime mover would have been, of course, the father, the tall proud war pilot whom Arthur loved and whom the father not only never loved, but never hated either, just simply ignored. Hemminge's mother, who would have loved him, died too young. That was a contributing factor. The father forced Arthur to fly too early, after filling him with wild terrible stories of how planes crashed, and so imbedded in the boy a fear of airplanes, and of heights. That was also a contributing factor. Arthur's only son became a pilot, and was one of the few American airmen to be killed in the Korean War. That was probably the final factor. The report would say of Arthur Hemminge that he had fixed on airplanes as the cause and solution of all his life's pain.

And so when Arthur Hemminge took his father's inheritance and bought him a lonely place in the mountains and learned, finally, to fly, the fear of heights now suddenly, oddly gone, and built himself a private landing strip and began his weird path of murder, the reasons were obvious: by becoming a pilot himself he could take his place at last with his father, his son, a man among men, a fighter pilot among pilots, and yet at the same time he would be destroying the things that had taken the loves of his life from him—airplanes.

All this a report would say simply, and with truth, and yet—Arthur Hemminge was forty-three years old before he broke. It took him forty-three years of bitter building to bring him to the moment

when his mind fragmented like pulverized glass and he became the odd horrible thing that he became, but it took forty-three years to do it. Forty long years of memories and events entered one after the other in endless succession, day after day, a tiny moment here, a gesture there, words overheard and words spoken directly to him, memories of his small son, brutal memories like the telegram from the War Department, sweet contrasting memories of his mother. All added together brought the moment when he went, finally and for good, insane.

To understand what Arthur Hemminge was is to understand all of those moments, to enter into Arthur Hemminge's mind. And a clinical report is not enough for that, whole books are not enough for that, there is a mystery to insanity which remains a mystery, even to the insane. Most of all, perhaps, to the insane, who sometimes have, like Arthur Hemminge, those terrible moments of clarity, rising like islands in a boiling sea.

So Arthur Hemminge lay on his couch in the desolate midst of nowhere, his mind filled with the roiled visions of madness. He had killed his wife the day before, when she had found out what he was doing and wanted him to go to a doctor. He could not help thinking about her, and from her he thought suddenly – women and children. Women and children must die in a war, because that is one of the things that makes war so terrible. And he thought: a pilot not only shoots down planes. He strafes. He bombs. Visions of bombs bursting among crowds of civilians swarmed in his brain.

I have to do that, he said aloud. All pilots have strafing missions. So I must bomb crowds. He sat up on the couch. He tried to think. Now where could I find a big crowd?

When Harry Ball got to Pat's house, it was very late and she was not in a good humor. She was standing in her doorway, tapping her foot, looking very small, soft, blue-eyed and delightful. Looking at her, he began to hunger for her, gently, dangerously, and he pulled himself back. Remember, he told himself, she's got a backbone of steel. Don't be fooled by the softness, or you'll be in trouble.

"Hey," he said happily.

"Well," Pat glowered, " have a nice vacation?"

"Honey," Ball murmured, soothing, reaching for her.

"Now none of that," Pat fended him off, "you *promised* me you'd be here by eight o'clock–"

Ball kissed her. She was stiff and unbending and then suddenly she melted, coming to him, and he held her close for a long moment si-

lently. He had driven a long way that night and he was tired and maybe that was part of it, but he suddenly wanted only to hold her and feel the warmth of her all the rest of the night. I'm in love with you, he thought, the words rising in his mind, shocking and warming him. But he said nothing. When he released her she looked up at him, her eyes searching, and then she said: "*You*. Oh *you*," and then turned and went away from him, going for his coffee.

He went to her father's favorite chair and sat down. He looked after her, shaken. Pat was the one and only girl he had been dating for the past six months. She was a nurse in the hospital at Dawson. He had know he was in love with her for several weeks, but he had not said anything about it. He did not know what to do about it. Pat was possibly too much for him. When he was with her, he was never quite sure just who was in command, under that fluffy exterior lurked a girl with a mind of her own. Harry Ball was old-fashioned enough to want to be the boss in his own house. And honest enough to realize that with Pat he might not be. She was more than strong-willed; she had "education." Because Ball had not gone to college himself, it was a barrier between them.

It was not Pat's barrier; it was his own. He knew that, but he could not seem to help it. There was a certain poise in Pat, the way she used words, the words she used, the ease with which she could carry on conversations about things Ball did not know. Education and intelligence are two different things, and Ball knew that and knew also that he was no fool, but . . . he had a deep inviolable belief that a man should not feel inferior to his wife. He had a need in him to father, to protect. So he said nothing. And went on falling in love with her, falling slowly, helplessly, like a man sliding down a long, long glacier.

She came back with his coffee and plunked it down by him, and plunked herself down on his lap. He reached up and turned out the light and there were a few lovely seconds in the dark, and then she reached up with determination and turned the light on again.

"Coward," he said.

"Uh uh," she shook her head teasingly, then slyly tapped her temple. "Brains. Part of my foxy campaign."

Which brought it up all over again. Ball frowned.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Ball turned away. "A hard day."

He began to tell her about it and soon he even forgot that she was still on his lap.

"They're giving *you* a plane?" Pat said, startled.

"Yep. A Navion. Lockwood borrowed it from some big wheel in

the State Government. There're about six more volunteers. We'll all be flying back and forth in shifts. We'll catch the bugger. But boy, isn't that something?" He chuckled. "To be paid for flying?"

"The poor man," Pat murmured.

"Poor man?"

"The man you're looking for."

"Poor man?" Ball repeated, astonished.

"Well, he's insane, obviously."

Ball stared at her. Pat looked down at him coldly.

"He's a sick man," she said. "Most policemen just don't seem to realize . . . well, you shouldn't talk about him as if he were just another . . . purse-snatcher."

Ball dropped his eyes. After a moment he said:

"I get it. Time for a lesson in psychology. All right," he reached out for his coffee. "Go ahead."

She looked at him for a moment. Then got up off his lap.

"Well, let's have the lecture," Ball said.

"If you're going to act like that—"

"I know I don't know anything about psychology," Ball said. "I know I'm just a dumb insensitive clod. But honey," he leaned forward brutally, "this here poor man you're talking about has killed, altogether, six people, six real live human people. Two of them women. Killed them for no damned reason in the world that makes a difference to me. If we don't get to him very quickly somebody else who is alive right at this moment, walking around healthy and full of beans right now, will be spread all over the county maybe this time tomorrow."

Pat sighed. "Harry, I wish you wouldn't—"

But Ball went on relentlessly. "You say he's sick. Yeah. Well. The people he killed are just as dead as if he was healthy as a pink hog. I don't want to know his temperature or his pulse or any of that. I leave that to people like you. My job is to get him. If I run across him I'll kill him."

Ball had not meant to be that brutal, but all of this had jarred him.

"What an awful thing to say." Pat rose, flushed.

"Listen, now, this is my job. I don't mind you passing judgment on Cezanne or how to do a hysterectomy or any of that, okay. But this is my job and I am not bad at it. My job is to see that this joker does not kill anybody else and if I have to kill him to do it then that's my job, and this poor man stuff is not for me."

"So that's what it is," Pat said softly, staring at him. "Your pride has been hurt. It's your pride."

"Pride, hell!" Ball said. Now he stood up. "I've seen it too many times. We're always the villains, guys like me, the brutal cops. Every day we get the sociologists, the psychologists, coming down and telling us what we do wrong.

You've got to treat poor Ferd gently, he's not a common criminal, he's sick! And so we give them poor Ferd and they treat him in some understaffed hospital and have to let him go too soon and then we only have to get him again, and again . . ."

"I'm sorry," Pat said, still staring at him. "But you know, I don't think you'd kill him."

"You don't think I would, huh?"

"You couldn't anyway. You won't have a gun."

"They're arming the planes," Ball grinned. "Old Lockwood's having them install guns in the planes, just in case. He said he wouldn't send his boys looking for any killer without a chance to fight back."

"Now you're being melodramatic," Pat said, stiffening.

"Another four-barrelled word," Ball said. "Where's my hat?"

"Harry," Pat said. He stopped.

"It's the college, isn't it? That's what's holding you back."

"Holding me back from what?"

"From loving me."

It was the first time the word "love" had ever come out between them. Ball said nothing. He stared at her, tortured by the sweet sight of her, by the proud rage within himself.

"Harry," she said, pleading.

"No," Ball said. "It's no good. You won't even leave my job alone. What am I if you take over my job?"

He went on out the door. He did not look back. Something inside was telling him that all this was ridiculous, that he would probably never even see the killer, that some of what she had said was right, was true, but . . . he did not turn back. He drove home through the same rain that was falling, at that moment, on Arthur Hemminge.

The next day Hemminge did not fly. He was busy preparing bombs. He wasted a lot of time trying to be complicated and exact, but in the end he decided on simple gasoline. He puttered away most of the afternoon, humming with delight. But just before sundown, he went back into the house and stumbled again across the body of his wife.

After that he had a very difficult time. He could not seem to think clearly. Almost immediately the headache began coming back. The glowing lights began again in the corners of his eyes; he could feel the pressure building as if black water was being pumped into his head. He was tremendously depressed; he became violently angry. Usually the headaches gave him a few days peace in between, but now he had hardly gotten over one when another one began. He raged around the yard while he still had his sight, kicking, destroying, emptying gasoline and burning it. Then he blacked out.

When he came to, it was dark and the stars were out. He could not move. He lay on the ground in the cool grass, staring upward. The pain in his head had come and gone, looking upward into the cool heaven, the mighty black, he felt a moment of enormous peace. He slept.

He awoke some time later, just before the sun came up. He was still in the grip of a deadly paralysis; he had to fight himself to move, get up. He staggered back to the house, but did not go in. He sat on the porch. He had not shaved in several days; his beard was thick and dark. He lifted his face to the morning, remembering last night's brief moment of peace. He prayed. What he said did not make any sense, but there was no one to hear him. He prayed for a long while, tears streaming down his cheeks. Eventually he stopped.

It's time to fly, he thought. In the red glow of the horizon he could sense men moving about him —Pilots! Man your planes! He could see long lines of great black planes outlined against the sky, flames winking on in the exhausts one by one. I'm coming, he said aloud.

He rose and ran out to his plane, hearing the squadron thump by around him in heavy flight boots. He started to sing. He gassed the plane and loaded the gun. Planes roared all around him. He took his place in the line, answering commands over the radio from the tower. When it was his turn, he took off and climbed high up into the sun, along with the rest of the Dawn Patrol. When the squadron broke off, Hemminge waved them all good-bye. He settled down alone, the hunter, searching for game in the clear vaulted sky.

Just before he took off that morning, Harry Ball was handed a letter from Pat. One of the boys had gone up to the hospital where she worked and she had given it to him to deliver. Ball stuffed the letter into his shirt pocket, unopened, and took off. Once out of the traffic pattern, he pulled back on the stick and began the long slow climb to the west, toward the mountains. The letter was heavy in his pocket, but he did not open it. There was a force in him urging him to open the window and let the letter slip out into swift empty air.

Harry Ball was a hard man and he had not broken with Pat lightly; for two days now he had been making it clear to himself that he would not call her again, he would not see her again. He admitted to himself that he loved her, but that made no difference. He had come very close to kneeling to her, but his pride had held him back. And he knew that because of his pride he had lost her, and he also knew that there was nothing else he could have done. Because there was that

same proud thing in Pat which also could not kneel to him. And what kind of marriage would that make? Ball thought, two people forever fighting each other for control. And after all, Ball thought, I'm thirty years old. Maybe I am not a man for marriage.

So it was all done. Ball looked around at the sky and made an effort to push Pat out of his mind. He flew on over the mountains, high in the morning sun, forcing himself to think about the killer—whom he could begin now to really and truly hate, a startling feeling, a new and murderous feeling .But now Ball had something personal in this, and so scanned the sky intently, searching for any other plane in the dark blue above, forgetting Pat enough to feel a stomach-tightening thrill as he approached a high bank of clouds, thinking that the killer could be waiting just ahead, hanging swift and hidden in among the soft white folds.

But the killer did not come, and abruptly the murderous feeling in Ball died. The sky was wide and white and empty. Ball flew on toward the west with the letter in his pocket, soothed by the drone of his engine, and gradually the fact of the letter in his pocket no longer jarred him. I can handle it, he thought. I can say that I won't call her again and I won't. And he knew that to be true. Then he took the letter out calmly, coldly, and opened it.

My darling—Ball read—I love you. I have been sitting here all night trying to think of the right words, but all that matters is that I love you. I cannot get over the feeling that I have really and truly lost you, that you will never come back. My darling, I have been terribly wrong. You are all I want in the world. Because you mean so much to me I have tried to mean something to you, but I had never tried to make anyone love me before and I did not know how. I had to be something special to you, but all I had to give were a few long words and theories I learned in school, and I only wanted to impress you, but more than anything else now I want you, and no theories, no words. I accused you of pride, but it was my own pride that hurt us. Darling. I do not care about pride. I love you. I will love you whether or not you have to kill, whether or not you come back to me. I love you. I can't seem to say that enough. I only wish I had said it before, that it is not too late. But it is all stored up in me, waiting to come out. I will come to you, if you will only call. I love you. Pat.

Ball put the letter down. He was shaken. Well, he thought. He

studied the letter for a long moment, trying to get his mind into focus. She went a long way, he thought. Somebody had to give and she saw that and so she gave. And it was her place to give in, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

In the midst of all his emotion, in the midst of the absolute certainty that he had been right all along, Ball felt a sudden stab of doubt. There was something wrong. He did not know what it was, but it was jarring him. It began to occur to him that he had humbled her, had forced her to come to him. But . . . was that bad? He had needed her to come to him. He did not know why that was so but it was so. He flew on in a straight line, thinking about it, trying to discover the thing that still bothered him. He flew on without looking around him, or behind, up at the sun, and in the end the letter nearly cost him his life.

Hemminge came down on him from directly above, out of the sun.

The first Ball knew of it was a pluck, plucking sound at his right wing. He turned and stared stupefied at black holes being stitched with astounding speed across the metal. What saved him was instinct. He rammed the left wing hard down, dropping the nose; the bullets meant for his cabin zipped by him through the air. He did not see the other plane coming, but he heard it go by, felt the blast of air from it going by. He dropped far down to the left before pulling up and he had no idea what to do. At the top of his climb he saw the other plane for the first time and stared at it across the open air, losing precious time just to see it, still stunned, and realized that it was a Comanche, a trim new Comanche, blue and silver and glittering in the sun.

It came at him again, nose on and shooting. He swung hard to get away and made a very bad mistake; the Comanche slipped lethally in on his tail and bullets plucked again at the Navion, at the fuselage behind him. He thought of the radio, for a call for help, but there was no time. He needed both hands to fly the plane. He dropped the nose again, gathering speed, rocking wildly back and forth, but the Comanche stayed with him. A bullet smashed through the canopy above him, spattering pieces into his hair. He had an enormous urge to pull up, but once again instinct saved him, telling him that if he pulled up now the Comanche would have him broadside, a lovely shot right into the cockpit. He did the only thing he had left to do—he let down flaps and hauled back on the throttle. The Navion slowed drastically; the Comanche overshot and brushed him going by, picking up speed.

Ball fought for altitude, but it was impossible to keep the Co-

manche below him. It was much faster than he was; it gave him no time for the radio. As it came at him again he turned to face it, in desperation he pushed the little button on the dash that fired his gun. The Navion kicked back as the gun went off; he could see the bullets sliding away, missing, but the Comanche veered crazily and Ball heard incredible sounds begin on the radio receiver.

It was a long eerie second before Ball understood. The killer was speaking to him. The Comanche had swung off high above him in a confused circle, and was speaking, yelling. In German.

Ball did not know any German, but there was no mistaking the gutteral sounds. The killer probably thought he was fighting a real war, against a German ace. But there was no mistaking the other thing, the weird, jittery, unnatural thing in the voice that came down from the other plane. Dribbling, spattering sounds. The killer was shouting at him, and coming down.

Ball had time for a quick cry into the radio; Harry Ball, Mayday, Mayday, near Bear Creek, over Bear Creek—before he had to fight again to keep the Comanche off. He wanted to get one more message across, at least one, that the killer was flying a blue and white Comanche, but bullets came into the canopy again and the killer would not stop talking, and the voice rattled Harry Ball's mind so that he could not speak, but had to go down again in a dive, with the Comanche following. He pulled the same trick again, and it worked again, and as the Comanche slid by him Ball raised his nose slowly and the killer was dead ahead, and Harry Ball's hand was on the machine gun button, and time froze as Ball looked down and saw the black helmet in the cockpit, the wild green scarf around the neck, no sound coming over the radio now, and Harry Ball didn't shoot.

He pulled up slowly; the Comanche went down and away. Harry Ball felt sick in the pit of his stomach. He felt that he had almost done a dirty thing. It would have been like running over a dog that comes out in front of you on the highway. It struck him now that Pat had known that he would not be capable of doing this thing, just as he had known it, but had been too perverse to admit. And then a new sound came over the radio, a strange deep voice, puzzled, plaintive, in English:

"But why didn't you shoot?"

Harry Ball did not answer. He radioed another quick Mayday, giving the Comanche's serial number. But the Comanche broke in, coming back at him, saying, "You should have shot. You had me fair and square."

But now Ball was in control. The Comanche seemed no longer as fast and sure, and Ball watching it sensed that the Comanche was

through, and knew at the same time that if he had to kill the Comanche he would do it, as soon as it became really necessary, because regardless of the sickness in this man he had his job to do—but thank God it was not going to be necessary. He said into the radio: "Give up, Comanche. I'll follow you down."

At that moment something caught the corner of his eye. Glancing up quickly, he saw the jets coming, two of them, trailing thin smoke down the sky. Ball said something else into the radio, but the Comanche did not answer. It swung quickly to meet the jets, a lovely little plane gleaming a burning blue in the afternoon sun. It rose up toward them and the jets broke apart, swung out in a wide pincer, and the Comanche went up between them, climbing.

Ball tried to follow, but the Navion was too slow. The Comanche went on rising, higher, higher, and now again Ball could hear sound on his radio, an even stranger sound, *singing*. The man was singing now, a broken unintelligible song in that eerie unnatural voice, and even the jets were silent, but swung easily around the little plane like huge fast fish around a slow blue minnow. They would follow him wherever he went. It was all done and they knew it, and as Ball watched he saw the Comanche flip suddenly, roll over on its back and it began to go down.

The man was still singing, humming. Ball listened to him and watched the plane go down, picking up speed, falling faster and faster with the engine wide open, boring straight down, the watching jets sweeping grandly down after it. For a moment Ball thought that the Comanche was making one last effort to get away, but then the singing stopped and there was a dead silence in the radio, and the Comanche kept going down, moving so fast now that Ball knew he would never pull it out any more, not even if he wanted to. And so the Comanche went straight down, falling out of the sunlight into the rising dark, and the man in the plane began to speak, praying, and he was still praying when the Comanche blew up in the rocks.

The three planes circled above aimlessly, silently. Ball could not think of much to say to the other men. They did not say much to him. After a moment he heard one of the jet pilots give the position of the wreck. He turned off then and started the long flight home.

When he got home, he called Pat and told her that he loved her.

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