ALFRED

NOVEMBER 35¢

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

MENRAD MAYER

Dear Readers,

It behooves me to inform you that October 26th through Halloween has been designated Festival of Mysteries. You may well ask, "What in the world does this mean?" I assume that during this period it is one's moral obligation to do nothing but read mysteries, because mysteries are more mystifying and entertaining than ever, and it is not by bread—or food substitutes—alone that man lives.

I'm also sure that you are all eager to know that my eldest granddaughter, Mary, is making a small, but theatrically important appearance this fall on my TV show. It is a drama which stars Hermione Gingold and Pat Hitchock—who is my daughter and also an editor of this fine publication. And so at last there are three generations of my family in what is irreverently termed show biz.

Those of you who are young—in spirit or otherwise—have been insisting that an Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine Club be formed—in my honor of course. And so I humbly bow to the will of my admirers. Please direct all questions concerning membership, and the organization of a club in your area, to Pat Hitchcock, P. O. Box 434, Tarzana, California. In any event, have a shuddering good time with the stories that follow.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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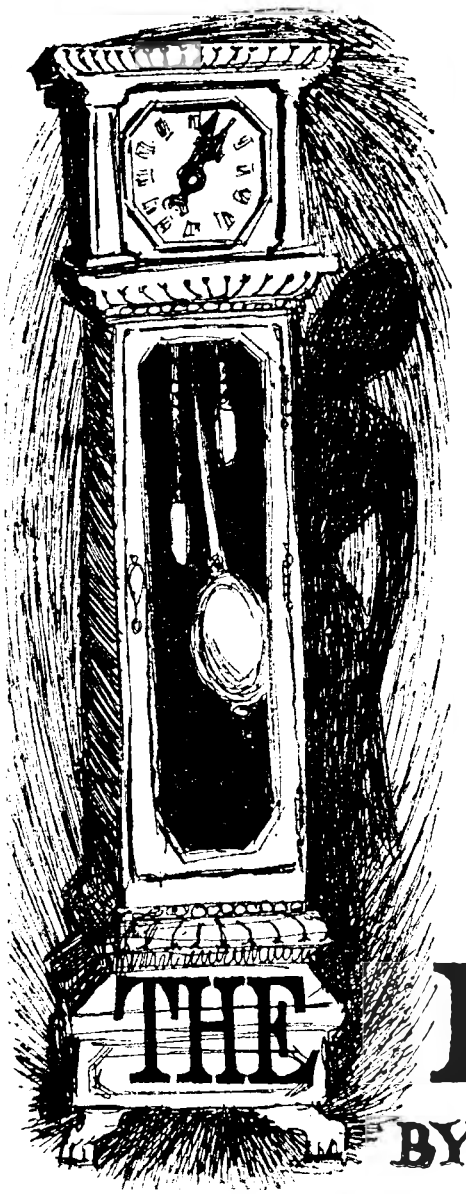


THE EMPTY

BY DONALD HONIG

THE GATE squeaked with a soft feminine whine as he pushed it shut behind him. It made him pause for a moment on the walk and look at the house. The house was dark, rising somberly in the night. He wondered if she were awake, if perhaps the gate-squeak had awakened her. But he really didn't care. It had gone so far now that he no longer cared. But the scenes were getting on his nerves, the constant repetitions, the accusations (which he no longer bothered to deny), the tirades.

He went up the walk and up the porch steps, reaching for his key. He let himself in, closing the door behind him. The moment he was in the house he sensed the hostility, the hatred generated there by her presence, by her constant unremitting resentment.

He slipped the key back into his pocket and was about to go upstairs when her voice came out of the dark, calm, controlled, pronouncing

Marriage is an institution, especially so when it is an unhappy marriage. Nonetheless, our drama is not meant to teach anyone the fine points of marital murder. Oh, no; it hops over those to the vital ones.

his name as if she had just decided what it was after hours of silent contemplation.

"Carl."

He stopped short at the foot of the stairs, his hand on the end of the bannister. He knew just where she was standing, beside the old grandfather clock in the corner near the door. When she waited for him it was always there.

"I should be used to it by now," he said, "but still you always startle me. Why the devil don't you let me know you're there? At least leave a light on."

"Why should I?" she said tersely from the dark, and he could see, without really looking, her sharp, tight-lipped face, her small intense eyes beginning to smolder. "Do you ever do anything in the light? Do you ever warn me?"

"You know where I was," he said, his voice quiet, patient. He could see her there now next to the clock, next to the momentus sway of the pendulum.

"No I don't. I want you to tell me. I want you to keep telling me every time you go, until your conscience begins to throb against your head."

"Please, Laura. Not again."

"Yes again. And again and again a thousand times until you stop it."

"Or until I leave you."

"You'll never do that."

Now she would say: Because what will you do? Where will you go? You don't have money or a job. I'm keeping you here and supporting you with the money you married me for, doing it because once I believed in you and loved you. . . .

"Shut up!" he cried, even before she had said it.

"Yes, Carl."

"Dammit, Laura, can't you get used to a thing being what it is?"

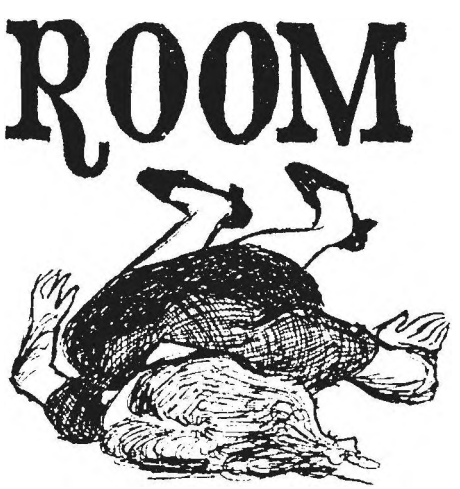
"I'm used to you, Carl, but not what you're doing. No woman can ever accustom herself to that."

"Don't you know how many men see other women?"

"Are you trying to justify yourself, Carl?"

"I don't have to justify myself. Not to you or anyone else," he said. He began to feel a dangerous calm, the first broodings of a great storm. He began to turn cold. He could feel it rising in him, seeping into him from the tense, hostile dark as from some black reservoir. He was fascinated by it, as if it were new strength.

Who did she think she was? Did



she think she owned him body and soul with her rotten money?

He moved toward her, dizzily exhilarated by the strange, dangerous calm that had seized him, the gray, heatless rage that had begun to foam in his blood.

She was alarmed. The way he was moving towards her through the dark: so silent, so intent.

"Carl!" she said, her voice oddly quiet, but sharp and alive with terror. "Don't. . . ."

They struggled in the dark, against the clock. They thudded against the old clock. The pendulum continued its patient, momentous sway. They twisted away from the clock, in tense, desperate quiet, her throat gargling hollowly. He whirled her again and she fell to her knees, his hands deep in her throat. She glared up at him, her mouth gaping, wordless. Their eyes were mere inches apart; his, cold, intent; hers, shining with death's light.

Then he let go. She fell sideways, heavily, inert. She lay beneath the pendulum's infinite, dispassionate sway. From deep in the old clock came a soft ticking, like a tongue clucking remorse.

He looked around. It was odd, he thought, how nothing had been disturbed, how the quiet was still there, how everything was either naively unaware or disinterested. A murder had just been committed here and nothing had changed. Not even himself. He felt very calm about it. He was not even breathing heavily. His hands, which had so personally and effectively done it, felt no different. He was standing there as if nothing had happened.

Well, perhaps nothing had. From the point of view of punishment, murders occurred only if people found out about them. Now, he wasn't going to go around and tell people he had murdered his wife; nor would she be telling anyone about it; and the only thing the old clock would ever tell would be time.

He went into the living room, pulled closed the blinds and turned on the lamp. He took off his jacket and lighted a cigarette. From his easy chair in the living room, he could see part of Laura's crumpled body. Profoundly, he contemplated it, holding his cigarette in front of his mouth, the smoke rising diagonally across his face. What to do with her now?

Then he remembered reading recently about a skeleton being dug out of the basement of some old house that was being torn down. The skeleton—it had been that of a woman—had been there for at least fifty years, it had been estimated. There, he told himself, someone else had done it and got by with it, lived his life and been buried a virtuous man.

So Carl Bogan went down to the basement. With a pick-axe he was able to split the floor. He tore up large chunks of the concrete. Then he was digging in the dark, soft

earth. He trembled with excitement. Carefully he hollowed out a place. Then—it was in the silent morning hours now—he went upstairs and got his wife. He carried her down to the cellar and placed her in the grave.

There was an old bag of cement in the cellar. It was the sort that was already blended with sand, for the convenience of the week-end handyman. He mixed the cement with water and soon had healed over the wound in the floor. By this time sunlight was streaming pleasantly through the small cellar windows.

When he was through, he sat down in an old wicker chair that was in the cellar and smoked a cigarette, staring at the sinister place. Later he covered it with the hall rug.

And so she was gone.

But people would notice that. Now he set about contriving a story to account for her disappearance. That would not be so difficult, though, because Laura had never made herself very prominent in the neighborhood. It was not one of those neighborhoods where each family knows the pedigree and income of the next. Carl's philandering had made Laura ashamed (she believed that everyone knew; but Carl had been much smoother than that) and so she had isolated herself to the extent where her sudden absence would go unnoticed.

To her distant relatives in California, he wrote that she was ill. He took care not to alarm them, for he did not want them suddenly rushing to visit. (Laura was a fairly wealthy relative.) But he made his point. In fact, that afternoon he wrote four different letters to the relatives, to be mailed out a week apart, describing Laura's various sufferings, improvements, relapses, and subsequent death.

A few days past. On the third day he realized he had not left the house since the night of the murder. He chided himself. There was nothing to fear, no one would rush in and dig her up if he left. But that was the feeling he had.

Then the telephone rang. He picked it up. The call was for Laura. It was the butcher. Mrs. Bogan had not come by for her order. Was there anything wrong?

"No," Carl said. "Nothing is wrong. Mrs. Bogan isn't feeling well."

Sympathy from the butcher. Just the thing he needed. He cut short the butcher and hung up.

It started him thinking again. He had said there was nothing wrong, then went on in the next breath and said that she was sick. Things like that could make people suspicious. Maybe the people in the neighborhood weren't that blind, that indifferent after all. Eventually someone would begin to notice that Mrs. Bogan was no longer there, would begin to ask questions.

Laura might have had some

friends. Thinking about that, Carl realized that he knew very little about his wife's habits. He was out of the house for whole days, sometimes for several days. How did he know what she did, to whom she talked?

He took a nap that afternoon. During it he had a bad nightmare. As desperately as his subconscious struggled to break the bond of sleep and wake him, it could not. He slept, sweating and tossing, through the long, harrowing nightmare. Laura was trying to dig her way out through the cellar. He could hear her scratching. There were muffled cries of terror and rage. The scratching grew louder, became a pounding. The concrete began to buckle. There was a terrible eruption in the cellar, rocking the foundation, the walls, rattling the windows.

He sprang up, his eyes aghast at what they had just seen. He looked around. It was very quiet. Too quiet. He sensed some deception. In his stockinged feet he ran down to the basement, his heart flooded with dread. In his panicky haste he almost tripped going down the cellar steps. Then he was there, standing over the rug, hot with apprehension. He bent and using both hands snatched it back.

The spot was undisturbed. He laid the rug back in place and stood up straight. He covered his eyes with his hand. What was the matter with him? Then he knew. He had been asking for such a nightmare, hanging around the house like that.

So he went out. Immediately he felt refreshed, relieved, as if some dark challenge had been withdrawn. He stood on the sidewalk in front of the house, in the bright sunlight. Then a voice said:

"Why, Mr. Bogan."

Immediately his heart constricted, the serpent of conscience binding it. He mustered his composure, rebuking himself for having to muster it.

The woman next door was standing there, a rather fat woman in blue jeans and one of her husband's abandoned white shirts. She held a pair of hedge-clippers in her hand.

"How are you, Mr. Bogan?"

He was fine.

"And Mrs. Bogan? I haven't seen her for almost a week now."

There! Gone only three days and already it was almost a week. Next they would begin whispering. Then they would accuse him of murder.

"She's not feeling well."

A lisp of sympathy. As if this woman really cared! Blasted busybody. Next she would want to know—

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No, no thank you."

"Is she very ill?"

"I don't know."

"Have you had the doctor?"

Already in the woman's eyes was the accusation, not of murder yet (give them time!), but that he had beat her; that she was laid up with bruises.

"Yes. He says she needs rest. Rest and absolute quiet."

"May I drop in on her? Perhaps I can cook her some soup."

"No, no thank you," he said quickly. Too quickly. Damn, what was the matter with him! Then: "I'm taking care of her."

"But when you're off at work. . . ." They still believed he worked. At least he had kept *that* from them. But this fool woman was persistent. She would remain persistent until she became suspicious. And all out of the goodness of her heart.

"I'm going to take in a nurse," said. He said that too quickly. But he had to say it.

The woman smiled. Not suspicious now, not even persistent. It was remarkable what a small lie could do, in the right place. He smiled. They smiled at each other, in the sunlight.

Then he went back into the house, locking the door. He sat down. What had he said? But it had been the only way to drive her back. A woman like that could become possessed by her good intentions and invade the house with her soup.

But maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all. He began to think seriously about it. While he couldn't very well hire a nurse, he *could* bring in someone to take care of the house, someone to cook and clean while his wife went through her illness. The person needn't ever have to see Mrs. Bogan. Mrs. Bogan would be deathly ill. She would require absolute rest and quiet. There would be strict orders about that. That would alleviate all suspicion. It would give him breathing time while he pondered what to do. But either way, he had committed himself to getting someone.

An ad went into the paper. Someone needed to keep a house while the mistress was ill. Someone to cook and clean and mind her business.

A few days later Betta Cool rang the bell. Carl opened the door. She was holding the newspaper, the page folded to the want ads. She was a tall woman with a rather pale face, not pretty, but not homely either. Pale and almost pretty, with thin, fine lips and clear thoughtful eyes. Not yet forty, his expert eye told him. And a woman, his finely-honed instincts in these matters told him, who might even be trusted, eventually. Anyhow, a woman who would not talk. He could tell that she was already replete with other secrets.

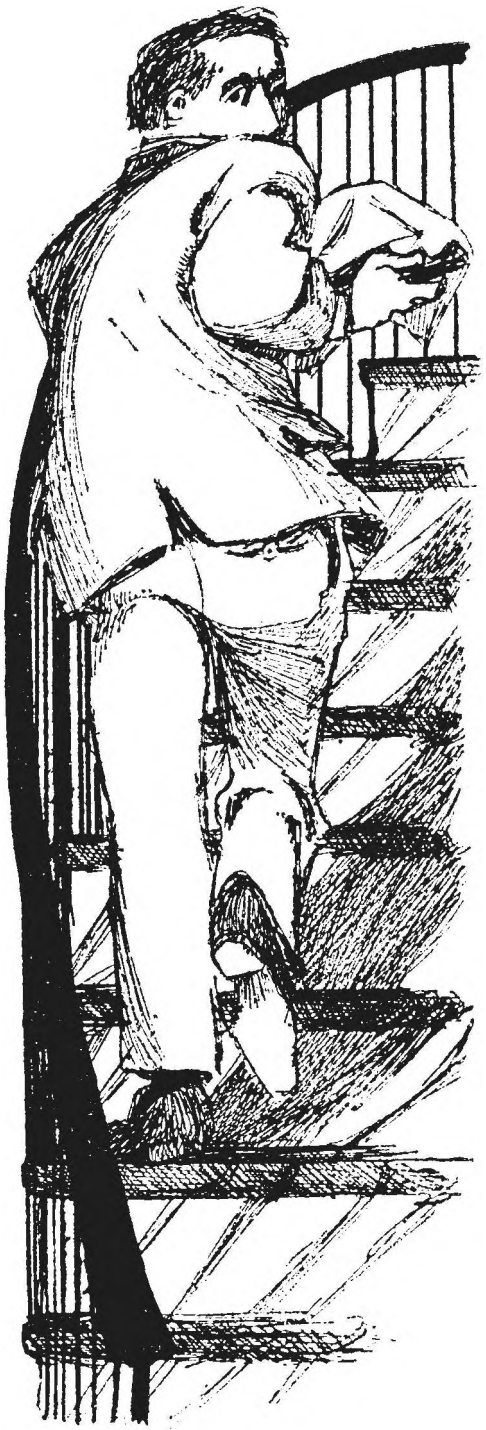
There was a quiet, thoughtful interview. Mrs. Cool—divorced, she said—had done this sort of thing before. She lived on the other side of town, alone. She answered his questions with monosyllables, having about her a rather English, or perhaps it was Irish, way.

Cook?

"Yes."

Keep house?

"Yes." And she volunteered: "I



can nurse, too, if I should be asked."

"Oh no," Carl said. "This is strictly a domestic job. Mrs. Bogan needs absolute rest and quiet, that's all she needs." He said this in the gravest of whispers, to emphasize. "The doctor looks in on her once a week."

Mrs. Cool gave him a long, steady gaze. She wanted to know something, but would not ask her question directly.

So he told her, slowing his voice with the proper emotion, "She was to have a child."

Mrs. Cool sympathized.

"She's very, very weak," Carl said, lowering his eyes in despair, trying to make it as ominous as he could without abandoning all hope.

So the pact was made. Mrs. Cool would come in the mornings and clean the house—downstairs only—and cook Mrs. Bogan's meals. Mr. Bogan would take them upstairs—where he would sit in Laura's room and eat them and bring the empty dishes back down with Mrs. Bogan's comments.

"You're a fine cook, she says, Mrs. Cool."

"Thank you, sir."

He watched her. Not a bad looking woman, either. And occasionally she stole a glance at him. She was feeling terribly sorry for him, he sensed. He knew what that could lead to. Women and their pity. She prepared special meals for him, with which he was forced to stuff himself.

So it became a routine. It went on for a week, then two weeks. Every morning and afternoon Carl dutifully and solemnly carried the cloth-covered trays up to the empty room, closed the door and sat there and ate, occasionally murmuring a few words of conversation, hoping Mrs. Cool downstairs would hear.

Every afternoon at four she departed. One afternoon he walked her to the bus stop.

"How is she getting on?" Mrs. Cool asked.

He shook his head. "She stays the same. And that's not good. The doctor said—he was here yesterday just after you left—that she's not making any progress, and in her condition that's bad. She just lies there, staring at the walls, hardly saying a word."

"Thinking of the child, no doubt."

"Most likely."

They came to the bus stop. She looked at him. "Frankly, Mr. Bogan," she said, "what do you think her chances are?"

"Between you and me, Mrs. Cool, they aren't good. I could tell by the doctor's eyes."

"You poor man. How awful for you. I know that kind of loneliness. I have it in my own life."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

This next he could not repress: "Perhaps we might give one another some cheering."

He expected no response. But she surprised him:

"Perhaps some evening a neighbor can sit with her and we can see a movie together. It might do you some good."

"Yes," he said, brightening. "I wouldn't be surprised that it might."

So a "neighbor" began coming in the evenings. And Carl Bogan was at it again with a woman. Mrs. Cool's loneliness, her aloofness, once penetrated, crumbled with a devastating crash.

Their evenings were gay and pleasant. He hardly seemed a man with a dying wife. They danced and went to shows and drank, and he took her home.

"You make me feel like a schoolgirl all over again, Carl," Betta said.

"I think we both needed a change."

"You don't think what we're doing is wrong, do you?"

"Of course not. And get that idea out of your head, Betta. We're simply two human beings trying to make the best out of the poor lot that life's given us."

"How soon do you think it will be for her?" Betta asked.

"I don't know," he said. "She never changes. She just lies there."

"It seems interminable."

Which was exactly how Carl wanted it to be. He had begun to wonder what he ought to do. He could have Laura die, of course. But that would present new problems. The burial could hardly be secret. People would have to be in-

formed. A death certificate would have to made out. And there was the undertaker. All sorts of complications, and this would be the case even with a private funeral.

He even thought of taking Betta into his confidence. She loved him. That made a woman a slave. But he was afraid. He had got by with it this far and did not like the idea of jeopardizing himself. But still, something would have to be done. and soon.

Probably the only thing he could do was disappear. And that wasn't as bad as it sounded. There was an excellent chance that Laura too, like the other woman, would not be found for fifty years. He could say he was taking her away to convalesce. That would be the end of it. Who would ever think of digging up the basement?

He was pondering all of this as he brought Laura's tray up to her. He sat in the room and ate, staring out the window. He could sell the house. At least he would have some money from that. Of course it was a pity to lose all the rest of Laura's money, but that was the penalty he had to pay.

And then a new idea struck him. Why lose all of that money? Why not Betta in place of Laura? With a private funeral he could get away with it. The only ones who would see her would be the undertakers, and they did not know Laura. It was a veritable stroke of genius. How wonderfully and ironically the pieces fell into place! But he would have to figure it carefully.

He came down to the kitchen with the empty dishes.

"Did she eat well?" Betta asked.

"Yes," he said, looking at her strangely.

"Carl," she said. "Do you love me?"

"Why, Betta, I think you know that. In fact I've been upstairs thinking about you."

"When she's gone, will you still love me?"

"More than ever."

"Then it will be soon, Carl."

"What do you mean?"

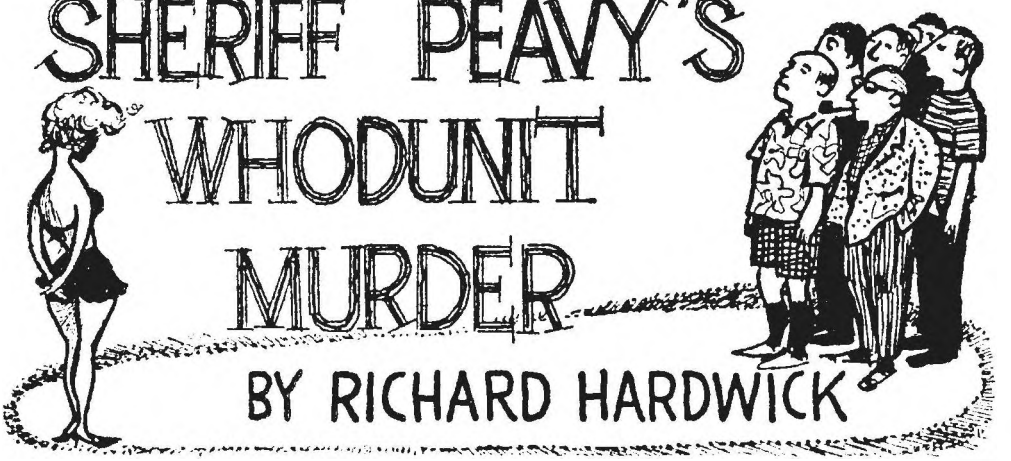
She looked at the empty dishes. Then she looked at him.

"I put enough poison in her food to make it easy for her."

He blanched. Then he began to feel it, the massive feel of it clouding up through him.

He managed to call her a fool before he died, writhing furiously on the floor under her astonished eyes.

SHERIFF PEAVY'S WHODUNIT MURDER



BY RICHARD HARDWICK

In the case of some homicides, everyone seems to be a part of the act. It does indeed seem surprising how one small victim—and dead, at that—can produce such a plethora of suspects.

DAN PEAVEY, Sheriff of Guale County, Georgia, cradled the telephone and leaned back in his ancient swivel chair with a deep sigh, the age-old sound of a man registering a mild, though definite, complaint.

"Pete," Dan said to me, "did it ever occur to you that there's a connection between temperature, humidity, and murder?"

"It has occurred to me from time to time," I said, closing the magazine I was reading. I eased my feet off the desk and waited for Dan's elucidation.

"When it's too hot to do anything else—even go fishin'—then watch out. Somebody's goin' to get himself murdered." Dan hauled himself wearily out of the chair and ran one hand through the thatch of snow-white hair that sprouted like a bush from his head. "Fella just got shot over on Little Piney Island."

"Little Piney? Say, ain't that where that writer, J. Melvyn Collinger, lives?"

"Lived," said Dan. "Past tense. He's the one that got shot."

The sheriff and me—I'm Pete Miller, deputy—started out toward the northeast part of the county, to Frenchman's Landing, where the woman who had called told Dan she'd meet us.

"Who was she, Dan?" I asked as I wrestled the Chevvy over the old road.

"Said her name was LaVerne Appleton, one of Collinger's payin'

guests. Said there were six real good suspects."

"Six, huh?"

"Yep. Also said she was one of 'em."

"She said what?"

Dan shook his head. I don't get it either, but I suppose we'll find out soon enough."

I pulled into old man Franklin's one pump gas station and grocery store at Frenchman's Landing. The screen door of the store opened and old man Franklin came scurrying out sideways, actually *smiling,* and holding the door back with both arms. Then she came out, with a little intimate nod of thanks. She was small, but that only added to the overall impact. If she had been large, it would have been too much to believe. Everything about her was just right, and then some. She wore a sunsuit, a little two-piece thing that seemed almost apologetic for the job it was trying to do.

"Thank you for everything, Mr. Franklin," she said in a honey-voice. "You've been just wonderful." And then she planted a kiss on the old boy's cheek, probably the first kiss he'd gotten in twenty-five years.

"You must be Miss Appleton," Dan said. "Matter of fact, you *got* to be Miss Appleton."

She smiled at Dan. "That's right. And you're the sheriff?"

"Sheriff Peavy," he acknowledged. "And this here's my deputy," he added in an off-hand way with a gesture of his hand.

"Pete Miller," I grinned. "Deputy Sheriff Pete Miller at your service ma'am—"

"Now, Miss Appleton," Dan broke through, "if you'll tell us a little more about what's happened."

The smile faded from her face. It was like seeing the sun disappear behind a cloud. A pretty cloud. "Melvyn was shot this morning, that's all I know. And that's all the others say they know."

"The others?" Dan prompted.

"Yes. There were six of us on the island, beside Mel and the cook. This is the cook's day off, so it's just the six of us. One of us is the killer." She batted the longest eyelashes I ever saw.

"Well," said Dan, "I guess we best get on out there and see what's what."

Little Piney Island was about a half mile up the river from Frenchman's Landing. We went in the outboard Miss Appleton had come down in. A little knot of people stood waiting on the pier when we reached the island.

"I suppose you're the law around here!" a small man with piercing eyes said loudly the moment I cut the motor. "Well, take a look around and you'll see a murderer. But let me add, I'd like to shake his hand, and don't let any of these phonies tell you they wouldn't do the same!"

"Can't keep it shut, can you, Arthur?" The man who spoke was totally different from the first one. He

was tall and thin with sunken eyes that gave him a sort of ascetic look. He wore a corduroy jacket, even though the temperature was well over ninety. A stub of a pipe hung from one side of his mouth and his hands were jammed deep in his pockets, as though he were expecting a chill.

"The odd part of it," he said, smiling wanly at Dan and me, "is that Paulk is right." He pulled his right hand out and poked it at Dan. "I'm Peter Haggarty, and the garrulous little fellow here is Arthur Paulk. Of course, you've met La-Verne." He smiled at Miss Appleton. "She was sent to get you because she's the only one we all agreed would not keep going once she reached the mainland.

"And this," he bowed toward the only other woman in the group, "is Anna Drucker." She was hefty, sour-faced, with Scandanavian features, blonde hair that seemed to have been cut with a dull machete, and was dressed in slacks and a baggy shirt. "Anna is a writer." He turned toward the knot of men. "Then we have Ian Jones. Ian is a tourist."

The man gave Haggarty a cutting look and stepped forward, like a soldier stepping out of ranks. "Peter is wonderful entertaining at birthday parties and *bar mitzvahs,* Sheriff. Actually, I'm a playwright—"

"A touring playwright," Haggarty spiked the attempted interruption by going on with the introductions. "Last in our insular rogues gallery, and least, I present Henry Epsom, the salt of the earth." He bowed toward a man who stood back from the others. He was as bald as a watermelon, and turned about as green at his introduction.

"Your little joke grew wearisome several days ago, Haggarty, which bears poor testimony to your imagined wit."

Dan nodded, apparently unimpressed by, if not unaware of, the side remarks. "Now, Mr. Haggarty, if you would show us the body."

Haggarty led the way to the house. Little Piney Island had been a fishing lodge originally, back in the twenties and thirties. The owner had died ten years or so ago and J. Melvyn Collinger bought the island from the widow. He moved there and established it as a retreat for artists and writers and anyone else who wanted a sort of sanctuary from civilization for awhile. There was no plumbing, no telephone, though there was electricity supplied by a war surplus unit. The buildings consisted of the main house, a two-storied affair with an open porch across the front and gabled windows upstairs, four cabins flanking the house, two to a side, and behind it several sheds that had seen use during the fish camp days, but which were now gradually collapsing.

We went across the porch and through the front door. "Right in

there, Sheriff," Haggarty said, indicating a closed door off the downstairs hall. "It's his study, the place he did his writing. We locked it as soon as we saw what had happened, didn't want to poke around, you know, messing up clues and that sort of thing."

"Who found the body?" Dan said. He held out his hand and took the key Haggarty offered.

"LaVerne found him about nine-fifteen. She let out a scream and the rest of us came on the run."

Dan turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. The room was large. Bookcases covered one entire wall, a fireplace stood alongside the door, and opposite, windows faced out over the marshlands. The remaining wall had a desk and two tables against it. On the desk was a typewriter, a chair before it. Beneath it lay the late J. Melvyn Collinger.

"There he is," Haggarty said superfluously.

"So he is," muttered Dan. He turned and took Haggarty's elbow. "If you'll wait outside, me and the deputy'll see what we can find out in here." He gently propelled the lanky form through the door and closed it behind him. "Figured we could do without the travelog for awhile," Dan said, running his hand thoughtfully through his hair.

The writer had been shot in the back, apparently while changing the ribbon in his typewriter, because there was no ribbon in the machine and a new one lay on the desk beside it. The typewriter keys were jammed where he had slumped forward against the keyboard before sliding to the floor. There were several notebooks and manuscript pages scattered over the tables.

"Ever read any of his books, Pete?" Dan said, kneeling beside the body.

"Couple. I ain't much for murder mysteries."

Dan grunted. We went about the room for a couple of minutes, looking. Beneath a chair near the door I found a cartridge case.

"Forty-five," I said, showing it to Dan. He glanced at it, nodded, and we went on with our search. Nothing else of any apparent significance turned up.

"Pete," Dan said presently, "you best run back to Frenchman's Landing and phone for Jerry and Doc Stebbins to come out and take Collinger's body back in. Can't afford to leave him layin' around too long in this hot weather. Meantime, I'll start questioning this bunch."

When I got back from my errand, Dan was sitting on a bench under a big live-oak by the river bank, talking to Haggarty.

I joined them. "Doc and Jerry'll be right out," I said.

"Mr. Haggarty was just giving me some interestin' information. According to him, Collinger wouldn't exactly have won a popularity contest around here."

"That's putting it mildly, sheriff.

Oh, he used to be all right. I've been here before. But this time the man was a detestable jerk."

"Detestable enough to kill?" I said.

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you're getting at, but I can't honestly say I'm sorry he's dead. As a matter of fact, I think I'm rather pleased about it."

"You're pretty frank for a man who's a suspect in a murder," said Dan.

Haggarty's eyebrows shot up for a moment; then a faint smile touched his lips. "Why, yes. Of course, I *am* a suspect. I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Just what was it that was so detestable about him?" Dan said, dabbing away at the perspiration beading his forehead. "If you didn't like the man, why didn't you just pack up and leave?"

Then Haggarty did a strange thing. He blushed. "Because of LaVerne—Miss Appleton. LaVerne said she would not leave until the first of the month, and, naturally, I stayed."

"Naturally?" I asked.

He gave a sigh. "LaVerne and I, well, we have a sort of understanding. It's supposed to be a secret, but I suppose under the circumstances I have to tell you." He fumbled in his pocket and brought out the pipe and a tobacco pouch. He began digging into the pouch, filling the pipe. His face darkened and he struck fire to a match and sucked the flame down into the packed tobacco, producing a dense cloud of blue smoke. "Dammit!" he said suddenly. "Mel was trying to break it up between LaVerne and me! He was a no-good—" He broke off and resumed smoking the pipe, glaring at Dan and me.

"I see," said Dan. "Well, I suppose that's for now. Oh, before you go, Mr. Haggarty, did you hear a shot this morning?"

Haggarty's brow furrowed. "No. I can't say I did. But that confounded electric plant was on out back, and it makes enough racket to wake the dead." He realized what he'd said, and smiled. "But it didn't, did it?"

"Pete, go get Mr. Paulk," Dan said. "And see if you can round up a little ice water while you're gone."

"Sheriff Peavy," said Mr. Arthur Paulk, "I don't know what that lush, Haggarty, has told you, but whatever it is you probably wasted your time listening. He wouldn't know the truth if it had polka-dots and grew on trees."

"Mr. Paulk," Dan said with just the right amount of authority, "we'd like to know your thoughts on the late Mr. Collinger. When and if Mr. Haggarty is murdered, then we'll gladly listen to your opinions of him."

"What? Oh. Yes, of course." Paulk took a couple of steps to the right and left on his stumpy legs,

then stopped, feet apart, hands behind his back. "Well, I didn't do it, if that's what you want to know!"

"Did you hear a shot this morning?"

"No," said Paulk. "It could have been while the electric machine was going. Made a godawful noise. Spoke to Collinger about it more than once."

"When was he last seen alive?" I asked.

Paulk rubbed his chin. "Last I saw him was at breakfast. We all pitch in on cook's day off, you see. I suppose it was about sevenish."

"What were you doing all morning?" Dan said.

"I was lying in a hammock reading a book. I'm not one of these pseudo-artistic snobs; I came out here simply to get away from my office. LaVerne told me about this place. Frankly, I wouldn't stay here five seconds if she weren't here. For some reason, she likes it."

"Miss Appleton?" Dan said gently. "You must have a pretty high opinion of the lady."

A smile eased over the little man's face. "Not just opinion, sheriff. LaVerne and I have an understanding —" He held up his hand suddenly, his chin jutting out."—nothing im*moral,* mind you! It's—she may one day become Mrs. Arthur Paulk." His smile broadened.

Dan cast me a quick glance. "That's—fine, Mr. Paulk. Congratulations."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything about it. It's a secret. LaVerne wants it that way for now."

The red line in the thermometer stretched up to ninety-eight, and that was in the shade. Anna Drucker sat in a wicker chair with a small typewriter on a table before her. It was clacking away like a machine gun.

"Sheriff wants to talk to you, ma'am," I said.

She paused for a moment, stared intently out at the river, then picked up a pencil and began to chew the eraser.

" 'Scuse me, Miss Drucker, but the sheriff—"

"Ha!" she said, spitting out a hunk of eraser. She resumed typing faster than before. Then, just as I was about to tap her on the shoulder, she jumped up and said, "I'm ready."

We went out and Dan motioned for her to sit. "Miss Drucker," he said, "is there anything you can tell us about this? Did you happen to hear a shot this morning?"

Her lips pushed out and she frowned. She shook her head. "No."

"Where were you during the morning?"

"Working, of course. I work, work, work, from morning till night. Right up there on the porch where the deputy found me."

"Collinger's study is just a few steps from there. Are you certain you didn't hear a shot?"

"Sheriff," she said patiently. "I have strong powers of concentration. When I am working, one could positively set off bombs all around me."

"Would you have any reason for wanting Mr. Collinger dead?" Dan said.

She gave us both a shrewd look. "For a small island, this place is certainly infested with informers. No doubt they told you, and in a way I suppose I did poke my neck out. I admit I told Mel I'd get him, but it was simply a figure of speech and not a real threat." She took a pack of cigarettes from her shirt pocket.

"Maybe we'd best hear your side of it," Dan said.

She lit the cigarette, nodding as she did so. "The louse stole from me. When I found out what he'd done, I said I'd get him." She held out her hands. "Do you put the cuffs on me now?"

Dan sighed at the attempted humor. "It's kinda warm today, Miss Drucker; so I'd be obliged if we could get through this without the window dressing. What did he steal from you?"

"Mel was supposed to be helping me with my novel," she said. "Not ghost-writing, mind you, just technical help. I—I confided in him more than I should have, I know that now, and I told him of an idea I had for a television script. Mel stole the idea and sold the script. That's all. He denied it, naturally, and I had no way to prove the idea was mine, but the others heard the argument we had."

She snuffed the cigarette out after two long puffs and put the stub back in the pack. "Actually, even after what happened, I suppose I still liked him. I was sorry about what happened to him."

Dan studied a small space of ground at his feet. We were all looking at it intently when he fired his next question. "What was the relationship between Miss Appleton and Mr. Collinger?"

She gave him a sly smile. "I sort of figured you'd ask me that, sheriff. Nobody else you could ask, was there?" She took the cigarette butt out again and re-lighted it. "Personally, I think she's a shill for this place. Look at the way those men hang around her. It's sickening! Every last one of them would have left it hadn't been for LaVerne. Not one of them gives a hoot about the island."

"I see," said Dan. "Well, if you think of anything else, let us know."

Henry Epsom was sitting in one of the skiffs at the dock. He had a fishing pole in his hands and a far away look in his eye. "Me next?" he said when he saw me coming out on the dock. I nodded and he climbed up from the boat.

"Is it always this hot down here, Sheriff?" he asked as he sat down on the bench beside Dan Peavy.

"If it was, Mr. Epsom, I'd o' left

here forty years ago." Dan crossed his legs and pinched the end of his nose. "Suppose you heard the shot this morning?"

"I really don't know," said Epsom, "so I suppose I can't say for sure. I'm a bit hard of hearing, you see, and sometimes I turn the volume down on my hearing aid when I don't care to listen. I was fishing most of the morning and if I heard a shot it was so faint I didn't notice it."

Dan sighed and rubbed his hand slowly over his eyes. "I reckon that's about as good as not hearin' it. By the way, what are you doing here, Mr. Epsom? Are you a writer or artist or something like that?"

"Heavens no! I'm in the contracting business. I'm a widower, sheriff, and I got a little money saved up. Me and Miss Appleton, well, I—we, its nothing definite you understand, but we—"

Dan nodded wearily. "I think I know what you're trying to say, Mr. Epsom. You're tryin' to tell us you and Miss Appleton have got a sort of understanding, is that it?"

"That's it! Only it's a secret; so I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything . . ."

"Mum's the word. Mum's the word."

"She said we should keep it a secret for a bit longer, sheriff," said Ian Jones, playwright, "but under the extenuating circumstances, I suppose the truth should be told."

"It would be helpful, I'm sure," Dan said, attacking his perspiring brow with a handkerchief.

"LaVerne and I are engaged. Not officially, but—"

"You have an understanding?" I said.

He looked at me fiercely. "That's right, an understanding, a perfectly moral arrangement which I am sure you backwoods people would not understand. And furthermore, I don't like your insinuating attitude one bit!"

"All right, Mr. Jones," Dan said. "Where were you when Collinger was shot?"

"How the devil should I know! You'll have to tell me when he was shot, and then I might be able to say where I was!"

I smiled at Dan's little snare.

"Well," Dan said, scratching his cheek with a forefinger, "we'll have a pretty good idea when Doc gets here. How did you feel personally about Collinger?"

"In a word," said Ian Jones, "I despised the man."

Dan's eyebrows went up a thirty-second of an inch. "Now, by golly, that's a frank statement if I ever heard one. What did he do to you?"

"He tried to discredit me in every possible way. He ridiculed my plays, said they were—" he almost choked on the words—"childish, asinine, immature, that sort of thing."

"And they weren't?"

"I've never had a play produced,

but that does not vindicate the things Collinger said! He's—he *was* not a qualified critic of drama; he was a hack writer of trash, a collaborator of trash, a perpetrator of trash—"

"We get the jist," said Dan. He cut a palmetto frond with his pocket knife and began to fan himself. "I sorta liked Collinger's stories, 'specially that one about the fella on the plane to South America."

"There's no accounting for taste," Jones snorted.

"Yeah, I suppose not," said Dan, grinning over at me.

Dan closed his eyes and leaned back against the tree when Jones had gone. "What do you make of it, Pete?"

"This LaVerne's the one that puzzles me. How do you suppose she got all those guys believing the same thing?"

Dan cocked an eye at me. "Son, I'm twice your age, and even *I* can figure that out! Guess we best talk to her some more, though."

LaVerne had changed into something even smaller than the first outfit when I found her. We went out to where Dan was dozing under the tree. He dragged himself to his feet when we got there. She sat down and Dan sat down and I stood and looked.

"Miss Appleton, looks to us like you mighta been working for Mr. Collinger," Dan said.

She looked startled for a moment, then she said, "Yes, sheriff, I was. Mr. Collinger was having trouble getting customers to come here in the hot weather, and I knew Mel and liked him, and—well, I was just helping him out."

"Do you realize all these men here think you're going to *marry* 'em?" Dan said.

She sighed. "Sheriff, it's just that since I was fifteen years old, I never learned to say no."

Dan and I looked at her in amazement."Never learned to . . ." Dan coughed and ran his hand through his hair. "I—I see, er, Miss Appleton . . ."

Deputy Jerry Sealey and Doc Stebbins coroner part-time, got to Little Piney Island at one o'clock. Doc examined the body.

"Hard to say, Dan, but I'd guess somewhere between seven and nine o'clock. That's as good as I can do without an autopsy. This weather don't help none."

"Well," Dan said, "I doubt if that'd help much now. Way it shapes up just about any of 'em coulda done it."

"Maybe even all together," I said brightly.

"Don't think so," said Dan. "Too many loners in this crowd."

"All except LaVerne Appleton, from what you told us," Jerry said.

Dan sat down on the edge of one of Collinger's writing tables. He

looked at the jammed typewriter, then picked up one of the notebooks and begun to thumb through it. After a few seconds he straightened up, his eyes narrowing. He put the notebook down and squatted before the typewriter, squinting at the machine.

"Ain't you ever seen a typewriter before, Dan?" Jerry said.

"Well, well, *well!*" Dan said, then he jumped up. "Pete! Go get all them people and have 'em out there on the porch right away. I believe we got this thing cracked!"

"Something's cracked," muttered Jerry.

In two minutes they were there, all a little blank-faced, all except Anna Drucker who still pounded away with a vengeance at her typewriter.

"Miss Drucker," Dan said politely, "if you'll stop for a minute or two?"

She finished a sentence, then looked up and folded her hands in her lap.

"Folks," Dan began, "it looks like we got this thing cleared up in record time, thanks to Mr. Collinger himself."

"Collinger? Mel?" several voices said.

"That's right. Seems the killer came in the room while Collinger was changing the ribbon in his typewriter. The way it stacks up, the killer probably said something to him so's he'd look around. Didn't want Collinger to die without knowin' who done it. Then, the killer shot him and rushed out of the room to get rid of the gun, not knowin' Collinger hadn't been killed outright."

Several mouths dropped wide open.

"Yep, he wasn't dead. Leastwise, not quite. He wasn't able to holler, or get a pencil or a pen, and there wasn't any ribbon or paper in the typewriter. But he knew he was dying, dying fast, and he named his killer before he went."

"How the devil could he do that!" Paulk snapped.

"Maybe you noticed the typewriter," said Dan. "The keys was all jammed together like he'd fallen on the keyboard after he was shot. Well, he didn't fall on it. He spelled out a name by jamming the keys in that particular order." Dan turned to face LaVerne Appleton. "He spelled out LaVerne, without the last 'e'. I'll lay odds a jury won't quibble about that, not a dyin' man's last efforts."

"Hold it!"

Everybody looked around to see Ian Jones standing there, eyes blazing.

"Collinger couldn't even die clean!" he shouted. "He lied with his dying breath! The stinking, rotten dog! If I hadn't already killed him, I'd do it again, and again and *again!*" He was screaming now, and Jerry and me rushed forward

and took a good, strong grip on his arms.

Jones showed us where he had tossed the forty-five in a creek, and about an hour's wading around in the mud brought it up. He was made as comfortable as possible in the Guale County jail, and Dan and Jerry and myself sat around the office, hashing it over.

"What about that typewriter business, Dan," Jerry asked. "How come Collinger would pull a stunt like that, particularly since it seems he left the whole island to her in his will?"

Dan grinned and tossed his feet up in the little groove on the left corner of his desk. "He didn't do that. He just fell on the keys when he was shot."

"You mean—you mean—"

" 'Fraid so. The way I figured it, it had to be one o' the men. LaVerne couldn'ta done it because she seemed to have a hard enough time saying 'no' to a man, much less killing one. The Drucker woman wasn't quite as mad as she let on about that business of Collinger stealin' her idea. Matter of fact, she seemed a little proud of it. So, that just left the men."

"But how'd you know it wouldn't backfire, Dan?" Jerry persisted.

"Ever take a real close look at Miss LaVerne Appleton?" Dan said with a grin.

Jerry swallowed, bobbing his Adam's apple. "Yep, I reckon I did."

"Well, everyone of those guys was sweet on Miss Appleton. I couldn't see any of 'em lettin' her take the rap for what he done, and that's the way it worked out."

"I don't reckon any of them'll be hanging around now that they found out she told the same thing to all the others," Jerry said.

I hadn't thought about that. The island was hers now, and she'd said she meant to go on running it. It seemed a pity for her to be out there with nobody but Anna Drucker.

"Dan," Jerry said. "No offense meant, but just how'd you happen to hit on that idea of the jammed typewriter business?"

Dan glowed at him for a minute, then settled back. "Might as well confess." He took out a notebook. It was the kind Collinger had on his desk. "I found the idea in here. Collinger was going to use it in a story, and it seemed like a shame to let it go to waste." Dan thumbed through the book thoughtfully. "You know, there's lotsa good ideas in here. I been thinkin' maybe this winter when it ain't so hot, I might take this little book and that old typewriter over yonder, and—" He looked up at Jerry and me and grinned. "Who knows . . .?"

But I wasn't listening. I was figuring on how soon I could get out to Little Piney Island. I wanted to find out for myself if LaVerne knew how to say 'no'.

Above the broad and busy avenue, high enough so the obligato of the traffic reached the hotel room as a merely faint whisper, the two men sat facing each other knee-to-knee. In their dark rather poorly fitted suits, their bodies were so frail and slender as to barely dent the cheap cotton spreads of the shabby cots upon which they sat. One man swiftly poured plum-brandy into water glasses. Eyes glowing, he proposed a toast, speaking in the harsh, slurring syllables of his homeland: "To you, Miljos! You shall be a hero!"

Miljos, two spots of color bright on his sallow high-boned cheeks, grabbed his companion's wrist. The words hissed between his clenched teeth, "No, Stefan! No hero, is that understood? Rather am I an instrument, do you hear? An instrument!" He shook Stefan's arm roughly, then he dropped it and raised his hand, his emotion tightening the skin on his face and slitting his eyes. "This I swear; by the Crown and the Hand, and yes—yes, in the name of Porgof and Coreau I swear. I shall not fail." Then he raised the glass. "I shall not fail. We drink to success."

Sourly, MacCurdy looked at the special agent. One of them Ivy Leaguers, he thought. What's the matter, they don't get them tough and meat-eating down there any

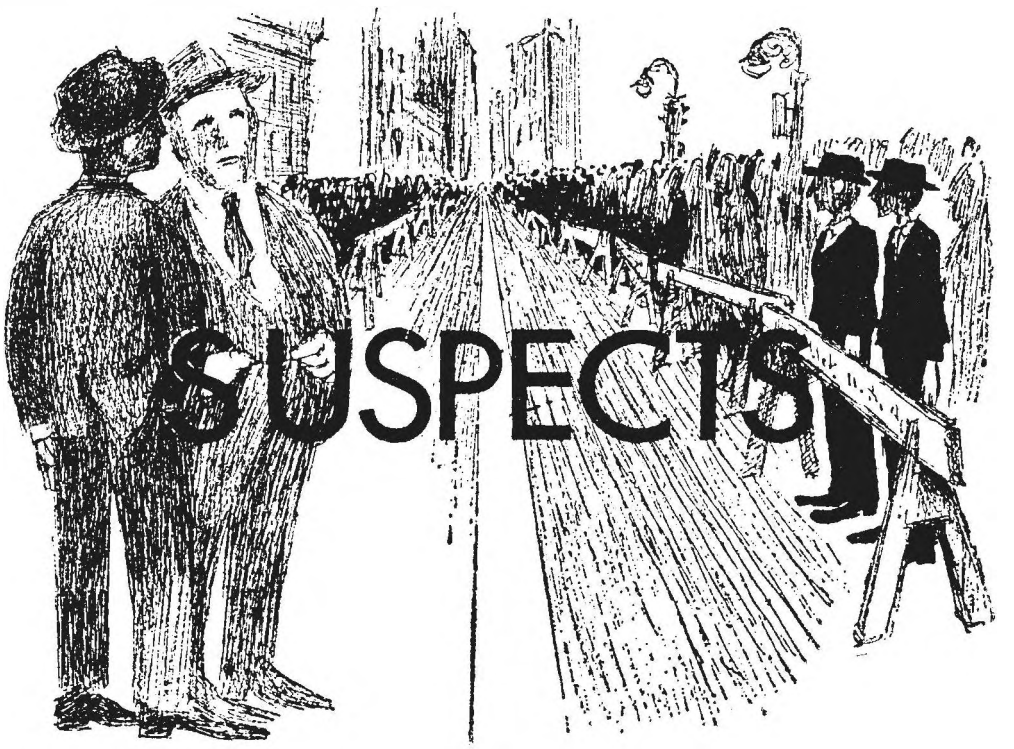
Assassination. Now, there's a glamorous word. And only a rare few may participate in all it signifies. Most ordinary folk must be content with being just a plain old murderer or a mere nondescript victim.

by FRANKLIN M. DAVIS Jr.

more? Look at him, sitting there in my chair, butter won't melt in his mouth. Ha.

And as the special agent continued to watch MacCurdy's men file into the narrow briefing room, he relaxed noticeably, stopped fidgeting with his glasses. It were as if this was just one more class at the Police Academy instead of something special. MacCurdy covered his annoyance by checking the setup on the platform. He knew everything would be there: city-plan blow-up; the diagram on a tissue-paper overlay; china marking pencil for changes; chalk; pointer. All the implements of the classroom and the briefing were there all right. But because he was uncomfortable in the presence of this smart young kid, MacCurdy tugged his watch from under his slight paunch, giving the shoe-string chain he carried the watch on a good yank to get it out of his pocket. The watch came free suddenly, almost striking the blackboard.

"Watch out for the turnip, Mac! You got thirty days before they give you another one!" This raucous crack from Scanlon in the front row.



MacCurdy turned, swivelling the full weight of his scorn on Scanlon, young and eager and feeling his new stripes. "I'd bet you'd be counting the days," MacCurdy said scathingly. "Retired in thirty days I will be. Retired right now I'm not. So shut up and pay attention. Already we're three minutes late." Then, addressing the room with a sharp glance from under his heavy, lowering brows that brought the shuffles and whispers to a dead silence, MacCurdy took a quick roll-call and then turned to the special agent. "All yours, Mr. Kennicutt. All yours." And when the agent stepped up to the board to talk, MacCurdy took over the chair, settling his bulk comfortably in its familiar embrace, clasping his blunt-knuckled hands over his belly, and cocking his head to watch and listen to Ivy League.

The agent's voice was brisk, pleasant, and he enunciated very clearly. Public-speech training, probably. MacCurdy snorted critically, but he listened.

"Thank you, Lieutenant MacCurdy." The agent attempted a brief smile, then turned to the thirty-odd men crowding the briefing room. "You know why I'm here. Coordination. But before I begin, let me ask you one question: is there any man here who for personal reasons, political beliefs, or any other reason, whatever it might be, feels he can't give the full weight and attention of his mind, body and spirit to this vital mission of guarding the security of—of our distinguished visitor?"

Kennicutt looked expectantly around the room. So did MacCurdy. Let one of these yahoos open his mouth just one little bit—! What was the matter with Ivy League? Did he think he was working with a bunch of rookies? MacCurdy scowled at Kennicutt who continued pleasantly.

"I'm not being overly melodramatic," he said. "I know you all appreciate how serious this is. You can just imagine the position we'd be in if somebody—a crank, a nut, anyone—got by our guard and our visitor was hurt. Even an unsuccessful attempt at harm could do untold damage to our country. Untold." Kennicutt paused to let that sink in, then gestured at the city plan on the blackboard behind him. "Yet, look at the size of the city. Look at the routes of the various movements on the itinerary." He turned to face the group again. "But you've gone through this kind of thing before." So he gave them some credit, MacCurdy thought. But then he destroyed that by continuing, "Nonetheless, there's never been anyone of quite this—this magnitude who is the target of such universal malevolence. So this multiplies the problem, you see, and makes it more difficult."

MacCurdy didn't see. He was still a guy entitled to maximum security, just like they put out for the

President. So where was the multiplication?

Kennicutt amplified his point. "You will find it hard to believe the tension this visit will generate in some quarters. I tell you this because you can't lull yourselves into thinking that past measures and past attitudes will be enough. You must treat this visit like a new and special problem. This is how we're treating it; this is how all the other government agencies involved in the personal security aspect are treating it. Am I clear on that?"

Like a bell. Like a ding-dong bell. Get on with it, Ivy League.

Kennicutt must have read MacCurdy's thoughts, because he said, "Lieutenant, would you mind reviewing things? Up to the point of the coordination of the itinerary movements themselves. That is to say, up to A-Time." He smiled. "Arrival time."

MacCurdy half-closed his eyes, reviewing his memory. A month short of thirty years, he'd spent on the job. Two days after Nibs left town, he'd be done, retired, finished. So this was going to be a good one. Done right. The plans had been brewing for weeks—ever since they'd known the city was on Nibs' itinerary. MacCurdy had schemed and planned and he'd done it well. Now he made his spiel. "Our plan is in four parts," he rumbled. His voice sounded harsh in his own ears; no public speech training like Ivy League, but plenty of time spent in yelling. Yeah. Plenty. "We got a segment for now, that's preliminary. That's going on now. That's screening known meatballs, for example. Anybody hasn't got a full string of lights or all his marbles, we make sure he's taken care of. Also initial route survey. Bomb squad details go out; we survey all locations for that stuff. We check the places where a guy might hide with a big rifle, let's say. Meanwhile, we bring in special reserves, start screening and training them." He droned on in his heavy voice. MacCurdy knew, as they all knew, that it was a tight detail; when you were charged with the personal security of the most-feared, and probably the most-hated, man in the world, well, you had to be tight.

But much of it was just plain old-fashioned police work. And MacCurdy thought, after they'd hashed and rehashed the preliminary, the A-Time Minus three-week, Minus two-week, A-Day itself and then even the after-departure handling of the crowds, that Kennicutt was a little contemptuous.

The two men stood at the blackboard, the detail chiefs gone now, their cigar smoke still wreathing the air, the chairs jumbled in the room, the headquarters still echoing to the thunder of big police feet on the stairs. "I'm worried about imagination," Kennicutt said, stroking his kid's jaw and looking sharply at MacCurdy. "We've got to use imagination."

MacCurdy growled, jamming his big fists into the lumpy pockets of his coat. "It ain't imagination pays off," he said. "It's good solid police work. We done all this before, you know."

Kennicutt stared at the brilliant lithography of the city plan, still fingering his jaw. "Never for this man," he said. "Never for anyone like this."

"I'll tell you something, jazzbo," MacCurdy said, not covering his irritation. "I been a cop for close to thirty years and I been in on some tough ones. I know this one's the biggest. And it's my last one. I want to go out looking good. It's a thing with me, you know? So I got the same interest in this you have. Maybe more even. Because it's my last one. A man wants to finish on top, you know? But I'll tell you this: you can imagine all you want and it'll still be police organization and police alertness that'll do the job. Protection. That's our business. So we make good solid plans. And we carry them out." *And we pray a little too,* MacCurdy added silently.

Kennicutt tapped the map. "I'm not worried about the reception itself, the luncheons, the dinners, the plant visits, the speeches, any of that. Not really. Because we can put two men in each place for every visitor and guest. What I am worrying about is the traveling. In the open. What do you have here, about six million people?"

MacCurdy snorted. "Over seven million on the city. But they ain't all going to be on the streets at one time, and they sure all ain't going to be in my precinct. You got your imagination working overtime, friend."

Kennicutt frowned and went back to rubbing his chin. "Of course. I know we're not actively concerned in our area with that many. My point is though, that this man is going to pull record crowds wherever he goes. And we can't cover crowds a hundred per cent. No matter how we do it. So that's the weakness, don't you see, Lieutenant? If somebody's made up their mind to an assassination, the chances are it'll be done during the traveling. Because it's easier in every way then."

"I don't know." MacCurdy took the opposite view for the sake of arguing. "We'll have men on the streets; so'll you. They won't be standing there with their hats over their eyes, you know."

Kennicutt shook his head. "I know, I know. But every building looks down on the route, for example. Anyone that wants to drop a bomb can do it. They won't worry about innocent bystanders. Not with this kind of target."

"You forget they could use helicopters. The Department's got plenty of them. So's the assassins, I bet."

Kennicutt looked sharply at MacCurdy, but didn't say anything.

Sure I'm pulling your leg, junior. MacCurdy didn't express that thought; instead he said, "Look, I got a kid's a bombardier; Offutt Air Force Base. You got any idea how hard it is to hit a moving target, throwing any kind of bomb from a window?"

Kennicutt shrugged. "I'm just worried about possibilities. I think —"

"You really thought about the kind of surveillance we'll have when Nibs is traveling? You really imagined it?" MacCurdy laughed. "Listen, Iv—Kennicutt, they ain't anyone going to be able to make a false move without some cop, uniformed or plain, seeing him. No matter what. He's got people too, the OKMNX or whatever. Nope, you can bet—"

"Yes, yes," Kennicutt interrupted hastily. "I know, I know. But I can't help worrying."

"Puts you in your grave ahead of your time," MacCurdy said. Then he added virtuously. "I'm not worried, not about this precinct. Of course, I can't speak for all the others."

"Nor can I, Lieutenant. But I'd like to feel we had left absolutely no point uncovered or unconsidered. From the madman who's willing to sacrifice himself and countless bystanders to accomplish his dirty purpose, to the brilliant schemer who wants to accomplish the act undetected." Kennicutt was silent a minute, then said, very softly, "Has it ever occurred to you that there might be people within his own regime who'd consider it advantageous to do him in while he's here?"

MacCurdy blinked. The prospect of something like that staggered him. But he spoke up stoutly. "I can't see any point," he said, "in trying to dream up the strategy someone'll use against Nibs. We got to deal in possibilities. And what my kid calls capabilities. We cover everything they *can* do." He wasn't sure this would be clear to Kennicutt, but it was the best he could do.

But Kennicutt was delighted. "Capabilities," he said. "Exactly." He smacked the map with slender fingers. "Now lets go over the route. What do you consider the critical points, from the capabilities point of view, that is?"

"I show you again. First, this intersection here. Why? Because this triangle's going to be choked with people. Can't help it. The public's entitled to see Nibs. Like this hotel here. See that side? Think about them windows . . ."

Miljos leaned out the window, making room for Stefan. For a moment he sucked the cool night air into his lungs, then he said quietly, "Look at below, my friend. Carefully. Now do you have doubts?" Gently, Miljos spit into the street, arching his head to

watch the descent of the spit. Beside him, Stefan spoke urgently, Miljos shaking his head slowly, negatively, all the time.

His conference with Kennicutt over, MacCurdy moved heavily down the headquarter's staircase. I better quit getting sore at him, he thought. Better I invite him to come bunk with me. We'll be seeing that much of each other before Nibs shakes the dust of this town from his heels. I wonder does he play cribbage? Or ain't that an Ivy League sport? Imagination, my foot!

Downstairs, he flagged a squad car from the motor pool. "Hello, Ryan," he told the rookie driver behind the wheel. "How's for running me up to my place?"

At the cheap hotel where MacCurdy hung his hat now that there wasn't much left of the family, and that scattered to the four winds, he undertook his daily joust with the desk clerk. "Mail for me?"

The clerk made a pretense of checking the boxes, but he was giving his answer before he turned his head. "Sorry, Lieutenant. Not a thing."

"You get three deliveries a day here. Nothing in any of them?" It wasn't that the MacCurdy kids didn't write their old man; it was the U. S. Post Office. Raise the rates and slow the mails. Worked every time.

"All three came in," the clerk announced happily "Ten, two and four." He smiled thinly. "Nothing for you."

MacCurdy headed for the elevator. It didn't take much imagination to really know what happened to his mail. Why didn't they use the extra postage to put on more help in the ding-dong post-office?

Upstairs, in the sterile comfort of his narrow room, he shucked off his coat and his shoes, put his gun and its leather in the night-stand drawer, took off his tie and stretched out on the bed. For awhile he thought about his kids. Maybe he'd make the big loop after he retired, see the grandchildren. Hell's fire, it was going to be hard to hang up the old buzzer. And take Nibs now. The man had grandchildren, he'd heard that somewhere. And he was past retirement age—police regulations age anyway. Ha, maybe that was an answer. All the old retired crocks—both them that were official retired and the ones that should be ought to get together and swap lies about their grandchildren and settle the cares of the world at the same time. What'd he told Kennicutt? Hard police work, that was the answer. It was the answer to a lot of things, hard work. He checked the time, pulling out the watch on the shoestring chain. That damned Scanlon. Maybe the Department wouldn't even give him a watch. Worry

about that one when the time came. Ha. Time was right. Time to hit the rack. Swiftly, MacCurdy completed his preparations for sleep; then, in his ankle-length night-shirt, he settled into bed. And for a few minutes, as was his custom before he switched off the light, he read from the Gideon on the night-stand.

Miljos spit into the street again. Now he was agreeing with Stefan. "You are clever, Stefan. Clever indeed. But can you obtain such things?" Stefan nodded his head quickly. "But of course, Miljos. Here, with money, you can buy anything. Anything at all." Miljos looked down into the street, laughing. "You know, Stefan, when I think what will happen down there, I can only laugh and be happy. I do not care one whit what becomes of me afterwards."

In spite of the flawless rehearsal, Kennicutt was unhappy.

"What's the matter?" MacCurdy asked the question sharply. "Everything worked just right. Now you're putting up a beef. Everything worked. Just like it was supposed to. So what do you want? Two heads on your beer?"

"No, Lieutenant, nothing that simple. It's just a feeling I have. I had it before, you know. You like to know when?" Kennicutt was looking at him, eyes solemn behind his glasses. "Can you guess?"

MacCurdy blinked. He wasn't one to smack down another man's hunches. But what'd the man want, anyway? The rehearsal was perfect; the cars making up the dummy party, escort vehicles and all, rolled through on the tick. Traffic details, sidewalk barrier details, surveillance, radio communications, helicopter on top, roof and window details, everybody was on the stick. "I'll bite," MacCurdy said dryly. "When?"

"Cermak. When they tried to get Roosevelt. I was there—"

"There?" MacCurdy asked the question incredulously. "That was, let's see, that was yeah a good twenty-five, twenty-six years ago. You must've been just a kid, wasn't you?"

"Just a kid," Kennicutt said quietly. "But I never forgot it. That's what put me in this business, really." He looked at MacCurdy, his glance level. "I told my father, he took me there that time, I felt funny, that something was going to happen. I have the same feeling now." He smiled quickly, suddenly more boyish than ever. "Silly, isn't it? I know it is. As you say, good police work is what you've got to rely on."

"Yeah," MacCurdy said quickly. He could understand something like the dedication the man felt; it was a thing to admire, yeah, and to envy. To respect. So you had to

give him a leg up. "Yeah," he repeated more cheerfully. "Good police work will do it. And that we got plenty of. You want to run the critique for the detail chiefs, or do I?"

Maybe Kennicutt wasn't any warmer than he'd sounded before, all along, but the way he said it made you think so. "You handled it, Lieutenant. I'll come in on the tail end. It's police business."

MacCurdy started off by warning the group, "Now don't think that crowd out there today was any sample of what you'll get when Nibs comes through. This was ordinary today; they didn't have no clue to what was going on and they didn't care. But it'll be different next time, when Nibs is in that party." MacCurdy glowered around the room. He could tell from the serious and thoughtful expressions on the various faces that he was off to a good start . . .

In the hotel room, Miljos watched Stefan unwrap the packages. "I have bought each item in a different part of the city, Miljos. Regard." As Stefan spread the items on the bed, Miljos chuckled. "veritable cloak of invisibility. Stefan, I'm proud of you."

It was hard for MacCurdy not to show the tension he felt. *He* felt—why, they all felt it. But a lieutenant couldn't let on. Not much anyway. But as Nibs' day—they were calling it that now—drew nearer, the separate and collective nerves of the precinct police thrummed and vibrated.

Part of the trouble was Kennicutt. He was too blamed smart. He thought of all kinds of weird angles. He worried out loud. "Nothing?" he asked. No tips at all? Not a damn word?" The *damn* was proof enough of his irritation; the bags under his eyes behind the glasses was even more. "Nothing?" His voice went up. "I can't believe it."

"Look," MacCurdy said wearily. "I can't speak for the whole city. Of course, I know some nut from another precinct could come over and mess us up. And I ain't responsible for checking out the crank letters. That belongs to the stupid post office department." MacCurdy scowled. "Your buddies in the government. All I'm telling you is we've checked weapon sales, demolitions sales, even—so help me—insecticides and rat poisons, and we've twisted the arm on every stoolie we ever knew. And there's nothing." MacCurdy paused, then banged a fist into his palm. "For the love of heaven, what makes you so sure there's any problem? You act like it'd already happened and we can't find out who did it."

Kennicutt ran a hand through his close-cropped hair. Then he laughed ruefully. "I know I'm a worrier, no question about it. I'm a born worrier."

"Well quit worrying. You get ulcers that way. And you're too young for 'em. Leave it to us old crocks."

"The weapon, Stefan. The weapon!" Miljos' eyes glittered. "I must try it, you see."

Shortly, Stefan produced the gleaming pistol from its hiding place in the toilet cabinet. "See, Miljos," he exclaimed proudly. "It is one of their own manufacture. This is true justice, is it not?"

Wordlessly, Miljos fondled the pistol. He cupped it in his hands, then started to laugh, silently, laughing without sound until the tears streaked his cheeks.

Eventually Nibs Day arrived. And even MacCurdy, with his long experience, was startled at the temper and breadth of the holiday spirit that pervaded the city. "It ain't right, you know that?" He growled the comment to Kennicutt as they drifted in a squad car down the cleared avenue, the crowd a surging, noisy mass around them. "These people shouldn't be so interested in Nibs. It's practically morbid, I'd say. And you know something? I think it's the biggest crowd I ever seen. By golly, I bet it beats the VE day bunch."

Kennicutt's voice sounded forlorn and somehow lacking in his usual brisk confidence. "Yes," he said, "There's something almost obscene about it. Romanesque, I'd say. It's one thing to give a courteous welcome, but this—this—" he waved a hand wordlessly at the thronged sidewalks, the policemen straining at the barriers, the jammed windows, the holiday streamers, placards, the whole panoply of celebration. "It's as if no one realized the dark side of what this man represents. Why, it's positively frightening."

And when the squad car was pulled into its special reserved slot near the key intersection, for what MacCurdy was sure was the hundredth time, Kennicutt said, "You sure this is the best place for us?"

With patience that had every right to be threadbare—did this guy think it didn't all get to the old-timers too?—MacCurdy said wearily, "This is the best place. If anyone's going to get close to Nibs, in this precinct, it has to be right along in here."

In the massive crowd, Miljos held his place at the restraining rope. The cloak of invisibility, he thought. How many are looking at me and cannot see me? He knew he shouldn't laugh, but the temptation was strong. And some suggestion of humor must have crossed his face because a nearby policeman, arms locked on the rope at the curb, winked at him. "No work today for you guys, huh? We shoulda

drafted you for help." Miljos, wise by now to these Americans, simply grinned and adjusted the bag on his shoulder. Gently, he tested the bottom, seeking against its softness the weight of the pistol. He experienced a deep and thrilling exhiliration . . .

Standing at the edge of the curb, one hand on the cool finish of the squad car, MacCurdy thought that probably the crowd up the line was getting a disappointment. Listening to the chatter on the radio, hearing the reports and coordination orders called off, you could tell it was really a waste of time for anyone to be out on the avenue, this long, standing, losing time from work and duties, just for a glimpse of Nibs in a big car whizzing up the street in the midst of the escort party. Like the ball games, you'd get a better view of the whole thing on TV. But people were funny. So you kept your eye on them. Restlessly, he checked all of the area he could see, one ear continually alerted to the radio. On the other side of the car, Kennicutt eyed the street too.

MacCurdy grinned; the kid was really sweating. Good thing, too. Make him a better cop in the long run. He moved over to him. "Details all check out," he said softly. "See up aloft? Rooftop, fire-escapes, windows. We got people all over. The place to watch is the crowd. I'll tip you how I do it, Kennicutt. I watch for sudden movements. Crowd moves are slow, delibrate, time like this. It's the quick moves you got to watch out for. *Oh, oh,"* the radio exclaimed suddenly. *"Here he comes. Here's Nibs."*

A swelling murmur started in the crowd, and far up the avenue there was a glimpse of the hurrying motorcade. And MacCurdy watched the crowd with wise old eyes. *Now there's something,* he told himself. *Look at that. Looks all right, but then it's not. Now why don't I like what I see?*

And then he had it. And moved. Moved without a word to Kennicutt. Driving under the restraining rope, he caught a man just as the motorcade swung past, just as the man tried to fire a shot at Nibs. MacCurdy nailed him, the big policeman hands going onto the man's skinny arms—and, so fast that only the nearest spectators had much idea of what was happening, McCurdy had cuffs on, of all things, a U. S. mailman. A post office mailman. "Kennicutt! Quick! Let's go!" MacCurdy flung the man into the rear of the police car, twisted his leather mailman's bag on top of him, and was ordering the driver to move out even as Kennicutt was scrambling in the door, Nibs and the motorcade now long past.

Afterward, when it was all over,

the booking and the mugging and the rest of the rigmarole started. MacCurdy held well-deserved court in the briefing room. "Come on, tell us," came a chorus led by Scanlon, while Kennicutt listened, grinning. "How'd you figure it was that nut, anyway?"

"Easy." MacCurdy put his hands behind his head, sorely tempted to ham it up by rubbing fingernails in his lapel. "What time did Nibs go through?" He didn't wait for an answer. "There's not a letter carrier on the street in the precinct that ain't got a load of mail. *And this clown had an empty sack!*"

The silence of the group, stunned, awed, was reward enough. MacCurdy knew he could retire on top of them all, on top of everything. It was a good feeling. Even if he didn't get no watch. He turned to Kennicutt grinning. Slapping old Ivy League on the shoulder, MacCurdy said, "Know something? I never even got a look at Nibs. Not one lousy look."

But Scanlon had a last word, overriding Kennicutt's responding grin. "Hey Mac," he said slyly. "Think what a favor you could've done the world, did you let that meat-ball give Nibs the works. You ever think of that?"

MacCurdy knew there was a lot he could say to that; but he cut Scanlon up with a soft answer. "Read your Gideon sometime, Scanlon. 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' That answer your question?"

hunt the tiger

by Henry Slesar

UNDER the rhino's head, fierce-faced on its mahogany mounting, Harrison Kolb peered down the barrel of the .22 and then swung the rifle, hunter-style, under his arm. It was a bid for attention, and he got it from the five people sitting around the sunburned leather couches. There were three men and two women, and it was the women's voices which trailed off at last into attentive silence.

Kolb cleared his throat, and said: "Now here's that treat I promised you. We're going on a tiger hunt, all of us, right now. A real hunt."

One of the women giggled, until Kolb's eyes, lead-gray under threatening brows, shut her up. He was a man past his middle years, blocky and squat, with military posture. A quiet life of lecture tours had removed most of the prideful trademarks of his calling. The wind-toughened skin, a product of endless safaris, had softened over the years. His big, square hands, once at home around a Mannlicher, were now more accustomed to the support of cocktail glasses and manuscripts. Nobody voiced these thoughts to Kolb, nobody who cared to continue to enjoy the hospitality of his Westchester home, a 20-room transplanted castle, complete with winding passages and places, and stone walls studded with the stuffed victims of Kolb's marksmanship, hunting trophies now frayed and motheaten. Nobody voiced these thoughts, not even if they came often, as they did to Charlie Dunn.

Dunn was the only unmarried man in the room. Appropriately, he was sitting in the only single chair, a wing-backed leather chair by the fireplace. He was an angular, smooth-jowled, pale young man, wearing a silken sports shirt under

For my money, tigers are most anti-social. To begin with, they have a decidedly wet-blanket look. And, of course, they don't drink or play bridge. I, for one, won't have them at my house parties.

an ivy league suit. His fingers were always playing about his lips, a habit that conveniently concealed he was biting the knuckle of his left forefinger, and wishing he was with Kolb's wife.

Kolb wasn't the most important client of the lecture bureau that Dunn represented, but he was one of their first clients, and that gave him special sentimental privileges. Dunn had only been assigned to his care and feeding for a year, but the year had been long enough for Dunn to decide two things. One, that Harrison Kolb was easy to hate. Two, that Emily, Kolb's wife, was easy to like. Kolb knew of neither of these opinions, and it was just as well. Charlie Dunn didn't like trouble.

"A *tiger* hunt?" said a woman in a gold lamé dress, her tone a delighted but skeptical shriek. "You're not serious?"

"Of course," Kolb said smoothly. "You know how serious I am about these things, Barbara." He rubbed his lower lip with a fingertip and smiled roguishly. "Of course, I've had to alter circumstances a little, taking everything into consideration. For one thing, Westchester isn't exactly jungle country."

"That's not what I heard," a stocky man with a pink scalp said with a chuckle.

"I mean fang and claw jungle," Kolb said. "Real jungle. But I think, with a little cooperation, we can re-create the conditions of an honest-to-God tiger hunt, if we use our imaginations. Are you willing?"

The women squealed, and the men looked dubious. Dunn's face, masked by his right hand, revealed nothing. The man with the pink scalp, who was Thurman Huber, Kolb's first publisher, said: "You'd better explain it first, Harry, I'm not dressed for a safari." He tittered, looking around for appreciation.

"You won't need any special clothing," Kolb smiled. "All you'll need is one of these—" He slapped the butt of the .22 in his hand—"a little simulated atmosphere, and, of course, a tiger. It isn't easy to put your hands on a good maneater in this part of the world, so I've arranged for a—reasonable facsimile. Tokyo." He jerked his head towards the oriental servant who was quietly stirring the contents of a martini pitcher in the corner of the room. "Bring in the beast, Tokyo," he said.

The servant, a Hawaiian whose

real name was Tokito, grinned back dutifully and padded out of the room. The guests turned to watch his retreat, their backs stiffening with sudden curiosity and vague apprehension. Only Charlie Dunn remained relaxed, but with an effort. He was accustomed to Kolb's penchant for planned amusements, but he was as surprised as the rest of them when Tokito returned with a wire cage held gingerly in one hand, and placed it on the carpet. The yowling, spitting, infuriated beast inside the tiny prison didn't sound much like a tiger, but the noises it made belonged to an environment more savage than a Westchester living room.

"Behold the beast," Kolb said dramatically. "Uprooted from its native jungle, passionate with hatred, shrieking for human blood . . ."

"But it's a *cat*," Barbara Huber wailed. "It's an old *alley* cat."

"Precisely," Kolb grinned. "The biggest, sassiest alley cat you ever saw. But for tonight, tom is a tiger. This is his moment of glory, and this is our prey."

Thurman Huber was grumbling. "Now wait just a second, Harry. You mean we're going to hunt that alley cat? Is that the idea?"

"We," Kolb said, "are going to hunt a *tiger*. Those of you whose imagination is limited may prefer to hunt a cat. But when I let tom go, and the hunt begins, it will be a tiger we're after. Understand?"

"That's the screwiest thing I ever heard of," one of the younger men in the group said, but with a genial grin that softened the criticism. His name was Pierce, and he was a neighbor and gentleman farmer. Beside him, his even younger wife giggled and said: "I just *couldn't* shoot a cat. I mean, how could *anybody* shoot a poor little pussycat." She looked at the raging animal in the cage and hugged herself. "But he *does* look sort of tigerish, doesn't he? I mean, if you let yourself *think* that way."

Tokito, who had come and gone since placing the cage on the carpet, now appeared with an arsenal in his arms. "Weapons, everyone," Kolb said loudly. "Take your choice; they're all .22's and loaded. Those who want to join the hunt, grab your firearm. Those who don't —well, you can just stick around here and get drunk; there's plenty of whiskey left." He handed a rifle to Thurman Huber. "Here you are, Thurman. You're always boasting about that old marksmanship medal of yours, let's see what you can do."

"Really, Harry—"

"Go on, take it, I know what I'm doing. I'll just caution you about two things. One, don't kill each other; I won't be responsible for bloodshed. And two, watch out for the furniture. Wait until you see your prey out in the open. Don't worry about harming the walls; they're all stone."

Thurman took the rifle, holding

it awkwardly. "It's such a long time. I mean, I hardly remember how to sight one of these things—"

Kolb laughed. "It'll come back to you. Pierce, how about you?"

"Sure, why not?" Pierce grinned. "It won't make much of a trophy, but I'll take a crack at it."

"Let's not worry about trophies yet. We might not even get him; tom may be a lot smarter than you think, and this old house can hide a *dozen* cats without anyone the wiser. Charlie?"

Dunn took his hand from his mouth. "No thanks, Harry, I'm a lousy shot. I'm liable to kill half your guests."

Kolb frowned. "Come on, Charlie, be a sport. It's all in fun."

"I really don't think I want to, Harry. I mean, there's an SPCA in this town, and I don't want them on my neck."

Kolb came closer, planting himself in front of Charlie Dunn, the .22 extended. "I think you ought to play," he said quietly. "I can understand the women being squeamish, but not you, Charlie. Come on, take it."

Dunn looked up at him, and saw the mild reproach—or was it warning?—in the ex-hunter's eyes. He grinned feebly, and took the weapon.

Barbara Huber was staring at the cage, and when Kolb offered her the rifle, she took it without removing her gaze from the yellow eyes of the cat. The other women in the room squealed when Kolb came towards her, and refused to accept the offering. Kolb said: "All right, Katie, you just go along with Pierce and see that he doesn't get into trouble. Everybody all set?" He walked towards the cage, and Pierce said, uncertainly:

"Wait a minute, Harry, maybe Katie's right. It's only a cat, even if it's acting like a maneater."

Kolb turned a glinting eye on him. "You don't think you could do it?"

"I didn't say that. But in cold blood this way—"

"Haven't you ever hunted, Pierce?"

"Sure, as a kid. Chipmunks and rabbits, mostly; I suppose that wasn't much different, but still—"

"Still," Kolb repeated. "Do you remember the feeling you got, when your prey was in the rifle sight? Did you worry about *what* you were killing? Were you concerned with anything, but the fear that you might miss?"

"I usually did," Pierce grinned.

"I happen to believe," Kolb said stiffly, "that there's a killer instinct in man. That may not sound very pleasant, but some facts aren't pleasant. You've heard me talk about that, Charlie, haven't you?"

"It's one of your best lectures," Dunn grunted.

"You probably don't think so," Kolb said, revealing, perhaps for the first time, that he suspected Dunn's true feelings towards him.

"You probably think it's a lot of regurgitated Hemingway, don't you? But I believe it, because I've seen it proved a thousand times. There's an instinct, atavistic, in all of us. Hunting is one of its sublimations, and there are others. Thank God for that, or we'd all be taking pot shots at each other."

In the cage, the alley cat began to thresh about wildly. Kolb came towards it, and put his hand on the latch.

"How about Emily?" Dunn said suddenly. "Isn't she interested in hunting tigers, Harry?"

There was a moment's silence, and then Kolb looked up slowly.

"Emily has a headache," he answered quietly. "I told you that earlier. If she didn't, I'm sure she'd join us. You'd be surprised what a crack shot she is."

"No doubt," Charlie Dunn murmured.

"Here we go," Kolb said, and flipped the catch.

It was their first look at their prey outside of its cage, and not highly satisfactory. All they saw was the flash of its brindled fur and the spark of its yellow eyes as the tom raced across the living room rug towards the hallway. It was a big cat, all right, an alley veteran, and its blurred image helped foster the illusion that it was truly a jungle beast. It was out of sight within seconds of release, and Kolb stood up, went to the fireplace, and lifted his weapon.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said solemnly, "the hunt is on."

Charlie Dunn was the last of the party to leave the living room. He finished his drink after the others had gone, and then picked up the .22 rifle and studied it with vague curiosity. The last time he had held a rifle it had been an M-1, and he had gone through three years of war without firing it outside of a practice range. He snorted, cradled the weapon under his arm, and went slowly out into the hallway.

In the distance, he could hear the faint echo of a woman giggling in either nervousness or excitement. He walked along the stone corridor towards the Kolb dining room, pausing to look up at the ugly snout of a stuffed gnu's-head in the hallway. At the end of the hall, there was a suit of armor not much over five feet tall; playfully, he snapped the visor up and down, and it creaked.

He walked through the dining room, past the Arthurian table and high-backed chairs, and opened the door of Kolb's study. As he did, he caught a glimpse of Thurman Huber stalking past the bookshelves, and smiled when he saw the grim set of the publisher's features. The old boy was really taking it seriously. A few minutes later, he heard the crack of a rifle and waited expectantly to hear that the hunt was over; there was nothing but a

muffled shout, and a groan of frustration.

He left the study and found his way to the stairs that led to the upper floors. Pierce, grinning foolishly, passed him at a trot, and said: "Barbara almost got the beast. You see it go this way, Charlie?"

"Nope, not even a lion," Dunn said sardonically, and watched Pierce scurry off towards the south wing. Then he turned and went up the stairs. At the first landing, he met Kolb coming the other way, his face flushed, his eyes bright. "Nothing up there, far as I can see," he said. "If you ask me, old tom's headed for the basement. Cats have a subterranean instinct—"

"I'll take a look upstairs anyway," Dunn said.

"Suit yourself." Kolb clapped him on the shoulder, and bounded down the stairway.

At the end of the corridor on the second floor, the bedroom door was slightly ajar. Charlie paused, and lifted his hand, knuckles poised. Then he changed his mind about knocking, and whispered:

"Emily? You awake?"

When there was no answer, he pushed the door with his palm, and gained another inch of interior view. "Emily?" he said again.

He heard the squeak of bedsprings, and then the slither of footsteps on the carpet. The door opened, and he saw Emily Kolb on the other side, clutching a feathery bedjacket around her shoulders, her face exchanging a look of vexation for one of relief. "I thought it was *him* again," she said softly. She glanced quickly up the hall. "Come in, Charlie."

He came in, still carrying the rifle. "Harry said something about you're being sick. I thought I'd—find out how you were."

"You must have known it wasn't true." She shut the door and then went to the vanity table near the bed. She sat down, facing the mirror, and reached behind her to enclose the loose blonde hair falling over her back. Then she put a hairpin in her teeth. "I feel all right," she said, her voice distorted. "I just didn't want any part of—*that*." She took the hairpin out, and turned to face him. On the floor below, a bullet spanged against rock, and a man's voice bellowed. She closed her eyes, and then pinned her hair in a pony tail. It was a style that would have been too girlish for most women of her age, but it suited Emily's high cheekbones and full mouth.

Charlie walked to her, and put his hand on her shoulder. "I thought that was the reason. That's why I came up." His grip tightened, and she put her hand over his. "Or maybe it wasn't only that. I guess I just want to see you, Emily."

"Charlie . . ." She looked at his mirror image, and then grimaced when she saw the rifle in his hand. "Please put that thing down, Charlie. You know how I hate guns."

"Harry was telling everybody what a crack shot you were."

"Harry has all kinds of fantasies about me. I never fired a gun in my life." She looked up at him as he rested the weapon against the vanity table. "Is it really true about—that cat? Are they trying to kill it?"

He smiled. "Don't worry. At the rate they're going, the cat'll be okay." His arm slid from her shoulder and moved slowly to the small of her back; then he went to his knees and clasped her in an embrace that she didn't resist. When they parted, she kicked off her furry slippers and went to the bed. She sat on the edge and he followed her; they kissed again.

"Don't," she murmured. "He might come back. He was here only a minute ago."

"He won't be back. Not until he tracks that tiger of his."

"It's so horrible. Doing a thing like that, right in his own home." She pushed him away and searched his face, for an answer to her next question. "What makes him do it, Charlie? Why can't he forget—what he was?"

"Because it's his religion," Dunn said sourly. "You've got to look at it that way, Emily. Everyone needs a faith, and killing is Harry's. He really *believes* that there's a killer instinct; you've got to recognize that—"

"You can't go on making excuses for him, Charlie."

"I'm not trying to. I don't like it any more than you do. When he was a big-shot game hunter, when he was younger, well, maybe there was something to it then. But now—" He stopped talking, held her close, kissed her again.

"Don't," she pleaded. "Please don't. Oh, Charlie, if I were only free."

"Let's not talk about it."

"If only *you* were my husband. And we could live this way, just the two of us. If only he were dead . . ."

Shocked by the word, he drew away from her.

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing," she answered, painfully. "Nothing, Charlie."

"It wasn't nothing. You were wishing him dead. Weren't you, Emily? I'm not criticizing, for God's sake. I just want to *know*, Emily, that's all. You wish he were dead?"

"Yes," she said fiercely. "Yes! I wish he were dead now. This minute! I wish that whole dreadful zoo of his would rise up and kill him."

Charlie Dunn rose slowly and went to the rifle leaning against the wall. He didn't touch it, just looked.

Emily watched him, the thought almost a tangible thing between them.

"It's only a .22," Charlie said softly. "It could kill a cat. But Harry . . ."

She whimpered softly, a sound frightened but somehow encouraging.

"If I got him at close range,"

Charlie said dreamily. "Between the eyes, where it counted. I'm a lousy shot. Everybody knows that. It would look like an accident, a crazy accident. Him and his tiger hunt."

"Oh, Charlie," Emily said.

He picked up the rifle.

"An accident," he said softly.

He went to the door, and put his hand on the knob. But just as he was turning it, the heavy clump of footsteps were heard outside. He waited, holding his breath, but the footsteps came closer. He knew the tread. He had heard it before, marching down the aisles of lecture emporiums. It was the step of Harrison Kolb.

Cursing, he looked wildly about the room. His eyes went to Emily's closet, and her eyes followed his. She shook her head frantically, and he remembered how jam-packed her closet was. He turned, knowing there was only one thing to do. He dropped to all fours, and grunting, eased his way underneath the oversized bed.

The door opened, and he heard Kolb's heavy breathing.

"Not in the basement," he grumbled. "You sure you didn't see the bugger in here, Emily?"

"No!" the woman said hysterically. "Leave me alone!"

"He's *got* to be up here," Kolb said. "Damn cat must be *someplace*."

"No!" Emily said. "Get out of here, Harry!"

In the darkness beneath the bed, Charlie Dunn held his breath. He listened as Kolb clumped about the room, heard the closet door swing open, heard it slam shut.

The rifle under his body was jutting into his rib cage. He shifted slightly, noiselessly, putting out his hand.

It touched something.

He turned his head slowly.

Two thin slivers of light faced him. He didn't know what it was, until his hand felt the soft, bristly fur of the tom. The eyes of the cat glared at him balefully, but the cat was still, frozen by fear.

He stared back, terrified by his companion. He touched the fur again, with trembling fingers, tried to soothe the beast before the worst happened. But there was no help for it now. The cat arched its back, and parted its jaws.

"Meow," the cat said.

He heard the first report of Kolb's .22 as the bullet entered his neck, with the stinging impact of a white-hot blade. He didn't hear the second one, because the bullet entered his brain just above the right temple, shutting out all sounds forever.

Wayne Fallow's body was found three days after the hurricane—battered, scratched and black with mud and debris from the backwash of the receding water. Two small boys had discovered him almost a quarter-mile from shore. There was some speculation about the way he had died, particularly since he was the only local death as a result of the storm. But an investigation had turned up nothing conclusive. So it was decided that death was caused by accidental drowning.

He was given a traditional Baptist funeral. Gladioli were banked on either side of the coffin, their scent heavy and funereal in itself—a certain coolness reminiscent of damp grass and mossy stones. The elder Mr. Fallow had contributed a four-foot cross of white roses placed at the foot of the deceased. But not a soul there thought for a moment that it would've touched Wayne if he had been aware of what had been done to his handsome, young body. He would've thrown off the flowers and laughed at the tucked-down looks of all the mourners.

It wasn't necessary for everyone to follow the hearse to the cemetery. Only a few cars, the relatives, rolled eastward on a narrow road still rutted and patchy with drying mud. The rest of the townspeople gathered up the easy threads of life again. Went home or back to the bank or the gas station.

There was a burdening heat from the sun, pulling all the moisture upward. Most of the voile dresses and seersucker suits clung depressingly close to bodies, making everyone restless and uncertain.

"Right nice laying-out, wasn't it?" Millie Tawes, dressmaker but of an old Shelton family, nervously asked Miss Emily Strayer.

"Yes, it was." Miss Emily smoothed her white net gloves.

Her niece Vera pulled off a red leghorn sailor. "I won't be coming

home with you now. Think I'll see if Ruby can work in an appointment and do something with my hair."

Another niece Dudley stood beside Miss Emily. She took the old woman's arm. "We'd better get out of this heat, Aunt Emily." Her eyes were a cool fathomless blue, set deeply into white skin.

Miss Millie said good-bye and turned toward her house with its fern-laden bay window. Dudley and Miss Emily crossed Beauregard Street into the shade. The young woman still held her aunt's arm. There was a slow rise to the Strayer house. "Take your arm off, Dudley," said Miss Emily finally, leaning more heavily on her cane. "I do better by myself, child." She patted her niece lightly. "I appreciate the thought, though."

Dudley slowed her steps to match

the old woman's. She kept her eyes on the sidewalk, the zigzagging lines of grass between the worn bricks. "Vera took it mighty well, didn't you think?"

Miss Emily paused, then spoke, looking sharply once at the still profile beside her. "Why wouldn't she? There wasn't anything serious between them. Vera never would've married him."

"That's true," Dudley agreed. "Still, I never thought she'd be so calm about it."

They neared the top of the hill and the old woman stopped. "She'll get over it." She reached toward the fence and plucked a dead rose from the vine.

With a queer little smile Dudley faced her aunt. "Yes, of course she will. What's done is done, isn't it?" Miss Emily pulled two more fading blooms. Dudley kept on, "A person can't brood too long over things. can she?"

Miss Emily turned around. "I'm glad you've learned that lesson already, Dudley. Some folks never do." She pushed several loose strands of white hair back under her navy straw hat. "I think you're making too much out of this where Vera is concerned." She opened the gate. "Tell Min I'm going upstairs for a little rest. And to broil, not fry, the perch for supper. Some floating island would be nice, too. She can take home what's left of the pie. Unless you or Vera want it."

The Burial

by Nora H. Caplan

Any boy scout knows that if you rub a few crisp women together, sparks will fly. Southern, small-town women—heavily laden with wisteria and complexes—are best for this purpose.

Dudley followed her up the stairs. "No, I don't care. And Vera never eats much dessert anyway. I'll just tell Min to take it."

In Shelton, late afternoon passed unhurriedly into twilight. For a time all animation seemed to stop and take a deep breath. Then lights began to pinpoint the shadows and there were faint sounds of silver and dishes being set. Children rushed in to eat and then rushed out again before their mothers could hold them within the confines of their own yards. Newspapers were being reread more slowly (there was only a morning edition of the *Democrat Ledger*). Two births. One funeral. And night came inevitably with a slow, gentle grace, bringing mockers home to wisteria and bullfrogs in the thousand fingers of the backwater.

Min left the Strayer house shortly after seven, the pie in one hand and a paper bag with her old shoes and housedress in the other. The A.M.E. church was having a revival that evening; so she walked a little faster, but still dignified, in high-heeled sandals and a pretty cotton shirtwaist.

After supper Aunt Emily went out to the garden and cut down a few hollyhocks too high for propriety. She didn't really like hollyhocks and spikey things like delphiniums, but they had always grown along the back fence and she saw no need to change the pattern. The beetles were at the roses again. She made a note to tell Min's husband the next time he came to clean the yard.

Inside, Dudley was standing at the doorway of her cousin's room. "Going out?" she said.

Vera had a towel over her bare brown shoulders and was combing the stiffness out of her set. "Ran into Parker Forbes. He's taking me to a movie up at Charleston." She rose and stepped into a yellow sundress, pulling on the straps quickly and reaching back for the zipper.

Dudley was at her side in a second. Her cool fingers held the gripper. "Here, let me." She pulled it up, observing the way Vera's back had tensed into a tight hollow away from her contact. "There now. All set for a big time."

The other girl sat down again at the dressing table. She picked up a lipstick and carefully outlined her full mouth. One side was a little uneven. She ran a tissue over it and began again.

Dudley clasped the bedpost, rubbing her hand slowly up and down the smooth mahogany. "Wasn't it queer the way he died?" Her voice was like a sigh. Vera put down the lipstick. Both hands gripped the table for an instant and then she fumbled for perfume. The bottle tipped over, and a heavy musk scent quickly filled the room.

"I mean, he was so strong. And such a good swimmer. Wasn't he?"

Dudley insisted, watching her cousin intently.

"It does seem strange," Vera said after awhile.

"And how could he ever let himself get caught like that? So close to the water in a storm." Dudley clasped her fingers tightly. "Something's not right about it."

Vera looked at her in the mirror. Even in the reflection, Dudley could see her eyes wide and shiny with sudden tears. "I don't understand either." She looked down. "He'd laugh like anything, you know. To think of anybody crying over him."

Dudley smiled. "He was a cool one all right." She began stroking the wood again. "I don't suppose you ever thought you were the only one. I've heard," her eyes half-closed, "he fooled around a lot."

Vera stood up. "I know. But it didn't matter who they were. I didn't care. He always came back to me." She faced Dudley and said quietly, "There were things between Wayne and me that nobody could know about. At least I'll have that to remember."

Dudley didn't answer. Vera picked up her purse. "I feel about as much like going out with Parker Forbes as with Old Man Harmon. Tell Aunt Emily where I've gone and not to be worried if I'm late coming home."

"All right," her cousin answered pleasantly. "And try to have a good time." Dudley thought, *I shouldn't have expected to find out anything from her in the first place.*

Vera glanced back quickly. But Dudley's face had already reshaped into its usual neat oval. She left Dudley standing beside her bed and walked slowly down the stairs. Parker was just coming up the walk. She knew with a queer sureness that she would marry him. That life would be a long succession of Sunday dinners with Aunt Emily and Dudley, garden club teas, and quiet evenings at home in the cool, high-ceilinged rooms of the Forbes place. There wouldn't be any infidelity or pain from loving him too much. And she already felt as if she had died, with a square white stone pressing her body deeper and deeper into the yielding earth.

Aunt Emily returned from the garden just after Vera drove off. She wiped the pruning shears carefully and pulled off her gloves. "Wasn't that Parker Forbes Vera was with?"

Dudley answered from the dark of the porch. "Um hm. They went to a movie up at Charleston. Vera said she might be home late and not to worry."

Aunt Emily sat down in a rocker and hooked her cane on one arm. "I won't. Not as long as she's out with him. Fine young man. Comes from a good family. Hope Vera's got the sense I think she has."

"You didn't like Wayne, did you Aunt Emily?"

The moon was just rising beyond St. John's rectory. It seemed to belong exclusively to Shelton, not shared by the rest of the world. So did the night with its full-compass swing of black, pitted with stars, and the sea rolling almost close enough to hear. Aunt Emily rocked, the chair thumping rhythmically as it moved back and forth from the woven fiber rug to the bare edge of the porch. "He's gone now. What I thought of him doesn't matter anymore." Dudley caught her breath sharply. Then released it. "You looked tired at supper, Dudley. Why don't you turn in early tonight?"

The girl rose. "Maybe you're right." She moved closer to her aunt. "I'll help you inside. Min just waxed the foyer. You'd better watch those floors."

Miss Emily's fingers drummed on the arm of her chair. "Told you before. Do better by myself. I manage just fine."

From the swamp road faintly came sounds of the revival. Dudley leaned against the balustrade, pressing a cluster of honeysuckle between her fingers. The singing swelled as basses joined in. *Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. A long ways from home . . .* There was loneliness in the night. Full-measured, absolute. It weighted the stillness even after the singing ended. The girl spoke unevenly, "Everything sure seems to take an awfully long time. I feel like I've been living forever."

Aunt Emily rested her head against the back of the chair. "I wish you'd go out more. Like Vera."

Dudley rolled the tangle of leaves and yellow stamens between her palms. "We're not a thing alike. Maybe that money of hers has something to do with it. I don't know. Anyway, there's something about her that I don't have. And most things come easy for her. Almost always."

Miss Emily straightened. "Money can't supply everything. Both of you have needed more of a family than I've been able to be, much as I enjoyed raising you. I've often thought how strange things turned out with my never marrying. Then at a time when most spinsters settle back and get used to being alone, I was given custody first of you, then Vera. It was a great responsibility, Dudley. One I wouldn't have dreamed of refusing, but still a very grave undertaking—your health and well-being. Vera's money complicated everything." She unhooked the cane and pulled herself up. "Come along, child. A good night's rest will do both of us good. I think it must be this air. So humid. It depresses everyone."

She took her niece's arm. It wasn't at all necessary, but she didn't want to refuse Dudley again. They opened the screen. There was just a lamp in the corner illuminating the

foyer. The bare polished wood underneath picked up the light.

They took a few steps. "Is the back door locked?" Miss Emily paused.

"I'm sure Min took care of it, but I'll check." Dudley released her arm, and Aunt Emily pushed the cane forward. It made a sudden sweeping arc upward from the floor, catching her a little off-balance. The stick fell as she instinctively leaned toward her niece. Dudley steadied the old woman. "Why didn't Min put the rugs back before she left? You could've had a bad fall."

"It's all right. Didn't hurt myself a bit. Run along now."

Her niece stooped for the cane. There was something unfamiliar about the feel of it. She looked down, curiously. The wood was almost perfectly smooth. There were only a few nicks at the bottom end. Slowly she asked, "What happened to the other one?"

Miss Emily took the cane. "It belonged to my grandfather, you know. I was afraid something might happen to it, using it so much."

"Where did you have Min put it?" her niece pressed.

The old woman said querulously, "I can't remember just now. With the rest of the things in the attic, I suppose." She mounted the steps alone. "I want to go to my room now."

Dudley stood at the foot of the staircase, staring up until her aunt turned the corner at the second landing. Then she walked uncertainly to the kitchen, locked the back door and returned to the foyer. She stood beside a Sheraton chair, absently tracing the delicate outlines of the back with one finger. With an effort, she finally moved to the stairs, drawing each foot carefully ahead of the other like a child learning to climb, or an old woman consciously aware of each muscle required.

Aunt Emily called to her as Dudley reached the upper hall. "Come here for a minute, dear. My hair net is caught on the back of my gown."

The girl went into her aunt's room, her eyes suddenly clear and searching. The huge four-poster bed, the nightstand with Aunt Emily's Bible opened, her gold-rimmed spectacles marking the lesson of the day. Nothing was added to or missing from the many years' familiarity of the room. Dudley's eyes rested on the seven-feet high walnut wardrobe.

"Are you going to stand there all night, Dudley?" The old woman moved her head fretfully.

"I'm sorry." Dudley went quickly to her, freeing the net with a few deft turns. "There. It's all right now." She thought for a moment and then, "Don't you have a guild meeting at the church tomorrow? I'll just look over your things to wear."

Her aunt sat down in a chair and began reading the Bible while Dudley searched the wardrobe. She closed the door finally and started to leave. But halfway out, she turned and went back to the old woman, bent down, and kissed her on the cheek.

Without looking up at first, Aunt Emily said kindly, "I've been thinking that it might be a good idea if you were to pay a visit to Cousin Maude. The summers are much cooler up there, and she'd enjoy your company." She lifted her eyes to her niece, her face smooth and indecipherable.

Dudley took a step backward. "I . . . I hadn't especially noticed the heat lately. But if you think I should . . ." She gazed helplessly at the old woman.

"We don't have to decide right now." Aunt Emily looked down again at the page. "Sleep on it. But I really think, dear, you'll come to agree with me. That it would be a nice change to be away from everything here for awhile. In fact," her finger rested on a word, "If I were you, I'd make it a nice long visit." She seemed to have ended the discussion. Her finger moved evenly across the fine type.

Dudley went to her own room at the end of the hall. She reached automatically for the light switch. Then as the room was diffused with brightness, she pressed the button again. She felt as if everything would be more bearable in the dark. But her mind went on and on, relentlessly wondering. There was another question that she couldn't ask just yet, and the waiting made her desperate.

After some time she heard a low duet of voices outside. Eventually, Vera opened the screen door, her high heels tapping lightly across the foyer and up the stairs. Dudley's body became rigid with resentment. But paradoxically the feeling helped; she was able to fall asleep at last.

The next morning after breakfast, Miss Emily left for her customary walk to the post office. Vera would sleep until almost noon. Dudley saw her aunt to the front door, saying cheerfully, "I won't go with you today. There are some things I have to attend to." The old woman regarded her. Dudley smiled, "The visit to Cousin Maude's. I've decided it's a good idea." She touched the other's shoulder. "You'll want to get started now before it turns hot." And then almost gaily, "As long as you're going by the dry goods store, could you pick up a pattern book for me? I might just make a few new dresses. For the trip."

Aunt Emily's eyes softened. She took her niece's hand. "I'd be happy to. You look much better already."

Dudley stood at the door until her aunt passed below the crest of the hill. Then she went quickly to the kitchen. Min was drying the dishes,

humming one of last night's songs. "We could hear some of the music clear over here, Min. It was lovely."

The other woman smiled and rubbed a knife handle with her thumb until it gleamed. "Nothing like a good revival. 'Make a joyful noise unto the Lord,' the Book sez."

Dudley picked up a leftover biscuit and took a small bite out of it. "By the way, where did Aunt Emily have you put Grandfather's cane? I thought I'd better ask in case she ever wants it. Sometimes she forgets little things like that."

Min dried a teacup. "I don't rec'llect anything about her granddad's cane. Thought I seen her take it on her walk just now."

The girl shook her head. "That's a new one. She said she gave you the other one to store up in the attic."

Min frowned. "No'm, Miss Dudley. I never put nothing up there lately. I expect her mind slip a little when she sez that."

Dudley left the remainder of the biscuit on the plate. "Oh, it doesn't really matter. Don't bother asking her. I'll check on it myself. She doesn't like for anyone to think she's getting old." The girl looked at the worktable. "Corn fritters for lunch?"

Min's black eyes sparkled. "For Miss Vera. Can't fix 'em often enough to suit her, she always tells me. Be lunchtime 'fore she's up and prob'ly be hungry as a bear."

"I like them, too," said Dudley. Then impulsively, "And could we have shrimp creole sometime? Nobody else makes it the way you do."

"All you have to do is ask, Miss Dudley. I'll be glad to," Min answered respectfully.

"No," said the girl, her eyes growing darker. "I'd rather you surprised me. Like you do Vera." And she walked from the room.

Dudley knew now that looking through the entire house for the old cane was undoubtedly pointless, but she searched the attic and every room right on down to the cellar. The physical activity triggered her mind. She had gone through each day, backward a week, and had stopped on the day before the hurricane. It was that evening Aunt Emily had said she was going over to Millie Tawes. To get a cutting from Miss Millie's prize rosebush. That was exactly where she had said she was going.

As Dudley came up from the cellar, she glanced at the Meissen clock in the parlor. There was just enough time to go out to the garden. She went by way of the front door, to avoid Min. Aunt Emily had said she wanted the cutting for the bare spot along the west side of the yard. Making her way hurriedly past beds of camelias, cape jessamine, clumps of azaleas, the entire thought became almost unbelievable among the color and fragrance around her. And yet, even before

she reached it, Dudley knew at the end of the path there would be a space of bare brick wall with nothing yet planted beside it. It must've been Aunt Emily, as she'd known all along really.

Suddenly the scents grew nauseatingly sweet, too profuse with their hot reds, yellows, blinding white. Dudley went back to the house, climbed the stairs, stole past Vera's room and lay down on her own bed. "What will she say? I don't see how I can ever ask her." Dudley's thoughts writhed. But she had to find out. Sickly, she wondered how she could ever get through lunch.

Later, at the table, Vera poured syrup over her third fritter. "Don't wait for me," she addressed the other two. "I'm going to have another cup of coffee and then Parker's taking me swimming."

Miss Emily pushed back her chair. "The water's still a little rough, so be careful. And, dear, don't stay out in the sun so long. You're dark enough already." She smiled fondly at Vera. "Tell Parker I send my best regards to his mother." She turned to her other niece. "Come up with me to my room, Dudley. I have the pattern book."

Dudley followed her. Min had long before drawn the shutters against the noon heat and the room was still early morning-cool, faintly scented with yellow roses. The girl took the paper bag wordlessly from her aunt.

Miss Emily unbuttoned her blue print dress and hung it carefully in the wardrobe. She pulled out a cotton wrapper and drew it on. "One of these days, I'm afraid I'll have to end my morning walks. It took me a long time to accept middle-age, and now I'm beginning to realize I've passed even beyond that."

Dudley studied her aunt's figure as she removed her whitelaced oxfords. Finally she asked softly, "What did you do with the cane, Aunt Emily?" The old woman remained bent, one shoe still in her hand. "It's nowhere in the house. I looked this morning."

Miss Emily placed the shoe beside its mate, aligning both toes with precision. "That was very foolish of you, Dudley. It's not like you to question me this way."

"Did you leave it somewhere or did you get rid of it?" Dudley's eyes grew feverish.

Miss Emily reached for her spectacles. "Since you feel you must know, it doesn't exist anymore. Something changed its value to me. So I burned it. It's as simple as that, Dudley." She sat very erect in her chair, as if she were already presiding before the guild meeting two hours from now.

But Dudley was trembling with a driving eagerness. "You're the only one who would've killed him. The only one nobody would suspect in the least. And he was killed, I'm sure of that now. You did, didn't you, Aunt Emily?" She didn't need an

answer. After a long time Dudley sank to the foot of the bed, her eyes never leaving her aunt's. Gradually the feeling was stilled in her legs and arms and she waited almost patiently for her aunt to begin.

"Yes," said Miss Emily finally. "I felt it was something that had to be done under the circumstances. There's no need for you to know the details, Dudley. You may expect me to say I'm sorry, but I'm not. Even the hurricane's coming when it did seems like sanction from the Lord."

But Dudley probed insistently, "It must've been something he told you. Something that hurt you a great deal. Enough to make you want to kill him. That was it, wasn't it?" Her voice was compassionate, almost hopeful.

Aunt Emily suddenly looked very tired and much older. "That night when I met with him, it wasn't so much his lack of good breeding that drove me to it. It was the way he kept saying no matter what I did he'd end up with a Strayer yet. He told me I couldn't live forever. That someday he'd live in our house, looking down on everybody else. And I knew that he meant it. That everything he said could very well come true. But then he made some remark like he didn't know why I thought my family were so high and mighty. That he could give the town something to talk about. I didn't even let him finish the things he started to say, when I swung the cane at him. He was standing near the water and it must've stunned him just enough to drown."

Dudley lowered her eyes. "You probably would never understand why . . ."

"My only thought was Vera." Miss Emily's neck stiffened. "No matter what happens, at least I protected Vera."

Dudley's head lifted abruptly. "You thought of Vera?" She rasped, "You killed him because of what he was going to say about . . . about Vera?"

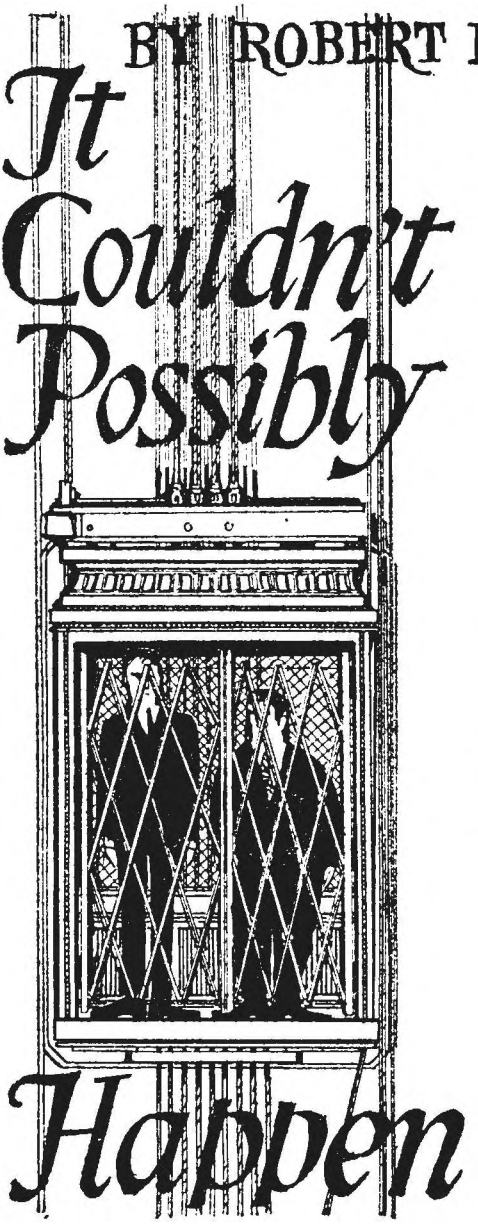
Aunt Emily looked puzzled. "Yes, of course. Poor child. But later on she'll understand things like family pride. The foolishness of ever considering anyone like Wayne Fallow. The very idea of his coming so close to her still makes me a little ill." She stared curiously at her niece. "Did you have something to say?"

The girl slid her palms downward against the cool silk of her dress. "Would you do the same thing for me, Aunt Emily?"

The old woman leaned forward, bewildered. "But I'd never have to, Dudley."

Her niece started to leave, lifting herself painfully. "I'll have quite a bit to think about while I'm away." Then she turned slowly. "But you can be thinking of a name for a baby, Aunt Emily. A girl's name." She smiled, but her eyes were terrifying, "I think a boy should be named for his father, don't you?"

It Couldn't Possibly Happen



BY ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

MARSH and the fat man, Mr. Venner, were the only occupants on the fifth floor of the hotel. They were strangers by birth, profession, and choice. And it wasn't until Marsh's third day in the European city, that anything approaching the social amenities occurred between them.

The elevator was an open grilled affair, and Marsh had entered and was reaching for the down-button when Mr. Venner issued from his room, just opposite the lift, and raised a hand, calling, "Wait, please."

The man carefully locked his door, even tested the knob after the bolt had been shot, while Marsh waited rather impatiently. Mr. Venner joined him and they started cranking downward together.

They stood in stony apathy past the fourth floor; then Marsh became aware of the little man's stare. He turned quizzically, and Mr. Venner smiled, but his eyes did not participate in the smile.

"You are Mr. Marsh? The American painter?" he asked.

"Well, magazine illustrator," Marsh offered.

Mr. Venner nodded, allowed his

It has been my experience that reading between the lines will inevitably give one a headache. And so I have mercifully seen to it, that this cloak and dagger interlude is fittingly printed in invisible ink.

eyes to remain on Marsh a moment longer, then turned deliberately away. Marsh shrugged and matched the other's silence. But something bothered him. He had the feeling that he'd just been catalogued, and he wondered why.

That was Monday morning. Late Tuesday evening, four-five minutes to midnight, Marsh returned to the hotel feeling saturated in local color. The desk clerk was nodding in his chair. Marsh didn't disturb him. He entered the lift and went on up to the fifth floor.

The first thing that struck his attention as he stepped into the hall was Mr. Venner's door. It was partially open, a light was on, and a sound—almost animalistic, suggestive of pain—came from it.

Marsh hesitated in the shadows, wondering. "Mr. Venner?" he called tentatively. "Anything wrong, Mr. Venner?"

A decided pause . . . then, "That you, Mr. Marsh? Come in—slowly."

Marsh edged the door open with his hand, framing himself in the jamb. Mr. Venner was seated at a table, facing the door. He was pointing a snub-nosed pistol at Marsh. His mouth smiled and he lowered the weapon. "Forgive me, Mr. Marsh. I expected someone else."

Marsh nodded. He illustrated too much melodrama to really believe in it. "Really, Mr. Venner—" he began.

"Close the door, please. Quickly." Venner ordered. "There's a man loose somewhere in the hotel with a silencer."

Again Marsh hesitated. Venner raised the gun to back his request. "*Please.*"

Crackpot, Marsh decided. He closed the door, but remained near it.

Venner pointed to an oilskin packet by his left hand. "This is what he's after. He's an agent . . . like me. I was going to sell out to the Americans. He caught me in the alley as I was coming home. Shot me in the back. I couldn't get to the downstairs phone and there's none up here . . . you will have to phone the American military—"

Marsh came to the table, frowning. He stared at the fat man with awe. "*Shot you?*" he said.

"Yes. I'm through. Take the packet . . . you're an American . . . it . . " He laughed and a bright-dab of blood appeared on his lower lip. "The money doesn't matter now . . . I won't be needing it . . . just as well, I suppose, that your countrymen have this information as—" He dropped the gun and put his hand inside his coat as pain passed over his face.

"Hurry . . . take the packet, phone the American military. Use the lift . . . the man with the silencer will be using the stairs, checking each floor—"

And then his head knocked down on the table. Dead.

Marsh didn't move. He stared. The incongruity of talking to a

stranger in a sordid hotel room one moment, and staring at the same stranger dead the next, was too much for him. He straightened up and started for the door. Then checked himself, remembering the packet. He returned to the table and picked up the oilskin, hefting it. The gun he ignored. He had always hated violence.

Walking in the hall, he felt like a somnambulist on the edge of a nightmare. He kept telling himself that what he had just experienced couldn't possibly have happened. He needed a drink. He unlocked his door, went in turning on the light, and proceeded to the dresser near the open window. His traveling flask was empty. He swore and stood by the cold, night-blowing window, rubbing his face. He stared down at the balcony, seeing it, yet not seeing it.

It was all too fantastic. It hadn't happened . . . had it? He looked at the oilskin packet. That was real. The dead man had been real. But cloak-and dagger in a European city? Agents fighting in a black alley? Secret documents? A silencer going *plat!* at midnight? He made an exasperated gesture with his hands and turned to the door. Only one way to settle it. Call the American authorities, turn the matter over to their MPs.

He still needed that drink when the elevator let him out in the foyer, so he roused the desk clerk with a call. "Send the boy for a bottle of brandy, will you? Put it on my bill."

Then he entered the phone booth and closed the door.

He left the booth five minutes later, wearing an expression of perplexed dissatisfaction. He felt his pockets, then realized he was out of cigarettes. Did the night clerk smoke? No, sorry. Suddenly, he felt that he must have a cigarette. All right, he'd go up to his room again and get some, then try another phone call.

Venner's door was still closed. Marsh hurried down the hall and opened his own. He stepped inside and stopped cold, sensing something wrong, something that went ominously beyond the obviously torn-up condition of his room. The door slammed behind him. He spun, facing a tall, bleak-faced man who watched him with eyes that were not capable of compassion.

The man poked a long-barreled pistol in Marsh's stomach.

"Get by the bed. I'll ask, you'll answer. Where are the papers?"

Marsh's first reaction was anger. All the hocus-pocus and gunpointing was beginning to tell on his nerves. Then he noticed the round addition on the end of the pistol. The man with the silencer.

Everything went dead inside him. "What papers?" he faltered.

The man sneered. "Don't play that way, Yank. I found Venner in his room, dead. The documents were gone. Your lights were on,

your overcoat on the bed, only you were gone. You're the only other occupant on this floor. Venner gave you the papers before he died. Give."

"Look," Marsh cried, "I'm just an illustrator. Not a secret agent!"

The man grinned. "You just made a mistake, Yank. I was only guessing till you spoke. How did you know I thought you were a secret agent?"

"Well—well I—I guessed, I mean I assumed—" Marsh stumbled.

The man shook his head. "Won't do. Won't do at all. You're allowed only one mistake in this game, and you just made yours. *Give.*"

Marsh moved away a step or two, aimlessly, trying to think, stall.

"If I don't?"

"Don't be a fool. This little toy of mine makes no more noise than a man spitting in a cellar. I'll shoot you, then take what I want from you."

Marsh looked at him. "And if I do?"

Out of delicacy, the man's grin twisted down to a wry smile.

"I'm very sorry about this—but you must know how it is. I mean, the inadvisability of leaving witnesses and all that. I'm really sorry."

But he wasn't. Marsh could see from the man's eyes that he was anticipating the tug of the trigger. Marsh nodded. "I thought it would be like that."

"I mentioned that I was sorry, didn't I?"

It was inconceivable to Marsh that thirty-one years of erudite living were suddenly going to end instantly and violently. And yet the primordial eyes of the agent promised that it was so. Marsh pushed a trembling hand over his face and looked absently at the window.

"What hurts so much," he muttered, "is that I've blundered myself into this."

"How's that?"

"I mean, I was with Venner when he died from a bullet. He gave me the papers, warned me, and then I did nothing to protect myself. I came up here for cigarettes, even though he told me you were on the the loose. Walked out of here leaving my window wide open so you could come in from the balcony. If I'd only thought to protect myself a little—"

"You did worse than that. You *must* have been in a daze. You left your door wide open. I didn't have to use your balcony. But don't feel bad; locked window or locked door, I can open either in ten seconds." He held out his free hand. "Hate to press you like this . . . but I am in a bit of a rush."

Marsh looked at the hand, at the silencer, at the man's eyes.

A knock sounded at the door.

The man leaped at Marsh the silencer in front of him.

"Who is it?" he hissed. "Who are you expecting?"

Marsh took a deep breath. "This is going to be rather embarrassing. When I left my room I went down-

stairs and phoned the American authorities. I imagine it's the MPs at the door."

The agent looked around desperately, centering his eyes on the window. He shoved the silencer into Marsh's side, deep.

"The documents . . . right now. I'm leaving by the window."

Marsh's hand was shaking to the extent he could hardly draw the oilskin from his jacket pocket. "Don't shoot," he advised. "I'll make a bargain . . . don't shoot, and I promise I'll stall them. You can go along the balcony to Venner's room and escape down the stairs."

The agent hesitated, then grabbed the packet.

"Word of an Englishman?" he asked.

At another time Marsh would have been inclined to laugh at that. Now he only nodded. "Yes."

The agent sprang to the window, threw one leg over the sill, watching Marsh. "If you fail me . . . you'll get the first bullet. You understand? Even if they get me . . . *I'll shoot you first.*"

The knock sounded again. Marsh nodded.

The man hauled his other leg over the sill and dropped from sight. A long second later a shrill scream knifed sharp and clean into the night. The door snapped open and the boy with the brandy bottle gaped at Marsh. "Lord! *What was that?*"

Marsh sagged against the wall. "A burglar," he finally said. "He thought you were the American police. He stepped out on the balcony to escape."

The boy's face was incredulous. "But—but he *couldn't do that!*"

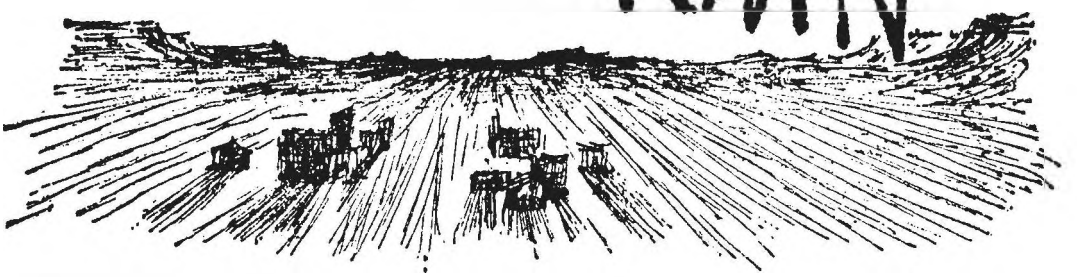
Marsh didn't want to talk about it. He nodded and pushed by the boy, going into the hall. "I know . . . but the thing is he thought he could.

He didn't want to think about the way the agent had died, but it had to be faced. He would have to go down to the street and remove the documents from the body, then phone the American authorities. He hadn't been able to get through to them, the first time he'd tried.

He felt very bad about the whole affair, but he hadn't lied to the man with the silencer, at least not completely. There was a balcony, the only one on that side of the building, and it was below Marsh's window. But it didn't belong to his room. It belonged to the *Gran Monde* Suite, and the *Gran Monde* Suite was on the second floor.

BY DONALD MARTIN

FOOTPRINTS IN A GHOST TOWN



SOMEHOW he had got the notion that a ghost town would be a very peaceful place. It seemed like a very sound idea, for, after all, what were there in ghost towns except ghosts? And no matter how ghostly they were, still they never were as disturbing as people.

"Silence and solitude, those are the things I'm after," Alan said to the man with the martini, whom he did not know. "I want to get away from this sort of thing," he said, waving at the chattery party around them.

"That sounds like a splendid idea," the man with the martini said. "Ghost towns are intriguing places. Genuine Americana. Are you going to do a novel with a Western background?"

"That's still a state secret," Alan said.

There, that was still another pet annoyance of his. In New York you were forced to run up against these perfect strangers at these inevitable cocktail parties, strangers who pried blandly into your innermost secrets.

"Have you decided upon your ghost town as yet?"

"Yes," Alan said. "And please don't ask me where it is," he said grimly. "I want privacy, solitude, aloneness. For a year I hope to sit there amid the rotting boards of the past and write my book."

Here we have a tale of TV west, replete with bad men and good men, a dance hall girl—even a few Indians. In spite of all this, you may conceivably enjoy what transpires.

"Splendid idea," the man with the martini said. "Go West, young man!" he cried with alcoholic exhuberance.

And when, a week later, Alan finally arrived in the place of his choice, he was certain his idea was a splendid one. Such a spot! Beauty, atmosphere, and solitude. The cherished solitude. The brooding quiet —measured from the hot dry earth, within a horizon of purple mountains, up to the hot white sky—was vast, intense.

The town itself had been called Cabin Creek. He had found it mentioned in one of the numerous Western histories he had pored over. Up to date, maps did not carry its name. To history, to the map-makers, to the world at large, Cabin Creek had vanished from the face of the earth. It had never existed, its people never lived. A dead place. Baked and bleached by decades of relentless sun. The nearest community was more than fifty miles away, New Cabin Creek. He would have to go there to buy his provisions, not more than once a week.

He parked his jeep in the middle of the main street and got out. Looking around at the crumbling buildings, he was delighted. Stepping up onto the elevated board sidewalk, he promptly crashed through, the rotted boards caving beneath him. He plunged forward, giving himself a nasty scrape. Restoring his balance, he laughed. This was not Park Avenue. He would have to remember the condition of the town. It wouldn't do to smoke in any of the buildings. A single match could annihilate his ghost town in a matter of minutes.

The word Hotel struck his eye. It was written in faded black, perhaps charcoal, across a plank nailed sideways to a post in front of what had probably been the most elegant building in the old boom town.

Regarding himself as a guest in Cabin Creek, he laughed and decided he would put himself up in the hotel. Going back to his jeep, he took his few pieces of luggage and his typewriter, and, stepping carefully on the boardwalk, entered the hotel.

Inside it was very sad. The place was cloudy with spider webs, with dust. Pieces of sagebrush, whipped from afar by the desert wind, lay scattered about. Weeds grew through the floor in many places.

Playing his silly little game to the hilt, he strode to the desk, with his palm struck a phantom bell (sending aloft a flurry of dust) and said aloud to a phantom clerk who had clocked to dutiful attention: "Mr. Alan Arnold of New York. I believe I have a reservation."

Alan chose a downstairs room, not trusting the staircases. With a piece of sagebrush, he swept and cleaned the room as best he could. One piece of furniture remained, an old bureau. In it he placed his things. From the lobby he took a

desk and chair (the chair received his weight with surprising strength) and placed them in his room. His bed was a pillow and several blankets, arranged upon the floor.

Later, he left the hotel and decided to have a look around his town. It had not been very big to begin with—it had surged to life on the crest of a silver strike in the mountains—and now there was very little left of it. There was the dusty main street, the buildings stretching along it in two weary, sullen rows, each clapboard structure sloping upon the next. A few small buildings had been built about the outskirts. These had largely crumbled back to earth now.

He past the ruins, staring curiously at them, as at some American Pompeii. A warm breeze mixed the untrod sand, heaved a creaking board, fluttered a diaphanous spider web. Everywhere was the dead slant of shadows, mounds of dust and sand. Could he ever become a part of this place? he asked himself. Well, he was going to have to, if he was going to work here effectively.

At the edge of town, beyond the last house, he noticed a slight rise. Curious, he went toward it. Coming closer, he saw the remains of a wooden fence that had long ago fallen back. Something strange and eerie about the place held him there. And then he realized what it was, what it had been: a cemetery. It had the uncanny *waiting* stillness of a burial place. But there was an odd thing—there were no headboards.

Intrigued, he walked through where the gate had been. In some places the grass grew very tall. He could see places where graves had been dug and shaped. But no headboards. There were none standing and none lying in the grass. Did they bury nameless people here? He walked to the summit of the brief knoll and stood there, feeling the warm breeze, squinting in the bright, still, dry heat. From this elevation he stared down at the town. For a moment, the dead town looked rather hostile. He had an uneasy feeling.

Walking back from the old, forgotten cemetery, he made a mental note about the curious absence of headboards. Next time he drove to town, he would inquire about it.

As he neared the start of the main street, he thought he saw something move on a ridge a few hundred yards away. It made him stop and whirl, a wild surprise that was almost fear seizing him. He peered for almost a minute, but could see nothing. He brought out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

"Nothing," he said, aloud. "Probably my imagination. Or maybe the shadow of a passing bird." Then he smiled uneasily. His first day there and already he was talking to himself. But then, once he got to working, the novel would make him concentrate, would fully occupy his mind; then he would be able to take advantage of his solitude in-

stead of it taking advantage of him.

That night, by candlelight, he began his work. It was a risk, he realized, to light a candle in all that dry rot, but he had no other choice, if he wanted to work nights.

He had been writing for more than two hours. He was making notes in his notebook, writing with a pencil. So it was very quiet. He had become so intense in his work, was concentrating so deeply, that he had forgotten where he was. He was leaning over the desk, the yellow light flickering tiredly over the white page, bobbing shadows across his white shirt.

Then he heard the sound. He was caught up by it almost instantly. His pencil stopped in the middle of a word. His eyes looked up, a sharp fright coming into them. They roved warily about the dark, shadow-hung room. He waited.

The minutes passed. What had the sound been? He began to make himself hear it over and over in his mind, trying to recapture and identify it. It had been a quiet, surreptitious sound. Surely it couldn't have been made by a human. Perhaps some desert animal, a coyote. Some animal that had become aware of a new presence in Cabin Creek's decaying buildings and had come down to investigate. Perhaps a mountain lion. He wished he had brought a gun.

He waited. For almost a minute he sat without drawing a breath, his pencil poised above the half-written word. But the sound did not repeat itself.

The wind. That was what it must have been. Self-consciously, he forced a grin. He laid down his pencil and sat back, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck. He was going to have to get used to this sort of thing.

A few minutes later, he blew out the candle and went to sleep.

Dawn came, vast, solemn, empty. The light filtered mistily through the dirt-smeared windows. Alan sat up in his blankets. He stretched his arms, taking a deep, expansive breath. Then he got up and dressed. He took his water pail and went out. There was a creek just outside of town. This was his source of water.

As he was walking away from the town, whistling, swinging the pail, he suddenly stopped short. There before him in the sand were footprints, shaped out in the sand, empty, mysterious. They couldn't have been his; he hadn't walked this way. He followed them. They led down from the foothills, through the town and up towards the cemetery. There they stopped, just outside the cemetery. Another set led back.

He looked around. So he *had* heard something during the night! Someone had been wandering about. And now the town, the same old assemblage of crumbling buildings, seemed almost to transform before his gazing eyes into some-

thing sinister, mysterious, not just something standing in ancient abandon and disuse, but standing with old and solemn purpose, guarding some inhabitant secret.

He did not get the water. He did not make himself breakfast. He was more disturbed than afraid. There was some logical explanation, he was sure. And he was going to find out just what it was. He went directly to his jeep, leaving his water pail in the middle of the street.

It was more than an hour's drive to New Cabin Creek. Driving out of the ghost town, he encountered several miles of rugged, unpaved road. Once he reached the highway however, he was able to make good time.

New Cabin Creek had been built on the crest of a hill. It was not a large town, but it was modern, with some small industry. Alan followed the highway's endless streak of white line into town and pulled into a parking area.

Yesterday, he had made the acquaintance here of a rather old man who had been sitting on a bench across the street from New Cabin Creek's gas station. The old man—his name was Bill Dodge—had evinced some interest when Alan told of planning to live in Cabin Creek for a year. But then their conversation had drifted away from the ghost town into other channels. Now Alan would seek out the old man and ask him some questions.

Crossing the street, he saw the old man. And Bill Dodge was quite an old man, close to eighty, small and stooped, with an unkempt thatch of white hair. The old man wore a string-tie and a vest over his white shirt. He saw Alan crossing toward him and waved a friendly hand.

"Hello," Dodge said as Alan stepped onto the curb.

"I'm glad I caught you," Alan said. "I'd like to talk to you."

The old man gave him a look of shrewd appraisal, his blue eyes, almost hidden beneath thick white eyebrows, kindling a lively interest.

"Can we sit somewhere?" Alan asked.

They went to the bench. The old man, although no longer spry, had nevertheless retained a sharp, tough mind.

"Want to talk about Cabin Creek, do you?" he said.

"How did you know?" Alan asked, smiling.

"You've got a look about you. As if there's something you don't understand. A ghost town can give a man that look, if he's sensitive enough."

"Did you ever live in Cabin Creek?"

"Of course. I was a young man during its tail-end years. It only had about a six-year boom, though that's a lot longer than most of them. I came down from Wyoming. I missed out in the silver strike, but I stayed on. The town didn't die that quick. After the strike it was a nice place.

It died slow. In fact I was one of the last to leave Cabin Creek. I went to California for awhile, then moved back here because this was the place where I was a young man."

"You say there's no one at all living out there now?"

"No."

"How about in the mountains? Any ranchers or prospectors or hermits or anybody like that?"

"No. There's no ranchers there, and nothing to prospect anymore. As for hermits, there's none that I know of." The old man fixed an amused look on Alan. "There's no ghosts either."

"But there's somebody there. Last night I heard something. This morning I saw footprints. They came down from the foothills, right across town, stopped at the cemetery, then went back."

"The cemetery you say?" the old man asked, his highly expressive eyes changing from amusement to sharp interest.

"Yes. And I want to ask you about that cemetery too."

"Never mind that for a moment. What else'd you see? Did you go into the cemetery?"

"No."

"The footprints didn't go in there either?"

"No. And one other thing. On this I could be mistaken. But yesterday afternoon I was sure I saw something move out on a ridge. Do you think it could have just been an animal?"

"No, no animal," Dodge said. "I know what you saw. The Indians."

"Indians?" Alan exclaimed, excited for a moment, but then certain the old man was laughing at him. But the old man's face remained completely serious.

"Yes. Two Indians. There's always two Indians over on that ridge You saw them. They generally don't like to let themselves be seen 'though everybody knows they're there."

"But I thought you said . . ."

"Never mind that. I know what I said. It's these footprints of yours that interest me. Right up to the cemetery they went but not into it, you say?"

"That's right. But just a second. What about these Indians?"

"They won't bother you. They know what they're doing there. They come from a place in the mountains, from a small but very proud and religious tribe. A long time ago one of their chiefs was shot in the mountains just outside Cabin Creek. Because he was a great chief they brought his body in for every body to look at. Then they buried it in the cemetery there. He was their greatest chief, Fire Heart. With the Indians he's still a legend, a god. There's always two of them, even now, in this day and age, sitting there watching his grave. They don't want nobody digging in it."

"Then it must have been one of the Indians I heard, going to the cemetery," Alan said.

"No," Dodge said. "They never come off that ridge, except on the anniversary of Fire Heart's death. Then they come down and put a stone on the grave. That time is close now too. But it hasn't come yet. You heard somebody else last night, and I'll bet a ten dollar hat I know who it was."

"I wish you'd tell me," Alan said.

"You stay in Cabin Creek and you'll know soon enough."

"That's not a very steadying thought. What's it all about?"

"Well, it's a long story, and it happened a long time ago. I guess I'm the last one who still knows all of it. I knew the people too. They're all gone now."

"Can you tell me the story?" Alan asked.

"I can, if you're interested."

"Of course I'm interested. Look, I want to stay in Cabin Creek for at least a year. I want to know what's going on."

"It happened right in the middle of the boom," Dodge began. He was not looking at Alan now, nor was he looking at the gas station upon which his eyes were fixed. He was looking back through the mists of time, back across countless summers and winters into that deep, lonely past which he cherished. "There was a lady named Diamond Annie, and there were two men who loved her, Adam Buzas and Tom Cartwright. Annie was queen of The Gallery, which was Cabin Creek's gaudiest night spot. Annie was quite a gal. Tall and beautiful, with a pompadour of the blondest hair you ever saw. Tom Cartwright was part owner of The Gallery. This made him think he was full owner of Annie. He did give her her nickname. He covered her with diamonds. Hardly a week would go by without Tom giving her another diamond. He insisted she wear them too. She had them on her fingers, around her throat, in her hair. And never did a woman do them fuller justice." The old man paused for a moment, having a long look at Diamond Annie, his eyes musing appreciatively. Alan did not press him. In a few moments the old man began again.

"But Annie loved Adam Buzas. Adam was a young one who'd come up from Texas. He owned a small ranch outside of town, but he sold it so he could move into town and be close to Annie. She liked him. She liked him a real lot, and Cartwright knew it, and there was nothing he could do about it. Adam used to tell Annie that he would take her away from Cabin Creek. He told her he'd homestead out in Oregon. But she was afraid of Cartwright. Tom was slick and tough. But finally one day she told Adam she'd go with him. Tom heard of it and set out to stop them. He went to Adam, but Adam wouldn't scare. Then he went to Annie. She had just finished her packing. She was going, she told him. He told her different. Then he told her he

wanted the diamonds back. She wouldn't give them. Then something happened. Nobody ever knew for sure just what. Some say that Annie tried to walk out. Tom shot her. She died there in the room.

"There was hell to pay for that. Tom had a lot of power in Cabin Creek, but not that much. Annie was a mighty popular girl. She had lots of friends, most of whom were all for stringing Tom up to the nearest rafter. Luckily for Tom there was a U.S. Marshal in Fathersville, 'bout twenty miles east, and he got here and took over. They had to tie Adam Buzas down—and I mean literally tie him down—to keep him from busting the jail to get Tom.There was a quick trial. You never saw so many men sitting with guns in their laps in a courtroom. Tom pleaded guilty and got life. That seemed to satisfy most everybody. Tom's friends figured he'd get out in short time, but he never did. He died in prison, about ten years ago.

"Then things began to cool off. I mean maybe a year later—that's how high the temperature of the hot heads was around here. Folks began to ask what ever became of all of Annie's diamonds. The day she'd been killed, she'd just finished packing. Later they went through all her things—and Adam Buzas was standing right there—and they never found a trace of the stones. Some folks figured maybe she'd given them back to Tom. But she never did that. Then folks realized what must've happened. Those were different days. The roads weren't always so safe to travel. Annie knew that. She was a cagey girl. What she did was sew all the diamonds into her dress—the one she was wearing the day Tom Cartwright killed her, the same one she was buried in in the Cabin Creek cemetery.

"But just in case anybody took any notions about desecrating the grave, there was Adam Buzas. He'd taken rooms in a house on the edge of town. The house is still standing, I think; least it was two years ago, the last time I visited the place. Adam well knew where those diamonds were, and he knew what some people would do to get them. From his porch he could see the cemetery. And from the cemetery you could see Adam Buzas sitting on that porch with a rifle across his lap. It seemed that he was there day and night, that he never slept. He'd just sit there and watch the cemetery, him and that rifle, which he could well use, as they knew; just sit there and get old and old and old, till folks began to say that he probably forgot himself why he was there.

"But there was getting to be less and less folks to say it. Cabin Creek was all played out. Gradually, people there were dying out, or were packing up and leaving. No fresh faces came in. And then Adam Buzas was the last man living in

Cabin Creek. I'd go down there once in while to see him. He'd still be sitting on the porch with the rifle in his lap. I doubted whether that rifle could fire anymore, but nobody was going to do anything to find out. He was the loneliest man in the world, sitting there grieving with all those ghosts around him. Then one day he went and took away all the headboards. There's probably two hundred graves in that cemetery. He was getting old then and he figured that if folks still remembered the story and came to digging he would make it as hard for them as he could.

"Then Adam died. Not too long ago, either. Somebody went there to visit the place and they found him lying on the porch, the rifle on the floor. They buried him here in New Cabin Creek. Some sentimental folks thought it would have been a nice touch if they buried him in the old town near Annie, but that was the way they did it. So Cabin Creek was empty. But if anybody began to speculate on digging for the diamonds—not that anybody's sure anymore where they're at—they changed their minds in a hurry. The Indians had heard the story. They knew all about it. Their chief was still buried there. When they heard that Adam had died, they expected folks would come out and start digging. They didn't want their chief disturbed. So one day they appeared there. Two of them. Always two. They sit for a week and then two more come, winter and summer, day and night. Nobody's ever tried them out yet. No more than anybody ever tried out old Adam when he was sitting on that porch. By now, though, the whole thing is almost forgotten."

"Except," Alan said, "by the person who was there last night."

"Yes," Dodge said. "God, I wish I were a younger man."

"You would try out the Indians?'

"Dig up Annie's grave? Me?" The old man passed him a rather harsh look. "No, I would never do that. Anyway, nobody will as long as those Indians are there. This fellow last night found that out. He was probably heading for the cemetesy for a look around; then the Indians let him know they were there. He tried them out. He'll have to try something better."

"Who do you think it was?"

"There's only one man that I can think of. Only a man who knew just where the grave was would be cocksure enough to go to the cemetery at night. And there is a man who knows. His name is Glenn Short. He came into New Cabin Creek on a bus about ten years ago. He started asking around about things, about Cabin Creek. Naturally folks referred him to me, being the unofficial historian of the place. He asked me a whole lot of questions about Adam Buzas and Tom Cartwright and Diamond Annie and about the grave and the

diamonds. Well I made sure I asked a few questions myself. I got it out of him that he'd been in the penitentiary and had known Tom Cartwright there. Then he said he'd come around as a favor to Tom, to look up some of his old friends. Well Tom's old friends had been gone for more years that you can remember, so it was pretty obvious to me what Short was after, and he was fishing around to find out if it was still there. And if it was still there, then he knew where it was. Because Tom Cartwright had known. Tom had suspected that Annie had the diamonds buried with her and he took pains to find out which grave it was. Said it was because he wanted to have flowers placed on it the whole time he was in prison. Well the flowers never showed up, just as Tom didn't. I guess when Tom began to realize that he was never getting out, he told the story to Short, told him just where to dig.

"So Short went there. But it was his misfortune to find Adam Buzas still there, still with the rifle. Tom hadn't told Short about Adam, so when Adam put a shot across Short's bow, Short took off and came back here. He hung around town for a few days. I suspected that he'd taken it into his head o go back to Cabin Creek and kill old Adam, Adam was the last one living there then. But he went to Salt Lake City first, maybe to get some money. Anyway, the next we heard was that he'd got into a scrape there and had got put away again. But now I suspect he's back, and that it was him you heard last night."

"Can you describe him to me?" Alan asked.

"Well, it's been a number of years now, but I don't reckon a fellow like him is going to change very much. He's not very friendly looking fellow, and his name doesn't fit him. He's tall, half bald on top, with a sort of craggy face, with eyes that don't ever quite seem to look straight at you—I reckon they get that way from looking through bars too long."

"Do you think he'd be dangerous?"

"What would you think about a man who suspects there's an uncounted fortune in diamonds a few feet down?"

"What do you think I ought to do?" Alan asked.

Dodge looked at him. "It ain't my place to tell you, son," he said. "But if I were a young man, I know what I would do."

Alan Arnold was hardly a hero. He was the first to tell himself that. And he was hardly fearless. But he did have pride, as occasionally a writer has. If old Bill Dodge had said that he would have left Cabin Creek if in Alan's place, then Alan would have taken the advice. But Alan had felt the old man's wild, swaggering spirit surge once more

in his tired old body. Alan envied that spirit.

And anyway, staying *was* the thing to do, if only to find out what happened, for the story intrigued him deeply. And neither was he in any grave danger, he felt. Glenn Short would have no reason to harm him—unless Alan objected to Short's digging for the diamonds. But Alan would have no reason to object. It was none of his business. Besides, the Indians would be there. They could take care of that.

He thought of the diamonds. How much could they be worth? Thousands? It excited him—just the thought of it.

He drove back to Cabin Creek. It was late in the afternoon. The shadows were beginning to lengthen across the empty main street. The peculiar, alienating air of mystery still pervaded the dead buildings.

He parked the jeep in front of the hotel. Before going into the hotel, however, he walked up to the little knoll where the cemetery was. He stood there, gazing wistfully. Diamond Annie. He wished he could have known her. From the soft, sad way Bill Dodge had spoke of her, he wished very much he could have known her. But even if he had, it would have done no good. He sensed that. They differed too much, one from the other.

The retreating sun was casting a soft copper light over the neglected, weed-grown cemetery. He looked out at it. It was poised over the mountains, bidding another of its infinite guardian farewells to Diamond Annie.

Then he turned around. There was Adam Buzas' house. The porch which had so faithfully supported his devoted, implacable figure for so many years had collapsed. It was a pile of rotted, eaten wood. Adam Buzas he knew. That kind of man he understood. He felt kinship with him and his long, lonely vigil. He and Adam Buzas would have been friends. But *such* devotion! It made him shudder now. It seemed somehow mysterious and inexplicable, like something told from a legend.

Having thus communed, ineffectively, with the veiled ghosts of an elusive past, he walked back to the hotel knowing, uncomfortably, that the Indians were watching him from their secret place, resenting him doubtlessly, not trusting him.

He entered the hotel. Walking towards his room he saw smoke. The first thing that rang in his mind was *fire*! He dashed into the room, then stopped short in the doorway.

A man was sitting there, looking at him, smoking a cigarette. Here was Glenn Short, just as the old man had described him, half-bald, tough-faced, his long legs extended before him. He was looking up at Alan, cynical, self-assured.

"Glenn Short," Alan said.

"That's right," Short said. He

squashed out the cigarette on the desktop. On the floor, next to the chair, lay a spade. Alan glanced at it.

"You're going after those diamonds, aren't you?" he asked.

"That's right."

"You were poking around here last night."

"You've got good ears," Short said with a slow grin.

Short's hands had been folded over his middle. Now he opened them and Alan could see the handle of a pistol protruding.

Short looked out the window. "Sun's going down," he said. "I've got to start soon."

"What about the Indians?"

"I've got a theory about them. My theory is that they won't do a thing. Do they really care about the grave of that chief that died all those years ago? I don't think so. They're just sitting there because it's become a tradition, a tribal custom. I'll bet they'll even be glad once somebody takes those diamonds; it'll get them off the hook."

"How about last night? Didn't you try last night?"

"I just went for a look at the layout, just to see if the grave was still intact, and they didn't do anything."

"But you didn't have your spade with you?"

"No."

"What about me?" Alan asked.

"What about you?" Short said right back to him. "That's up to you. I'm taking those diamonds. It can be over your dead body or not. It's up to you. And if you don't think I'm up to it, mister, you just try me out."

Alan pondered this for a moment. Then he shook his head, his eyes falling. "I won't try you out," he said quietly. "It makes no difference to me."

Short stood up, spade in hand.

"During the day it's too hot; at night it's too dark. This is the time," he said. He tucked the gun more comfortably into his belt. He was quite a tall man, towering over Alan. He held out his palm. Alan looked at him.

"The key," Short said.

"The key?"

"To the jeep."

Alan gave it to him. It would be folly to resist this man who was not only much bigger but armed as well.

Short left. Alan sat down by the window. He watched Short stride up the street, the spade swinging rhythmically at his side. Short passed the house with the collapsed porch and strode up the knoll.

He knows just where it is, Alan thought bitterly.

Short paused, looking around, standing quite tall against the copper sky. Then he plunged the spade into the earth, defiantly, exclaiming his purpose to the watching Indians. For a few moments he dug, his long back curved, tiny streams of earth flying up.

Then, suddenly, a rifle crackled. Then another. The earth spurted at Short's feet. Quickly he flung down the shovel and went to one knee, his revolver drawn.

Feeling a hot constriction in his heart, Alan wheeled. From the window he could see them, the two Indians coming across the prairie, not at all like the Indians in a movie; there were no feathers, no war-paint, no war-whoops. They were dressed like other men, in plaid shirts and work pants. They were coming boldly, their rifles at their shoulders.

And just as bold, as fearless, was Short. He looked like some lone Custer, kneeling on the knoll amid the desolate headstoneless graves, firing his pistol. One of the Indians fell. The other was hit, falling for a moment into the grass, but then rising, coming up with a blazing rifle, advancing with a fierce and furious slowness, wounded, staggering, but inevitable. His rifle blazed again. Short screamed. Alan watched Short rise, stand full against the sky, then break and fall. The Indian's rifle dropped. His hands came up to his face. For a moment he plunged through the chest-high grass like that, blind, dying. And then he fell.

The silence resumed with a sudden, uncanny completeness.

Then Alan was running to the cemetery, a hot excitement teeming in his heart. He ran up to the knoll. He stopped. Glenn Short was dead. Next to him was the place where his shovel had so desperately scraped.

Alan stood above the grave. So here was where the diamonds were. Dig down a few feet with Short's spade and scoop them up. He pictured them there, the glittering stones clinging to the ragged remains of a dress, sewn there by the woman's trembling fingers as she was about to run off with her lover. And he thought of Adam Buzas who had sat away his life, in bitterness, in grief, in loneliness, and in mysterious love to guard the place where his heart lay buried. And of the Indians and their chief, of whom they were so proud and so jealous, who lay here somewhere close by.

And he thought of Cabin Creek, upon whose dying boards he had foisted himself: Cabin Creek, which would probably crumble tomorrow because now it had all happened, it was all done.

Had it been meant for Alan Arnold to come to this spot and dig into the grave of buried love and devotion and take the reward which had colored the dreams of dead men?

He lifted the spade and began pushing the dirt back into the hole Glenn Short had begun to open, covering it again, making it look exactly as it had before, like all the others.

For those of you who have ever purchased a house, this is your light epic. The long-lived mortgage, the wet cellar, the unkept promise, the inevitable neighbor, all are here—plus murder—to bring back sweet, sweet memories.

It was a quiet day, a calm day, a day nothing had happened at this man's home, his castle, his FHA house 24-303876. Not that the wife and I were hoping for a ruckus, but the wife *was* supposed to get on the builder's back about replacing our kitchen sink. You know how it is in these housing developments—the party currently screaming the loudest might get something done. By the time I got home, about six-thirty the wife hadn't yet worked up to an effective scream. We still had a chipped sink.

"Marak told me the plumber would have to rip out the kitchen wall to get a new sink into the formica!" Now Dell was hollering. At me.

"Whaddaya mean, rip out the wall?" I hollered back. "They got clips under this formica that make it a cinch to hook in the sink from inside the cabinet. Look!"

I opened the cabinet door to show her, and that's when this body rolls out. Well, he didn't exactly roll out. He sort of *un*rolled. Whoever stuffed him in shoved his feet in first then rolled his upper half in and slammed the door shut. When I opened the door he just uncoiled and laid his head at our feet.

Trouble with Dell is that she's excitable. By the time she got through screaming and blubbering, the whole subdivision was swarming around the house, the body was identified, and the police chief was shooing out the neighbors. All this before they got me revived.

"Hal, dear," the wife's voice dripped icily through the ammonia fumes, "that was Lew Marak. And I mean *was*."

"He's gone?"

"If you mean from our kitchen, no. If you mean from this mortal coil, yes."

By now the chief had everybody out of the house and had estab-

lished the dignity of the law, at least to the point where we were calling him "chief" instead of "Rocco" as everybody usually called him.

"You feel like answering some questions, Hal?" he asked me.

"Yeah, sure."

He started probing his pockets for a pencil, while I probed my memory for anything I might tell him about Lew that he didn't already know. Lew Marak was building the twenty-eight houses in our Estate Homes development. Although he had conned the FHA out of completion certificates for most of them, there wasn't one house 100% completed. Lew should have been sales manager, not builder. He talked a good house and he talked lots of extras and services, but instead of delivering he kept right on talking.

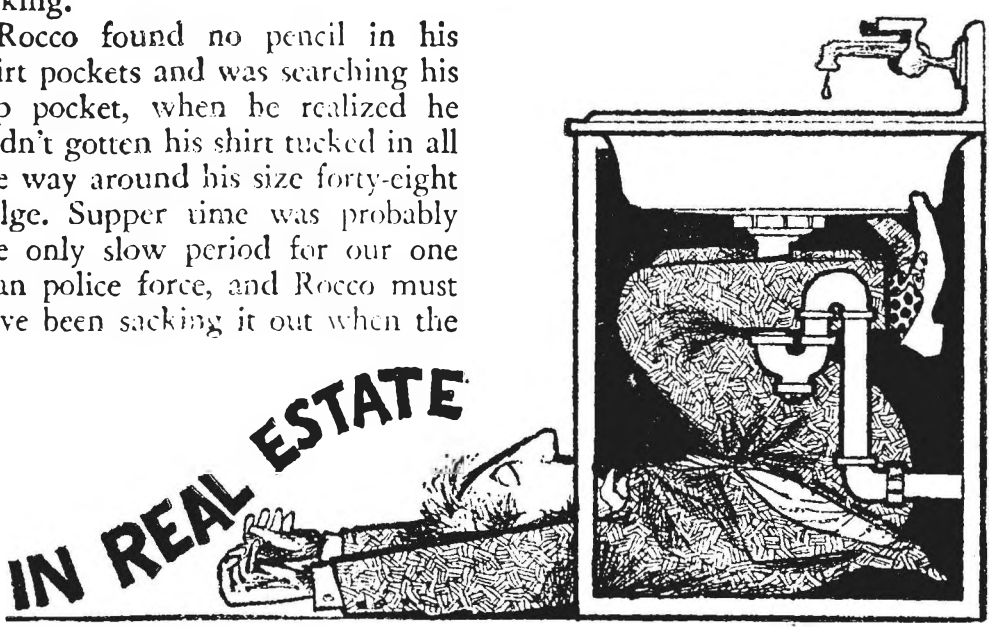
Rocco found no pencil in his shirt pockets and was searching his hip pocket, when he realized he hadn't gotten his shirt tucked in all the way around his size forty-eight bulge. Supper time was probably the only slow period for our one man police force, and Rocco must have been sacking it out when the Hallidays next door phoned him about Dell's ruckus. He was still fumbling in his pockets, when Dell brought over my route book and ballpoint.

"Here," she said, handing him the route book, "use this. The water company has its own screwy system of billing anyway, no matter what figures Hal reads off the meters."

We were a little embarrassed for Rocco. He asked the obvious questions, about how long was it since we had opened the cabinet previously, and who was with Lew when he was here last. Then he asked, so help me, "Did you notice anything unusual about the cabinet."

I almost told him we find a body there every night, but a sharp "Hal" from Dell shut me up.

"Ya know," Rocco said, not waiting for my answer, "this is the first



killing I've ever had so I guess I'd better call in the county boys. Come to think of it, they're supposed to handle our murders anyway."

Two hours dragged by before county headquarters sent over a lab crew, but then they finished up in less than one hour. They told us to stick around the house the next day, as the homicide detail would be taking over. Wouldn't you know Lew Marak would croak on a Friday, so that a guy didn't even get a day off out of it. Had it happened any other weekday, I'd have had no qualms about taking a day's sick leave, for right then I felt pretty sick—from ammonia fumes. In the morning, I told myself, I'd feel better.

In the morning I felt worse. It was pretty near eleven when the lieutenant showed up. Soft job, I thought, until he pulled my letter out of the photo envelope he was toting. He'd already been to Newark, siphoning up everything the bank and the FHA had on Marak.

"Fern is my name," he said when we opened the door. "Detective Lieutenant Lawrence Fern. You said you might kill Marak."

"I did?"

"In writing."

I just kept looking at him like maybe he had said my birth certificate was a forgery.

"Okay," he said, "I'll read it to you. In case you still don't remember it, it's a letter you wrote to the president of the Garden State Mortgage Company."

Did I remember that letter! It was a masterpiece. I worked two nights over it and I've reread my carbon copy twice since I mailed it, as sort of self-congratulation on the results the letter got. For my benefit he didn't have to read it, but he did anyway.

"Dear Mr. Gorenpal," Fern read. "It's time you and I got together on the house we own jointly. That is, your company owns 12,000 of it. 15,000

It's a good house, or at least it will be if it ever gets finished. We let Lew Marak talk us into moving in while there was still some work to do. Now all we can get out of Lew are promises, assurances, and guarantees. Unfortunately, my wife cannot wash pots in an assurance and rain just won't be kept out of the basement by a guarantee. With the mortgage already approved by the FHA, I no longer have that as a persuader over Lew Marak. I need some new persuader before I get mad enough to kill Lew," the lieutenant put second grade phonetics on those last five words. "Since he's a nice guy in spite of his glib unfulfilled promises, and since I'm signed up for 25 years under this roof, I'd much rather find that new persuader than resort to mayhem." He went through this part fast, mumbling. "Since you are still bankrolling Lew's project how about protecting your investment in our

home by coercing him into finishing the last 5% of the job?"

That was the letter and it had worked. It got everything finished so far except the replacing of that chipped sink. It also got me into this delightful spot.

"How about it?" Fern asked as he folded the letter and placed it back inside his photo envelope.

"Aw c'mon. Lots of guys threatened to kill Marak. They've stood outside his office and screamed for his blood. Two at a time, no less."

"Sure, anybody can get mad and yell threats," the lieutenant conceded. "I've even heard my wife scream at the kids that she'll kill them. But you weren't excited when you wrote this letter. It reads pretty cold and deliberate."

"Aw, c'mon," was all I could say. Why hadn't I thought of this possibility last night, so I could have schemed up some witty comebacks? Even Fern seemed a little disappointed in me.

"Can't you at least say," he asked, "that you are not dumb enough to sign a confession in advance before you knock off anybody?"

"Well, you can *see* that."

"Yeah, I can see it. Guess I gotta believe it, too. For now, anyway."

"Thanks. Thanks . . ."

"Besides, I bought an FHA house and moved in a year ago."

"House finished yet?," I asked.

"Almost."

Now that he had tightened the screws and loosened them again, Fern had us set up for some expert probing. It struck me that he was a taller man than he seemed at first, and heavier. His light complexion gave him a deceiving appearance of being slight. Either his humor was the dry English type, or he just wasn't being funny. He wanted to know whether Dell had left the kitchen between four and six-thirty.

"If you will pardon the cliche, lady, "he said, "you were the last person known to see Marak alive."

"Do I look like the kind of a woman," exclaimed Dell in mock shock, "who would *strangle* a man?"

"No good," said Fern, shaking his head slowly. "That line wouldn't get you any information even if he *was* strangled. Now, let's quit clowning and answer some questions. Between four and six-thirty, where were you and for how long? All the stops you made."

"Stabbed?" asked Dell, still trying to find out how Marak was killed.

No answer.

"Well," she began, "it must have been closer to four-thirty when Lew and the plumber left, and I . . ."

". . . just had to run next door and tell Kitty the snafu about the sink," I contributed.

"Let the lady supply her own answers," said Fern coldly.

". . . just had to run next door and tell Kitty the snafu about the sink," Del continued. "Gosh, it

didn't seem I was in there much more than ten minutes, when *he* came along."

Me, of course.

"Only ten minutes," repeated Fern. He was surprised, but kept scribbling. "You mean this house was empty for only ten minutes?"

"Well, it *seemed* like only ten minutes, but I guess it must have been longer. Hal doesn't get home until a little after six."

Fern sucked his lips in tight, but didn't look up from his book. He reversed his pencil and began to erase.

"You'd better make that a little after six-thirty," I offered.

"Why?"

"I never get home until after six-thirty, that's why."

"Lady," if Fern wasn't struggling to keep his voice level, he was making a good act of it, "were you out of this house from about four-thirty until after six-thirty?"

Dell had her thumb and forefinger stuck thoughtfully in her mouth and was studying Fern's notebook. She raised her eyes sheepishly and nodded, then tried her own sneaky interrogation again.

"Lots of people were mad at Lew, but I can't think of anyone mad enough to *shoot* him. Can you think of anyone mad enough to *shoot* him, Hal?"

Fern kept writing and never glanced up. He didn't get much more out of us. We hadn't much to give. As Dell said, every new homeowner in the development had a mad on against Lew Marak, but if killing a sweet-talking builder was justifiable homicide then the country would have one monumental housing shortage. We gave Fern the run down on the little we did know about our neighbors. We weren't any help on the point he seemed most curious about—the previous home town of each. He was obviously disinterested when we gave Brooklyn as our former address. He took one more look under the kitchen sink, then started for the front door. He turned, stared at us for three seconds, then said, "Lady, if headquarters takes me off this case," it sounded as though he hoped headquarters would, "don't ask my replacement who drove a spike into the back of Marak's neck or you're in trouble."

Two doors banged. Kitty Halliday flounced into the kitchen as Fern went down the front steps.

"You're not going to make this poor girl cook in this modern kitchen tonight, are you?" she demanded. Then added quickly, "Don't look so belligerent. I'm only trying to be cute about asking you two over for dinner tonight. Ralph says you won't be in any hurry to eat where the corpus delicti-ed."

"Who's belligerent?" I said. "I'm just trying hard not to stare at your head of orange hair. Sure, we'll free load tonight. It is orange, isn't it?"

For a doll who didn't need the help of artificial gismos, Kitty was always bugging the new fads.

"Keeps the boys interested," she flung over ner shoulder.

She meant that, too, I was thinking as I watched her flounce out again.

"I'm reading you soft and clear," Dell's voice cut into both my thinking and watching. "And, just in case you hadn't noticed, Ralph is six-two and weighs about 240. He notices Kitty, too, and he notices who else notices her."

We took up the invite gladly. We'd been avoiding our own kitchen. Except for making coffee that morning, we hadn't gone near the sink. A few hookers of bourbon had constituted our nourishment since breakfast, and we had rinsed the glasses in the bathroom. We were squeamish, not jittery. At least we weren't jittery until we heard the racket out in the kitchen, while we were dressing to go over to the Hallidays.

"Something fell in the kitchen," said Dell in a soft, scared tone.

"Yeah," I whispered back. "Must be the cat."

"We," she said, mouthing each word distinctly and slowly, "do not have a cat."

With the left foot shod and brandishing the other shoe in my hand like an Indian club, I forced myself to walk out towards the kitchen. I clumped down noisily, that one shoe I was wearing, with every left step. At the door to the kitchen, I groped around the door jamb and flipped on the light. Of course there was no one and nothing there, but the outside kitchen door was ajar.

"I guess we didn't close it when the detective left," I told Dell, who had followed me all the way. Then the cabinet door, that same one under the sink, began to swing open.

"Oh no, not again," I breathed, as Dell's fingers just about reached the bone in my upper arm.

This time no body tumbled out. We walked over to the sink and Dell gasped. The cleaning gunks, the Tide, the Brillo and the bleach, all the detergents which tidy Dell kept in the basket shelf on the cabinet wall, were stacked neatly on the floor right under the drain. The shelf was on the floor beside them.

"Somebody's been in there," Dell said.

"Sure, Lew was."

"You're not funny! Somebody was fooling around with those things while we were in the bedroom just now. Those detergents were all on that shelf and the shelf was on the wall."

"Probably fell down yesterday, and the cops stacked them up in the middle that way after they took Lew out."

"Uh uh. I washed the coffee cups this morning. Everything was on the shelf and the shelf was in place. Somebody's been in there while we

were in the bedroom." Her voice was getting high and quivery.

Still brandishing one shoe, I clumped across the kitchen and closed the door. I locked it. Dell looked terrified, so I picked up the telephone and asked for the police department. Rocco was little assurance. Didn't I know, he asked, that there were more tracks in the mud around Marak's development than there were on all TV westerns combined? And did I know where in blazes he could get fingerprinting equipment?

Any prowler we had flushed would be in the next county before Rocco could get up around our way. Moreover, Rocco, it seemed, wasn't coming up.

So we called county headquarters. A bored sergeant said he'd give the message to Fern, even though he regarded it as a simple breaking-and-entry for the local police.

"Let's leave the radio on and lots of lights burning while we're next door," suggested Dell.

We did.

When we told them about our visitor, the Hallidays mixed their reactions. Kitty was positive that we should call Trenton and demand protection from the state police. Ralph obviously considered the incident as a double case of jittery nerves and prescribed double martinis. He did say, however, that Rocco ought to call a "special" for guard duty around our house for a few days. "Specials" are part time cops who get paid to fill in when Rocco has a day off or whenever there's a parade or other big public event.

"Why a guard?" asked Dell. "Whoever it was tonight, was looking for some *thing,* not for us. Who'd want to bother us? We don't know a thing about Marak's murder in the first place, and we've already told the police that. So, who'd want to bother us?"

"For that matter," Ralph countered, "who'd actually want to kill Lew?"

"Well," snapped Dell, "somebody did."

"Sure, but who'd *want* to? Besides if a killer wanted to get Marak, he could have caught up with him in any one of a dozen empty houses around here. Instead, Lew gets stuck in the back of the neck in your house, just as it's getting dark. Consider this: Lew is just about Hal's build . . ."

All three of them got a turn at pounding my back before I disgorged the olive. And when I got my voice back, I couldn't think of any use for it. I just stared stupidly at Ralph.

"Well, after all," he said, "it's a logical possibility."

"For heaven's sake!" Dell raised her voice considerably. "who'd want to kill Hall?"

"I know I'm sounding monotonous, but who would have wanted to kill Lew?" Ralph insisted. "I know there were a lot of guys who

were fed up with him. But still that's not enough of a reason."

He had something. Eight families and two police departments had not come up with an answer to his question in over twenty-six hours, ever since we found Lew . . .

"With a hole in the back of his neck," I mumbled, "meaning he didn't even face his killer."

"Or vice versa," Dell added.

"Just as it was getting dark," Ralph also added, "probably no lights burning, and in your house."

After that, we dragged through dinner. Three of us were valiantly making with light and merry conversation for the benefit of the fourth. The fourth wasn't buying. Ralph made the obvious corny observation that maybe some jealous husband knocked off Lew, pointing out with a ha ha that Lew had all the development wives to choose from on week days.

"Ha ha," said Dell.

"Ha ha," said Kitty.

While they chattered, I did some mental roll calling. I counted off on my fingers everybody I'd gotten to know in the two months since we moved to town, but I couldn't come up with anyone who might be mad enough at me to stick a spike in the back of my neck.

There were only eight families currently living in our subdivision. Four didn't even have names. That is, not to us, that's how little we ran across them. Besides the Hallidays and ourselves, there was one other family on Doughty Boulevard. They were the Groggins. You couldn't miss knowing them. They had ramps front and back instead of steps, on account of he was a paraplegic. We still had no sidewalks in Estate Homes, but Lew kept plenty of two-by-ten planks conveniently dropped around the Groggins' place. For a stinker, Lew had been awful nice.

Groggins I checked off. The other nine houses on both sides of Doughty Boulevard were still unoccupied. They had smart buyers who knew enough not to move in until the houses were completed. Once Lew got you in the house you either had to take title or pay rent. An empty house, he'd figured, earned him nothing. The Bensons over on Peapack Road were only names to me. I think we exchanged glares with the she Benson when we were selecting wallpaper in the crummy shop Lew'd made his decorating deal with, but I couldn't be sure.

Of the other four families, one was the "Alfa Romeos" because on their driveway was the only Alfa we'd ever gotten close to. The other three had just moved in a week or so back. They all must have figured out for themselves how to get the lousy casement windows out of the basement, for they hadn't come knocking on the doors of us older settlers to ask. You had to get those windows out and let the March breezes zephyr through, or every-

thing you put down in the basement turned moldy green before you got back up to the top of the stairs.

"Hah!" I snorted, and all the light chatter stopped. "The only suspects left are the nineteen aluminum storm window salesmen who were here the first Sunday after we moved in. Somebody tipped them off that I got wood combinations from Sears, and they chipped in to hire a professional killer."

It wasn't worth two snickers, but Dell must have been relieved to hear me at least attempt a gag. We all got kind of silly, each of us speculating on who the killer was and whether he meant to get Lew or me. Kitty, as usual, ran the ball the wrong way.

"Remember that screwy FHA inspector," she giggled, "who made Lew dig out one shrub from every lawn because each house was only supposed to have six instead of seven? Oh no, that doesn't figure. Lew should be killing him instead of vice versa." She trailed off in a fit of giggling.

It was then that we remembered the painter Lew fired. He was a drunk, a mean drunk. He had mixed in some mentions of physical violence with all the obscenities he had screamed at Lew when he got sacked. That ended our speculation on a serious note, and we agreed that I'd phone Fern in the morning and squeal on the painter. I didn't know how much help that would be since none of us knew the painter's name. On any other project there might be some personnel records, but with Lew Marak you couldn't count on that.

Back at our own ranch house, I forced myself to check out the kitchen before turning out some lights. Martin Block was playing platters over the radio—a guy we hadn't heard since television took over our living room in '49. I started to peel off my shirt, when Dell gave me the needle.

"That mistaken identity angle shook you up bad," she quipped. "You never even noticed that Kitty was wearing her own hair and a high neckline."

"Color blind I'm not. I did notice she wasn't sporting the orange wig."

"Well, since color blind you're not," Dell's head cocked a little farther to the right with each word, "perhaps you noticed how red her eyes were when we came in."

"Good night, Dell."

When you got a wife talking about how you do or don't notice another woman, the only thing for a husband to do is break off the conversation and hope for a draw.

Fern came out in the morning. Earlier this time, probably because it was Sunday and there were no offices open for him to poke around in. He'd gotten our message about the stacked suds and wanted to look

around. He was squatting down inspecting the interior of the cabinet, when I told him we remembered someone mad enough at Lew and big enough and violent enough to kill.

"If you mean Anders," he said without turning around, "he's about half way through a thirty day stretch in the county workhouse."

"Is Anders a painter who—"

"He is. He's also a painter who trompled all over a taxi driver who only wanted to collect his fare."

"That sounds like him and that lets him out," I conceded. Then I got around to the angle Ralph had stirred me up with the night before. "Lieutenant, is there any possibility the killer mistook Marak for someone else?"

"Well, you tell me. We haven't yet dug up a good reason why anybody might want to knock off either you or Marak."

"You mean," piped up Dell, "that you thought somebody had intended to kill my husband!"

"Lady, we *are* cops—policemen, that is." Then he turned back to me. "How about it? You hiding out from some Brooklyn mob, or you had any run in with violent-type neighbors? No? Okay, maybe that doesn't rule out mistaken identity, but it makes your being the intended victim less likely."

He paced to the living room picture window, studied the empty houses across the street, then measured his steps back to the kitchen. He repeated the whole process and we were beginning to get curious. Maybe he had figured some angle.

"You figuring an angle, Lieutenant?" asked Dell.

"I'm trying to figure out when that police chief of yours is gonna get up here. He's supposed to pick me up and run me back to headquarters. My car ditched in one of your late Mr. Marak's unfinished sewer trenches and broke a tie rod."

"Rocco must be down at St. Peter's," explained Dell. "Eleven o'clock mass will just be getting out about now and he'll be handling traffic. I'll run you downtown. I'm going out for some chow mein for our lunch."

"Lady," said Fern, almost fatherly, "you got twenty-four years and ten months left on your twenty-five year mortgage, and you gotta cook and eat in this kitchen some day."

"Sure I do. Some day. Do you or don't you want a ride downtown!"

"I want it," he said.

I'm the second fastest thinker in our house. So Dell, not me, was going for the chow mein, and me, not Dell, got left to dig up dishes and set the table. It was when I was groping through the silverware that I saw it. A skewer, I think you call the bigger versions, but this one must have been designed for amateur outdoor chefs who cotton to shish kebab. It was a slender ribbon-twist of steel, maybe about fifteen inches long and with a hefty handle tacked on one end. I didn't remember our

having such a wicked looking instrument, and my flesh began itching when my imagination suggested how it got in our silverware box and what it had gotten into before that.

There was a rapping on the kitchen door and Ralph let himself in before I could replace the skewer in the drawer.

"That what you knocked off Lew with?" he asked. He was carrying the sweater Dell had forgotten the night before.

"I've never seen this gismo before," I said.

"Maybe that's what your sneaky visitor was looking for last night."

I wondered out loud how difficult it might be to trace the owner of it. I guessed it must be the type of gadget that is stamped out by the gross and sold in every garden supply store in the country.

Ralph shrugged, then held out the sweater, saying, "We thought since Dell got taken downtown to be booked, you might want to take this down to comfort her in a cold clammy jail."

"Booked!" I snorted, "She'll know the complete contents of Fern's book by the time she gets back. Man, you should have heard her yesterday trying to con him into telling us how Lew got it. Fern finally blurted it out. I haven't even seen anything in the papers yet about Lew being stuck in the back of his neck."

We both stopped grinning at the same time. I felt creepy all over and I didn't want to think of what Ralph must be feeling. I knew what he was thinking, though. Right now we were both remembering how the night before Ralph had been the first to point out that Lew got stuck in the neck while he had his back turned.

He had fifty pounds on me easily, and he stood at least three inches above my head. What's more, now he had that skewer in his hand. He was closing in on me slowly, deadpan, when the front door squeaked open and Dell sang out, "Soup's on!"

Ralph pivoted to face her and that's when I lunged at him. I just dropped my head against my chest and charged at his right kidney. I didn't lose consciousness; I know I didn't. Because when Ralph propped me up in the chair, Dell was still holding the brown sack with the chow mein.

"Easy, Hal boy," Ralph was saying. "You missed me and nearly wrecked your famous kitchen cabinet."

"Is this a new television wrestling act or just some early football practice?" Dell wanted to know.

Dell was annoyed, I was hurting awful on top of the skull; Ralph was still deadpan. Somehow, he didn't seem dangerous.

"Would I find your lieutenant down at Rocco's, you think?" he asked Dell.

"That's where I left him. He's

waiting for the B and B Garage to fix up his car."

"Hal," he said to me, picking up the skewer again, "don't ever believe that tripe about it coming easy the second time. I was hoping I could find this gadget before you or Dell did. I guess sooner or later I'd fold up anyway." He choked a little, then added, "If I'd only had enough control of myself, I would have just scared that louse Marak."

He walked out the kitchen door and the draft closed it for him. The heavy thump was Dell going down into the nearest chair. She was still clutching that bag of chow mein.

"Hal," she asked weakly, "does that mean . . . is Ralph . . . did Ralph . . . was it . . ."

I nodded.

You would have thought the lieutenant would be happy at having it all wrapped up, but instead he was growling. In any other neighborhood, he griped, everybody but the husband would know who is fooling around with whose wife. Here it has to be the other way around.

"You mean Kitty Halliday is what got Lew dead?" I asked.

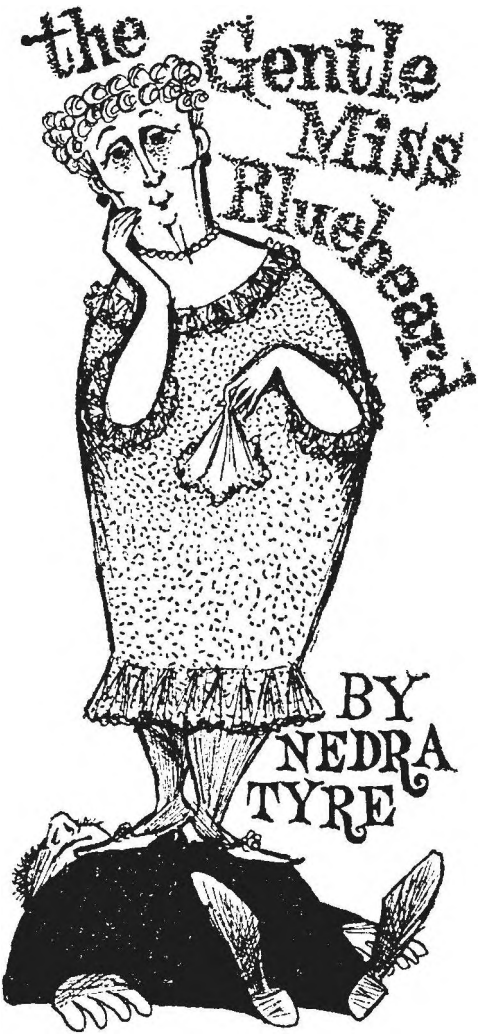
"Yup. Her husband was jealous enough to be suspicious of anyone. And his wife just isn't slick enough to lie convincingly." The lieutenant chuckled a little, then added, "It must have looked like one of those old silent movie comedies the night of the murder. Marak went straight to Kitty from your kitchen. He probably didn't even get his hat off when your wife came running over. Your missus comes in the side door, and Marak, who always ducked out that door when Halliday came home, had to sprint out the front door. He saw Halliday driving up, but figured Halliday hadn't seen him, for he ducked around the back and into your kitchen again. After all, he had some excuse for being in there. But Halliday did see him, and he went in your front door. Marak was peering out your kitchen door to see where Halliday was when, Halliday rushed him from behind. At that point it wasn't a comedy any longer."

Dell sobbed, but just once.

The lieutenant held out the skewer and shook his head slowly. "Tidy and helpful, that police chief you got. He picked this off the floor and put it in with your silverware. I'll bet he even washed it first." He looked quizzically at Dell and asked, "Lady, wouldn't you notice anything missing or added to your silverware?"

"I guess not," smiled Dell. "But from now on, I'll check carefully after there's been a body in my kitchen. Or a policeman."

the Gentle Miss Bluebeard



Miss Mary Anne Beard was not of a reflective or probing disposition, and so it did not occur to her to dwell upon how she had developed into a murderer. A talent for murders of a discreet and delicate nature came upon her unexpectedly in early old age, a gift fullblown and quite successful. Her prowess indicated that she might have been born to do murder.

If she had been compelled to form an opinion about her connection with murder, she very likely would have said she had fallen into it for lack of anything better to do. But she would not have been offhand about it. Pride seems a bizarre word to use as descriptive of the attitude she took toward her proficiency, and it lacks accuracy; yet she did regard her gift, her knack, her faculty—whatever it might be termed—with some feeling approaching pride and wonder.

Her aptitude for murder first showed itself six months after her sixty-fifth birthday. It was then that she murdered for the first time. Her wits were about her; her purpose was clear, and she did not waver. That night after she had committed murder she slept well, remorse was not even a remote bedfellow. Two days later, wearing her best dress and newest hat, she went to her victim's funeral, not to gloat over her success, but out of respect to the dead man, of whom she was fond; she nodded toward his wife, muttered some apt words of unfelt sympathy, and listened with reverence to the service for the dead. Though the deceased was only an acquaintance, she was gratified that she had gone to the funeral because few people were there, her victim was old and had been bedridden for years, his friends had dropped away, and a shrew of a wife was his only relative.

Miss Beard murdered because there was not much else to do in

her retirement: the paucity of her social security check did not allow for other indulgences. That sounds callous. It is not meant to be; for Miss Beard followed her new calling with high resolve and dedication.

There was not much else that would have attracted her. Actually, she had no taste for travel, even if she had had the money for it.

Most of her previous leisure during her business career had been devoted to reading. There had never been enough time to do all the reading she wanted to do. Now that there was time her sight had begun to fail; reading closed her lids like a soporific, or else the print danced before her eyes in some intricate ballet which she was unable to follow.

So reading was out.

For a short while to try to find something of interest Miss Beard sought out the old-age clubs. The members at these clubs were all pleasant enough, but Miss Beard resented being lumped with them for the sole reason that they were all elderly. She did not feel an automatic member of the aging, just because she had gotten up every day that presented itself and had lived through it the best way she could, and so by this natural and inevitable course had accumulated an impressive number of years. No, she could not identify herself with all these people.

And so old-age club activities, were out, along with travel and reading.

So, in a sense, because there was nothing better to do in the time of her retirement Miss Beard took to murder.

She was modest about this gift; she must have nurtured it through the years to have become suddenly so adept at it, yet she had not once suspected this deadly and deathly trait in herself. And then the long tunnel of memory bored deep into her subconscious and she remembered that year in the third grade when the children had taken up the taunt, aping a boy—a mean, spiteful youngster—as he called after her, Mary Anne Beard, Mary Anne Bluebeard, Bluebeard Mary Anne, and after that many of the children out of the teacher's hearing had called her Mary Anne Bluebeard. But this name-calling had ended when her father died and her mother moved to a more modest neighborhood and Mary Anne had gone to another school, so that she and her former

The original Bluebeard—if memory serves correctly—dispensed with an even half dozen. Our heroine beats that score all hollow, and what's more she's a lady and not even trying.

classmates had been lost to each other in the city's vastness. The name Bluebeard had hurt as it had been meant to hurt, yet she had forgotten it until the time of her first murder. Her talent for murder had been dormant all those years and it might very well have been that the little boy—what was his name?—something simple—she had no head for names—had been gifted with unusual intuition and had divined her true nature.

Anyway, her ease and adeptness at murder sometimes amazed her.

What amazed her even more was the number of people eager for death. She had believed that however hazardous and fraught with discontent and discomfort existence might be, that people still grasped at life. It was not so. Her victims were all obsessed with the death wish. The slightest gesture in death's direction and they embraced it like a lover. She learned with astonishment that a person needs only the tiniest encouragement—only a word, a gesture, or the slightest push or shove—when he or she is inclined toward death.

Her first victim's name was Smith, John Smith, and his life was as non-committal as his name. Miss Beard had been as unaware of him as she was of the other tenants in the modest apartment house where she lived. It was a neighborly deed on her part, an offer to help in an emergency, that introduced them to each other; on their first meeting, there was no hint that their brief acquaintance would end in murder.

That afternoon Miss Beard heard the doorbells ring, the ringing progressed up one side of a corridor and down the other side. The walls of the apartments were thin, the bells sharp; it was a sound she had become accustomed to since her retirement—solicitors, salesman of one kind of another, making their rounds, neglecting no one, going from apartment to apartment, seldom getting an answer because it was a domicile of working people. The sound of steps approached and diminished, with the spitting buzz of the bells blaring in between. Her turn came. She answered the door. A woman flushed by irritation stood there. "I've got to leave the house," she said, "and the man who promised to come stay with my husband just phoned he can't come. I must go. It's urgent. Can you come?"

There was nothing tentative about the request; it was a command.

"Of course," Miss Beard said, as if the question were politely put, "I'll be glad to come."

And so she was admitted to the presence of her first victim: to Mr. John Smith. He lay there on the bed, a captive of heart disease.

Mrs. Smith barked an introduction to them and then busied herself in a bluster of leavetaking. The

apartment was a glory of silence when she left, and then Miss Beard turned to Mr. Smith. From his bleak dominion he summoned up a smile for her. She answered him with a smile but could think of nothing to say, nor could Mr. Smith, who was like a timid child suffering a bad case of the cat had got his tongue, and so they smiled again at each other, and this exchange sealed their goodwill.

Miss Beard sat there as she was to sit on succeeding occasions when Mrs. Smith went to play bridge (card playing was the emergency that took her away, not anything more urgent than that) and she habitually called upon Miss Beard to sit with Mr. Smith, as Miss Beard came willingly and would accept no pay, whereas the man had to be cajoled into coming and charged a dollar an hour.

Though the total of their meetings was mounting at the rate of two a week, Miss Beard and Mr. Smith still found nothing to say to each other. Miss Beard was alert to any wish of his—his eyes glancing toward the water and she was up quickly to hand the glass to him, or a flicker of pain across his brow and she proffered a pill, and sometime just to show her interest and concern she would raise or lower the shade, tuck the blanket in, or remove it—and his smile would tender his gratitude. No words were spoken. He had come to mistrust words and spoken communication, and well he might, Miss Beard thought. For even during her brief stays in Mrs. Smith's presence, she had noticed the continuous barrage of Mrs. Smith's words directed against Mr. Smith. Once or twice when he had attempted an answer, Mrs. Smith had distorted what he said, a simple statement that she was not to worry he was in Miss Beard's good hands would be caught as if it were a barb and shot back at him with an arrow's speed to wound and hurt and make him cringe beneath the covers.

Then after the miracle of her departure, Miss Beard and Mr. Smith did not defile the blessed silence. Yet they had begun to plot and what they plotted was Mr. Smith's death. Those two gentle people began to collaborate on a deed of violence. No word was spoken; it was tacit planning.

There was the afternoon when Miss Beard had stolen for the first time in her life. Her theft was a rose for Mr. Smith. She had come back from the grocery store and there the rose was, leaning over a fence, tempting her; a thorn pricked her finger when she reached toward the vine, but that did not deter her in breaking off the blossom. It was the loveliest rose she had ever seen, and Mr. Smith's look of pleasure told her he thought so too when she handed it to him shyly. Though Mrs. Smith had been engrossed in dressing, her witch's heart had intuited something; she came to the

door and saw Mr. Smith in the act of accepting the rose. "My, my," she said. "Nobody knows what goes on around her while I'm away." Her voice was a mockery, a taunt; nothing could possibly take place in her absence and she knew it.

And Miss Beard, aware that she was in the presence of an inquisitor, a sadist and tormenter, said to herself: Mr. Smith must get out of this at once. I must murder him right away, and Mr. Smith looked longingly at her, as if to answer, yes, you must, I can't endure this any longer.

Events proved immediately favorable; there was no need to dilly-dally.

That afternoon Mr. Smith had one of his attacks, and Miss Beard reached for the dosage Mrs. Smith had measured out, just in case. Miss Beard extended the glass, and in the midst of pain Mr. Smith looked at her and his lids blinked negatively, and she had taken the glass and poured the medicine down the lavatory. It would have done her no good to have had any remorse later and to have tried to replenish the glass, because she did not know from what bottle the medicine had been poured and the chest's shelves were regimented with bottles. She did not know Mr. Smith's doctor's name and so could not telephone him. Twice she tried to telephone the city hospital, but got only a busy signal. If there had been an answer she would have asked for emergency service, but she might have given an incorrect address, only to call later with a mild reproof over the fact that the ambulance had not appeared. Anyway, it would have been too late.

Her second murder was something like trying out a new recipe, wondering if it would work. Yes, it was like reading a recipe and deciding to follow it sometimes if the ingredients were available.

It came about in this way.

The house next door was very close and the people living in the upstairs apartment opposite Miss Beard's used loud voices in their anger. A lovely girl whose lovely face was twisted into a hag's mask, shouted: "But mama, has it ever occurred to you that you have these attacks only when I'm going out with Joe?"

The older woman answered: "It's no pleasure for me to suffer alone here in this grubby apartment day in and day out and then have you come home at night and scream at me and rush out, just when I've been hoping we could have a nice evening together."

"But, mama, it's only once a week. Joe knows I have to stay with you every night but one."

"Last week it was Friday and tonight's only Tuesday. Is that once a week?"

And then Miss Beard watched the girl go to the telephone. The voice

she used was the cold, bitter one of women who give up men or have been given up by them. For a long time, the girl listened to the reply she had provoked and at last said: "That's how it is, Joe. There's nothing I can do about it."

So for the second time, murder was to prove an easy task for Miss Beard.

The next morning she watched the girl leave the apartment. Miss Beard joined her at the bus stop, and opened the conversation with a reference to the weather gambit, then sat down with the girl on the bus. The ride was not long, but it took no time at all for the heartbroken girl to spill out her despair to a sympathetic listener.

So it came about that instead of husband-sitting as in Mr. Smith's case, Miss Beard began to mother-sit while the girl went on dates with Joe. The woman whose name was Brown enjoyed Miss Beard's company and her many attentions—Miss Beard dearly loved to pamper people: a massage, a manicure, a shampoo, a cologne foot bath, an alcohol rub, pleasant conversation that lulled Mrs. Brown into sleep. Her last speech before she dozed off was invariably: "If Anne should leave me to marry Joe, I'll kill myself."

That was when Miss Beard decided to do it for her.

And yet Miss Beard was not sure just how this murder might be consummated, though she knew the deed must be done immediately, for Anne had whispered: "Joe asked me to marry him. I said yes. I don't know how to tell mama. Help me to think of a way." And Miss Beard promised she would put on her thinking cap and try to figure out a way to break the news.

As it turned out, there was not a great deal to it. That next night Mrs. Brown complained of being chilly and asked Miss Beard to hand her a bed jacket. "It's just come from the cleaners," she said. "You'll find it in a plastic bag."

Miss Beard handed bag and all to Mrs. Brown. She watched Mrs. Brown take the jacket out and put it on and fling the plastic bag to the foot of her bed. Miss Beard talked on and on to her in her most soothing voice, and then after awhile the woman's resounding snoring began. There was nothing, Mrs. Brown had bragged, that could wake her once she had fallen asleep. It was then Miss Beard recalled what she had read in the newspapers, so many unfortunate cases recently of persons, usually babies or young children, being suffocated by plastic bags. It was really hard to believe they were so lethal. Miss Beard had not seen one before; her cleaners used old fashioned paper bags. She wondered if plastic bags were as deadly as all that. Would it work? Ought she to try it? She might as well see if all those news stories had any truth in them. Surely it was worth a try. She picked

the bag up from the foot of the bed and laid it across the edge of Mrs. Brown's pillow. Just then Mrs. Brown turned over in her sleep and burrowed deeply into the plastic bag.

Miss Beard tiptoed out.

She was not invited to the wedding; it was a small, very private affair, coming so soon after a death in the family, only the closest friends and relatives were asked and Miss Beard was not among that group; she did send a present: two dessert spoons in Anne's pattern —Greenbrier.

Miss Beard encountered her third victim in the grocery store. The weather that day was perfect, the wind just right, the sun just warm enough; it did not seem possible to Miss Beard that there could be misery anywhere. But her awareness of sinister reality came back when she reached for a number two can of beets and turned to see a rapacious hand stretched toward the section marked Disinfectants. The hand belonged to a woman whose face was wracked and devastated by unhappiness; in the distraught eyes was a bald and bold lust for death.

Miss Beard, thinking only of the woman's suffering, and not of her own gift for murder, said: "My dear, you must sit down. Let's go to the drugstore next door. A sip of tea will help you."

Over the tea, the woman poured out such a pathetic account of betrayal that Miss Beard saw at once something must be done to try to comfort her. The tea grew tepid, and the tea bags, limp against the saucers, only added to the air of dismay and ruin. Something had to be done at once, the woman must not be allowed to commit suicide in the awful way she had planned, with poison causing slow, infernal pain and distortion and disfigurement.

The woman pleaded in a pathetic tone: "Do you mind walking home with me? I don't think I could cross a street without help."

"Of course, my dear, I'll be delighted."

And with Miss Beard's two shopping bags full of groceries and the woman's sack with its solitary fatal content, they walked to the dingy rooming house where the woman lived.

Inside, down labyrinthine halls filled with musty odors of days old cooking, the woman guided Miss Beard to a furnished room. The bed with its imprint of the woman's body, the pillow moist with her tears, the sink filled with coffee cups ringed with stains and grounds, the cheapness and shabbiness of everything, the solitary armchair with its stuffings bursting through, like some picador's injured horse whose belly had been ripped by a bull's horns, and the ceiling cracked and discolored, were too much for Miss Beard. All these

evidences and echoes of misery were beyond her endurance.

The woman's teeth began to chatter, making hallow staccato sounds of grief.

"You must get in bed," Miss Beard urged. "You must warm yourself."

Miss Beard turned on the gas heater, and the heat made the exhausted woman relax. Miss Beard tucked her into the rumpled covers, and almost at once the woman fell asleep. Then Miss Beard saw the suicide note the woman had written earlier; it was stuck into the cracked mirror of the dresser. The woman's heavy breathing reassured Miss Beard; the room grew warmer and Miss Beard turned down the gas, and then she turned it off. The woman slept on and on and Miss Beard felt that she must leave. But the woman must not be allowed to wake in that dreary room with the newly bought disinfectant so conveniently at hand. There was a much easier way to carry off the whole thing.

Miss Beard turned the gas on. But she did not light it. She tucked towels at the window. The door fit snugly enough. The room was small; there was no reason why the gas should not take effect in a short time, and there was the suicide note to explain everything. Miss Beard had kept on her gloves—she had always worn gloves when she went out and when she worked around the house, strange that all her life she had prepared herself for a murderer's necessary precaution.

Miss Beard picked up her shopping bags and left the woman's room.

She had forgotten how perfect the day was, until she walked out into the sunlight again.

As for her next murder, Miss Beard eased her fourth victim across death's threshold with a slight push, down a fire escape. And her fifth murder—no, her sixth—also involved a tiny push, this time down an embankment. Her seventh was an administering of an overdose of sleeping pills. And so they mounted: her eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth murders. She was most especially careful about her thirteenth—no matter how much anyone protests, everyone is superstitious about the number thirteen.

And so it went, murder only slightly premeditated—one after the other, with no malice, and no such maudlin emotion as regret; murder in these instances seemed required and Miss Beard did not flinch; she felt no sorrow for what she had done and the persons she murdered benefited from her action.

There were no complications at all, though every now and again after her fourteenth endeavor she would have a strange, somewhat unsettling sensation that she was being watched, yet no one could

possibly be watching her. What could any of those deaths mean to anyone living—all her victims had been emotional outcasts, no one had taken any notice of them except to wish them out of the way. Still the feeling of being watched persisted, and in an eerie fashion she half expected the little boy whose name she had not been able to recall to dart out at her in some dim hall and shout, Bluebeard Mary Anne, old Mary Anne Bluebeard, and then to chant, I told you so, I told you so, I've always known you were a murderer.

One afternoon, after her fifteenth murder, the impression of being watched was so overwhelming she decided she needed a rest, her trouble must be that she had grown fidgety from overwork. Besides, all the chores were getting behind in her apartment. She should soft pedal the murders for awhile; she had been overdoing them, zeal was triumphing over zest and that would never do. One or two crimes a month were all that she should reasonably expect of herself, whereas that last week she had disposed of three poor wretches.

A change of pace did prove helpful. She enjoyed her vacation from murder. Tidying, dusting, cleaning out drawers, puttering around, shifting furniture were most satisfying. And then time began to pall; she must get her hand back in; that poor lovetorn lady on Sixth Street urgently needed attention and the poor dear alcoholic gentleman on Seventh had suffered too long. Well, then, another day or two of pampering herself with all that leisure and she must get back at it.

Unaccountably, and for the first time, she began to doubt her gift. She even began to think that she might be caught. This had not occurred to her before, and because she had never told a lie in all her life she knew that if she were ever questioned about any of the people she had helped along death's route, she would answer truthfully. So to be prepared for any emergency, however remote, that was the morning she took her light blue silk dress to the cleaners to have ready, just in case she should ever be brought to trial.

It was the last day of her holiday from her delicate craft that the bell rang. She went merrily to answer it; what she needed to put her in the mood for getting back to work was diversion.

A man was standing just outside her door when she opened it. She greeted him and he gave his name, but she was so poor when it came to names she did not notice what he said. A thought slightly strange and unsettling, but on the whole stimulating, rushed through her mind: I know this man quite well. And at the same moment, she realized that she had never seen him before. He was quite nice, a person in either late youth or very early middle age with a relaxed, assured

air. He complimented her on her geraniums and primroses and asked if he might talk with her. At her invitation he settled himself on the sofa, and then he said:

"Miss Beard, I want to talk with you about crime. Are you interested in it?"

It was another survey, she thought. People were eternally making surveys on every subject and object; only the week before, she had answered a long list of questions about soaps, washing powders, and detergents.

"I don't quite know what you mean," she said and smiled. "If you're asking whether I like to read about crime, I can't say that I do. I've never been a detective novel fan, not even when my eyes were good. I don't read about crimes in the paper either, except maybe the headlines."

He gave a small polite nod to acknowledge her answer. "I meant to be more specific than that," he said. "I meant to ask you if you were aware of the sharp increase in crime in this immediate neighborhood—a radius of five blocks. It's phenomenal—the increase in accidental deaths and so-called suicides. Have you noticed?"

She did not answer. She could not lie, falsehood outraged her principles. She would give the man an answer soon, but not just then; and he rushed in to fill the conversational lag, as if he were the host and she the guest to be put at ease.

"Well, I'm interested in crime," he said. "My whole family is. It started with my father. Before his death my father was a criminal psycholgist. He had what some authorities called a genius for probing the criminal mind—particularly murderers. He went off the deep end just once. My father knew dozens of murderers, but he said the only mass murderer he ever saw in his life he recognized when he was a child—she was a little girl in his class at school. Do you know he made very discreet investigations of that little girl throughout her adult life, and all the poor lady ever did was build up a fine record as a stenographer? Until the day my father died ten years ago, I kept twitting him about her. I told him Lombroso or anything resembling his theories was for the birds, that no one could possibly discover a murderer just by looking at her. He still insisted that respectable lady was a mass murderer. He went to his grave believing it. And he wouldn't tell me her name; he said it would make headlines some day. Aside from that one instance, my father was right on every criminal he ever dealt with—but he really was off the beam about that little girl. It was the only time anyone ever caught him out. Now, you see Miss Beard—"

And just for a moment she did not pay any attention. Now she knew the little boy's name. Now she knew why the man in front of

her looked so familiar. for months she had tried to remember a name and in that instant she knew it as well as she knew her own. The little boy's name was Bobby. Bobby Williams. And this man, his son, had said that he was Lieutenant Williams. Yes, that was the name he had given when he entered her apartment.

She began to listen again.

"Miss Beard, in the Police Department we can't intuit anything. My father wouldn't be of much help in making inferences for us. We have to have proof. So when there's a marked rise in the rate of suicides and accidental deaths, we have to know why, and when those deaths occur within a small area and when most of them happen in the daytime in a neighborhood where nine-tenths of the people are away from home all day working, we still may have a tedious job, but it's something we can handle. So we start looking for someone who doesn't work, and one day one of our men notices a pleasant elderly lady who always wears white gloves and who is conveniently near after a suicide is reported, and then when we're almost positive it's she, why her suspicions are aroused and she doesn't go out any more on her little errands and for two weeks there aren't any suicides or accidental deaths. So that makes us sure she's the one. Do you see how it is?"

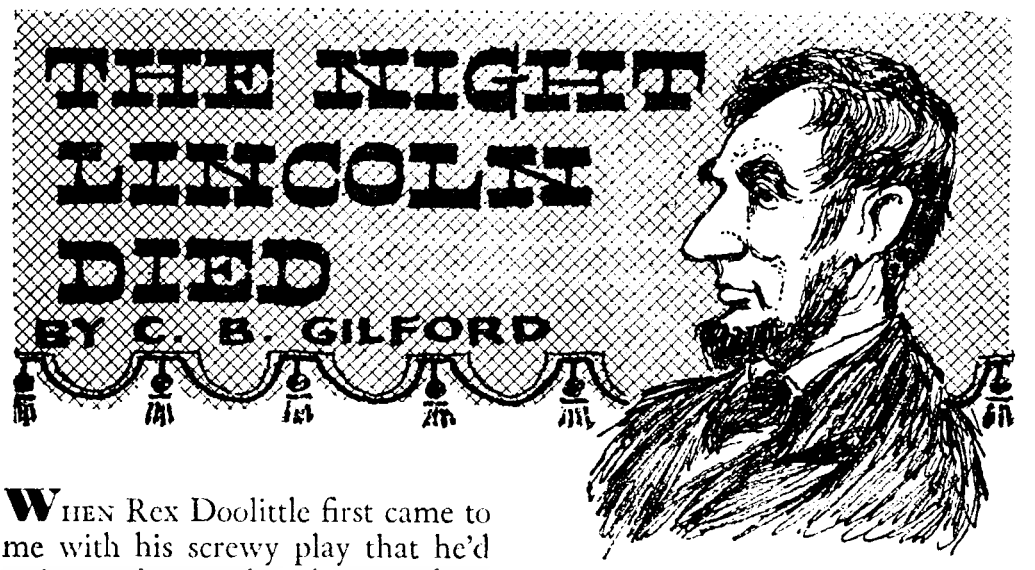
She did not mean to justify herself; she had no need to justify what she had done, but he was waiting for her to say something. "But don't you see," she said. "Those people were miserable. They had to die. They would have killed themselves if I hadn't done it for them."

He glared at her; it was the only time he showed any temper. "Miss Beard, people in this world have the right to their unhappiness." He was so angry he repeated himself: "Miss Beard, people in this world have the right to their unhappiness just as they have the right to their happiness. You can't go around killing people just because they're unhappy."

They talked on for awhile, and once during the rest of their conversation she thought of her blue dress and was glad that it was cleaned and ready, it was a good thing that she had been foresighted enough to think of it. And then she thought of the lovetorn lady on Sixth Street and of the alcoholic gentleman on Seventh that she had not disposed of. Poor darlings, they would just have to manage the best they could.

Then Lieutenant Williams offered her his arm, and Miss Beard, the gentle Miss Blue Beard, who had done everything quietly her whole life long, went quietly with him.

I have stoutly maintained, in the face of opposition, that all the world is a stage. And also that great actors are born, after which they have the opportunity of becoming great actors.



WHEN Rex Doolittle first came to me with his screwy play that he'd written about what happened in Ford's Theatre the night Lincoln was shot, I knew I should have thrown him out without even listening to him.

"Rex," I said to him, "you've got the wrong sucker. I'm a guy who likes nothing but shows with lots of girls. You know me, the second Flo Ziegfeld."

"But it's time for you to grow up, Sam," he argued. "To graduate from girls to art."

"That's growing up?"

"And anyway, Sam, I got it on the grapevine that you're not only interested in girls, but you're also interested in making money. And I've got a moneymaker here, Sam. I sure have."

I sat back, propped my feet up on the desk, and blew smoke rings. "All right, I'll give a listen," I said. "But why did you pick on me, I'd like to know."

Rex's mouth and mustache both smiled. He took off his sun glasses, slipped them into the breast pocket of his loud sport coat—he'd jetted in from Hollywood just that morning.

"Two things, Sam," he said enthusiastically. "First, you own the best theatre in New York to per-

form this play. You see, I'm going to put my Lincoln in your first box, and my John Wilkes Booth is going to shoot him right there in front of everybody and then jump down on the stage. You know, like the real Booth."

"He'll kill himself jumping," I objected.

"No, he won't. I've got an acrobat who I know can do it."

"You said 'two things,'" I said glumly. "What's the second?"

Instead of answering right away, Rex got up, went to the door, opened it, and beckoned with a finger to someone in the outer office. Then he turned back toward me. "Sam," he said, "I want you to meet a discovery of mine. His name is Jim Bart."

Just as Rex got the sentence out, the open doorway suddenly filled up. A man walked into it and stood there. He was six-four or more if he was an inch. I guess he really didn't fill up the doorway, because although he was tall enough to do it, he wasn't wide. He had the big shoulders, but he was lean.

When I got to his face though, I had the real shock. It was a pale face, and it was topped by a lot of black, sort of unkempt hair. The face was narrow, the cheeks were hollow, and they had about a week's growth of dark beard on them—growing for the play, I guess. The eyes—in a way you couldn't see them because they were sunk so deep in their sockets—but yet you saw them too, light-colored, kind of gray, the saddest eyes I've ever seen. Something like certain dogs' eyes can be. But these were sadder, because they were human, and a human being knows more about sadness than a dog does.

"What do you think, Sam?" Rex was saying. "Isn't he the spittin' image?"

"I guess so," I said slowly. I hadn't stopped staring at Jim Bart's sad eyes. Looking at the man was just like looking at a Lincoln portrait. Now I'm not exactly patriotic or a special admirer of any of our national heroes, or any corny stuff like that. But I shivered looking at this guy. A ghostly feeling, I guess it was.

"Now tell me Sam," Rex was going on, "have I got a great theatrical idea or haven't I?"

I desperately searched for objections "Where'd you get this guy?" I wanted to know.

"I found him on the street in L.A.," Rex answered. "He isn't from anywhere. An itinerant berry-picker I discovered him. . . "

"Yes, but can he act?"

"He doesn't have to act. All he has to do is wear a stovepipe hat and a black frock coat and get shot."

Rex had all the right answers, so I turned to Jim Bart. He hadn't stopped looking at me with those sad eyes of his. I glanced away from his face, and covered the rest of him instead. His angular, bony frame

was dressed in a dark suit, probably bought for him by Rex, that didn't fit him too well. His wrists were an inch lower than the end of his sleeves, and his big feet got to the floor long before his trouser cuffs did. He was wearing white socks.

"You're a farm worker, Mr. Bart," I began in my best business-like way. "What do you think of becoming an actor?"

"It's fine," Jim Bart said. He had a deep-toned raspy voice, but he spoke softly and timidly. "Specially since Mr. Doolittle said he'd pay me a lot of money. 'Cause I need the money. . . "

"Now wait just a minute," I said. That money Mr. Doolittle was throwing around was my money, of course. "Just how much did Mr. Doolittle promise to pay you?"

Rex came in fast, because he evidently was seeing my point. "Equity minimum, that's all, Sam. For six weeks of rehearsal and two weeks' guarantee if the show folds."

I looked over at Rex and found him winking at me. The whole show—if Rex had a show—was going to depend on this poor jerk, and he was working for minimum. Peanuts. It was criminal the way Rex took advantage of people whenever he had the chance. But then I remembered, this would be my money. Okay, so Rex could be a criminal.

"After all," Rex said, "it'll be a non-speaking role."

"Eighty-five bucks a week is good pay," Jim Bart put in. "There ain't much other work now. And I need the money."

I thought about it for a couple of minutes. As I'd told Rex, I preferred to book girlie musicals and things like that. And especially if I was going to put some of my own dough into it. And besides, I had a funny feeling about this thing. Almost a scary feeling. But then here was this big lug who looked just like Abraham Lincoln.

"Okay, Rex," I said. "I'll read the script anyway."

We started Monday morning. We didn't have a complete cast, not even a complete play. All Rex Doolittle had really started out with was Jim Bart and the idea of having Lincoln shot in the first box. And like a real dope, I'd sunk my money into it and given Rex my theatre when I might have been booking another *My Fair Lady*. Who knows?

Mostly what Rex was concerned with was his big shooting scene. He'd start with that and build around it, he said. I sat in the middle of the house and watched him work.

I saw the guy who was to play John Wilkes Booth, for the first time that morning. His name was Nicolo. The Great Nicolo, he told me quickly. High wire, trapeze, tumbling, he could do anything he said not a bit bashfully. He was a real ham.

"How about acting?" I asked him.

He had a swarthy, handsome face, and slicked-down hair. Now he grinned and showed me his perfect white teeth. "How do you think I make my own performance look dangerous?" he answered. "I'm a great actor."

Rex started showing him what he had to do. The jump was the problem, of course. The first box was close to the stage, all right, plenty close for girlie shows. But jumping from that box to the stage was something else altogether. The Great Nicolo, for all his bragging, kind of blinked when he looked at the situation.

The box was maybe fifteen feet higher than the stage and about ten feet away from it. I still remembered my geometry and square root from second-year high school. The answer came out to be about eighteen feet—diagonal from box to stage. That's a healthy jump.

Nicolo shook his head. "That's a bone-breaker," he said.

Rex lectured, mentioning a contract. Then he resorted to flattery, talking about how the Great Nicolo specialized in stunts that frightened the audience. Well, he could frighten them with this one.

Challenged that way, Nicolo started to think. The solution he came up with was simple but ingenious. There were lots of things sticking out from the wall between the box and the stage, ornamentation, light fixtures, and such. Nicolo found a couple of things that would give him a second's foothold and handhold about half the way down. Therefore he could make two smaller jumps out of it, instead of one big one.

We watched him do it, for the first time. He stood balanced on the railing of the box, poised for a minute, and then sailed out into space. You could hardly tell it when he made his temporary landing. He just seemed to bounce off the wall. Then he was down on the stage, turning sort of a somersault, ending flat on his back for a moment, then finally and slowly rising to his feet. We clapped for him, and he bowed, but he looked a little shaken up.

I had to agree with Rex. That jump would make a nice spectacular moment.

"I'll enjoy it too," Nicolo cracked, "if I can walk away from it."

None of us had noticed Jim Bart. He'd been sitting in the shadows at the rear of the house, I guess. But he stirred out of them and came shambling down the aisle, his long arms swinging at his sides, his big hands seeming to dangle from his wrists like they were just loosely tied on.

"How'd you like that jump?" Rex asked him.

"That was some jump all right," Jim Bart said. "His part is almost as dangerous as mine."

"Dangerous?" Rex asked. "I don't get it."

"I mean that jump is almost as dangerous as me getting shot dead."

It was Jim Bart's attempt at a joke, we guessed, so we all laughed. But we glanced at one another too, and gave one another those little shrugs that the guy who the joke's on never sees.

"Let's get to that dangerous part of yours, Jim," Rex said.

All of us followed Rex out through the side passageway and climbed the stairs to the box. It was a small box, just four seats, but it was visible from every other seat in the theatre.

Rex marked out the business to the actors. Jim Bart sat in the seat closest to the stage. Nicolo stood outside in the passageway just beyond the velvet drapes. Then on a signal he burst through the drapes, stood behind Jim Bart's chair, pointed his forefinger at Jim, and said, "Bang."

The first time they went through it, Jim sat there and did nothing. Rex made a face, but didn't look at me.

"Jim," he said, "we're rehearsing. You're supposed to pretend you've been shot."

Jim's sad eyes looked up at us, patient, but sort of blank.

"Look," Rex went on, trying to be just as patient, "don't you understand how actors are supposed to rehearse a play?"

"I never seen a play," Jim said. "Not on a real stage."

Rex rubbed a hand over his face. "Well, it's like this," he went on. "Rehearse means to practice over and over again. That way you can decide how you want to do something, and learn to do it just the right way. We'll rehearse, you see, in this empty theatre here, without anybody watching. Then on opening night, the people will come to see the play, and that's when we have to do everything just right, like we rehearse it."

Jim had listened seriously, and then he nodded. "I practice getting shot every day here without anybody watching, so we'll get it right for that . . . that."

"Opening night," Rex finished for him.

What a character, I thought to myself. He looked the part all right, but how dependable was he going to be in performance? He'd never seen a play, much less been in one. I wished again I'd never listened to Rex Doolittle's sales talk.

Rex went to work again, coaxing Jim Bart along. It was getting pretty obvious about this time that Jim either wasn't very bright or that he found this business of acting just too strange and confusing. Or both. But Rex wasn't going to let stupidity or anything else stand in his way. This was the big scene of his play, and Jim Bart, even though he didn't have a line, was his star.

Actually, Rex explained, when

the real Lincoln was shot, he just sagged back in his seat. Few people in the audience, and certainly nobody downstairs, could have seen him. Then to make it worse, from the theatrical point-of-view, they had taken the real Lincoln and laid him down on the floor.

But Rex was going to change all that. This was the big scene, and everybody was going to *see* it. So he would have Jim lurch to his feet at the cue of Nicolo's "Bang." He demonstrated to Jim just how to do it. He came to his feet, swayed, clutched at his chest. Then to top it all, instead of falling backward, he fell *forward*, and ended up draped over the side of the box, in everyone's view.

"That's corny," I said. "Looks like a cheap Western."

"Have faith," Rex said. "Have faith."

He had Jim do it then, had him do it over and over again, till there was sweat on the big man's face. But after about an hour, it didn't look so bad. Jim stood up on cue, then swayed and leaned like the tower of Pisa. He looked enormous. There was even a kind of expression of pain on his face, and his eyes looked sadder than ever. When he fell down over the railing, his long arms dangled so far that it looked like the weight of them was going to drag him all the way over and he'd stumble down into the orchestra seats. But the limp way he hung there and everything, it gave you a sympathetic shock. I guess it was a quality in Jim Bart himself.

"We'll work on it," Rex announced. And then to me, "What do you think of it, Sam?"

I still wanted to be more convinced. "I think I bought a turkey," I said.

While he was writing the rest of the play and assembling the rest of the cast, Rex Doolittle didn't forget to keep working on his big scene. And on The Great Nicolo and Jim Bart.

"It's called the Method or Stanislavsky," I heard him explain to them one day. "Never mind the big name though. We'll just call it the Method. It means that you really feel the part. You 'live' it. Like this, for instance, Nicolo. You really believe you're J. W. Booth and Jim here is really A. Lincoln. And you hate him. You hate him enough to kill him. Now that kind of hate is about as strong an emotion as you can find. In other words, you don't just stroll in here, aim a gun and pull the trigger. You burst in breathing fire. You actually want to destroy this man, this flesh. You want to send a bullet tearing into him. You want to make him bleed. You want to *kill* him, and everything he stands for . . ."

Rex went on like that for awhile. It wasn't going to be too hard to sell the idea to Nicolo. The acrobat was a bundle of feeling and emotion

anyway. It was just a problem of steering him and getting him to react the right way at the right time.

The bigger problem was with Jim Bart. The guy listened attentively to the lecture, and it seemed that he understood the principle anyway.

"What am I suppose to feel, Mr. Doolittle?" he wanted to know.

"Your part is harder," Rex conceded. "You don't know Booth from Adam. You don't know that he wants to kill you. You don't know he's going to sneak up behind you."

"What am I supposed to be thinking while I'm setting waiting for him then?"

"Well, the story goes that Lincoln had a premonition of some kind. He kind of expected something to happen, I mean. Try that. Think about the fact you didn't want to come to the theatre. You've got other important things on your mind too. The country's in bad shape . . ."

"You mean," Jim interrupted innocently, "I'm not supposed to think about how I appreciate the money I'm getting for doing this?"

"Hell no!" Rex exploded. I could have laughed at him if I hadn't had money in this show. "You just think what I tell you to think. Get this into your head. Your name isn't Jim Bart any more. It's Abe Lincoln. You're the President of the United States. I want you to *live* it, see? I want you to *be* Lincoln. Then when you're shot. I want you to really *be* shot. I want you to stand up and sway for a minute, so everybody can see you. I want you to *feel* shot and *be* shot. I don't want you to say to yourself, 'I'm Jim Bart and I'm dying.' I want you to say, 'I'm Abe Lincoln and I'm dying.' Now I know Lincoln didn't die in the theatre. They carried him out and he died in bed. But we're going to make it more dramatic. I want you to die right here, Jim . . . I mean, Abe. Die right here. Hang over that railing and die right before their eyes!"

Jim Bart listened as if he were in a trance, and he kept nodding slowly. His beard had grown out a little farther now, and he looked more like those pictures of Lincoln than ever. Every time I looked close at him this way, I got the same funny, ghostly feeling. But of course, he wasn't really Lincoln; he was only Jim Bart, a stupid berry-picker trying to learn to act.

"I'll do my best, Mr. Doolittle," the guy was saying. "I'll die real good for you."

We headed for opening night, and we were going to do something you don't often do in this business. Ordinarily you open out of town, New Haven or Hartford or somewhere, play before a trial audience, and try to work out some of the bugs before the big night. But we were opening right in New York. Had to have my theatre for Nicolo

to make his jump. Besides, we didn't want to ruin the surprise of this big scene by letting the out-of-town yokels see it first.

And the scene was getting good. Rex's "Method" seemed to be working for both Nicolo and Big Jim. First one and then the other would take a stride toward realism. A spirit of friendly competition grew up between them. Then finally it got to be not so friendly. It was Nicolo I worried about now.

"It's a good thing," I told Rex, "that Nicolo isn't supposed to use a knife or a sword or anything like that. He'd stick it right into poor Jim. He gets awful excited."

We were watching the scene at the first dress rehearsal. Rex had fixed the business definitely by this time, so that the actors knew exactly what to do and were getting pretty well rehearsed.

Abe was sitting up there in his box —Jim Bart, I mean, of course—we were all getting to think of him as Abe by this time. He was in complete costume and had set his stovepipe hat beside him on the flat railing. That was a good touch of Rex's. Even though all the audience couldn't see Lincoln while he was sitting down, they were all reminded of the fact that he was up there by that hat.

Jim had marched in with the actress playing his wife, and he'd sat down with all the dignity in the world. The guy had a deep-buried dignity inside him, I guess, because he had really learned to carry himself like a President of the United States. He bowed stiffly to the audience, laid his hat down, and then sat back.

In contrast, Nicolo's entrance was stealthy and silent, although the audience would expect him, of course. But the first they knew about his actual presence was the sound of the shot. At that instant a spotlight came up on the presidential box, and the towering figure of Jim Bart rose up in it. The way he swayed and grabbed his shirt front would have been corny if anyone else had done it. But as I said, Jim had a dignity or nobility or something about him. Watching him fall was like watching a tall, grand old tree being chopped down. Then the way his arms hung over the railing. Well, the man looked dead, that's all there was to it.

But then, when Jim had had his inning, Nicolo sprang into the spotlight, leaping up to the railing and poising there like a bird of prey that had just made a kill. Rex had given him the silly line, "Long live freedom, long live justice," and then had told him to laugh triumphantly. He was so sincere in it though, so intense, that neither the line nor the laugh sounded silly. Instead he was a madman, unpredictable and frightening. I'd seen dozens of rehearsals, and yet the laugh sent a chill through me. Then finally when he took off on his death-defying leap, I got goose pimples.

"Tell the prop man," I whispered to Rex who was next to me, "to check that gun before every performance. I want him to make sure there are no real bullets in it."

"Sam!" Rex was grinning all over. "We've got you believing in this!"

"Never mind," I said. "Just tell the prop man to check."

On opening night everybody was nervous, including Rex, but not including our two stars. The word "nervous" couldn't quite describe the way they seemed. Excited yes, but different about it. Both of them kept everything bottled up inside them.

I checked at Nicolo's dressing room first. The acrobat, who'd started this whole project with a grin, wasn't grinning now. When I walked into the room, he swiveled on his chair toward me and scared me for a minute. His eyes were hot and he was breathing hard, just sitting there, doing nothing but putting on his makeup.

"How do you feel, Nicolo?" I asked him jauntily.

"I feel fine." His tone was even, unhurried. He kind of purred it. He was like a leopard sitting there, and he seemed to me just as dangerous.

"I want you to be careful, Nicolo," I told him.

"What do you mean, careful?"

"Well, this business about living the part is okay, but you can overdo it."

Now he understood. "I heard, Mr. Sam, that you told the prop man to check the gun."

"Yes, I admit it. I'm worried. That hate of yours seems too near the real thing. I was afraid you might get carried away."

"Mr. Sam, you can't even buy bullets for an old gun like that."

That was a funny thing for him to say, I thought. "I'm glad to hear it," I told him. "But also keep this in mind. Booth shot Lincoln. He didn't stab him or push him, or anything else."

He looked genuinely puzzled. "What are you talking about?" he asked me.

I stared at him for a minute and then I said, "I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm too nervous, I guess. Well, break a leg, Nicolo . . ."

I was out of the dressing room and had shut the door behind me before I realized how apt that traditional saying was in Nicolo's case. John Wilkes Booth had broken a leg jumping from Lincoln's box to the apron of the stage in Ford's theatre.

I stood there a moment, and finally put my ear to Nicolo's dressing room door. I didn't hear anything at first, but then finally it came. Rex's corny line, "Long live freedom, long live justice." Nicolo was talking to his image in the mirror. I walked away from the door with-

out feeling any better about having visited our precious acrobat.

But I went to see Jim Bart anyway. He was just sitting there, dressed, all ready to go, since he didn't have to wear any make-up.

"How're you feeling, Jim?" I asked him.

"I'm all right," he said. "But you could do me one last favor, Mr. Sam . . ."

"Sure, anything."

He reached into an inside pocket, brought out a grimy white, sealed envelope, and handed it to me. Without bothering to read it, I noticed it bore an address and a stamp. I stuffed the thing into my pocket.

"Mail that for me, will you, Mr. Sam?"

"Well, sure I'll mail it if you say so. Of course I don't see . . ." A sudden thought stopped me. "You're not afraid, are you, Abe?" I asked him.

Jim Bart's sad eyes were completely serene. "I'm not afraid," he answered. "Why should I be afraid? Who on this earth should I be afraid of?"

Damn it, it sounded just like something Lincoln himself might have said. And I'd called him Abe.

"I wondered whether you were afraid of Booth," I persisted. "I mean Nicolo."

"Why should I be afraid of him?"

I gave up. There was no use trying to explain my silly fears to him. If I were to do that, I might really scare him and spoil his performance. To get out of my predicament I changed the subject.

"I just wondered, Jim," I said, "if you've got any relatives. You never mentioned anybody. Isn't there anybody you'd have liked to have come and see you in this show?"

"I got a wife," Jim said. "That's who that letter's to. But we don't get along too good. I don't think she'd want to see me, even tonight."

It was the first glimpse I'd gotten into Jim Bart's private life, and it embarrassed me somehow. I'd gotten so used to thinking of him as Lincoln maybe. I turned around and went to the door hastily.

"Well, break a leg, Jim," I said.

"That's a funny thing to say," he answered.

"Just remember, this is just like all the rehearsals, except that . . ."

"Except it's the real thing," Jim finished for me.

There was no understanding the guy. I went out without saying any more.

Usually on an opening night I hang around in the lobby. Not by the ticket office necessarily, because on opening night most of the tickets are complimentaries. I just like to count the people as they go in, that's all.

But for this show I sat down. I'd reserved the box directly opposite the Lincoln box for Rex and me. From there we'd have the best possible view of the big scene.

Rex joined me there about sixty seconds before curtain time. He

looked just about as nervous as I was.

"Well, this is it, Sam," he greeted me.

"Yep, this is it," I agreed. "But for once I'm not worried about my money."

"What are you worried about then?"

"I don't know exactly," I confided to him, "and that worries me too."

"I feel the same way," he told me.

We stopped talking then because the curtain went up. And right from the first I noticed Rex doing the same thing that I was doing. He wasn't watching the stage. He wasn't even watching the audience. He was staring at that box straight across the theatre from us. The empty box, the presidential box.

The first part of the play wasn't very important to us anyway. It was hodgepodge about the actors in Ford's Theatre rehearsing for their performance that evening. The second act was supposed to be during the evening, and it started with President Lincoln's entrance. That was what we were waiting for.

That first act was pretty dismal, but when the second act began and Jim Bart entered that box across from us, when he bowed his head a little to the audience, put his stovepipe hat on the railing, and sat down almost out of sight—well, something happened to the audience, that's all. The same thing that happened to us during rehearsal. Now Lincoln getting shot is a pretty familiar story. So it must have been Jim Bart himself who produced that effect.

Dignity. Nobility. A great man. A kind man. An unselfish man. A martyr about to enter upon his martyrdom. Those phrases describe it, and yet they don't—not completely. Maybe it was just ghostly, like I said before.

Anyway, the audience was on the edges of their seats all through that act. They knew John Wilkes Booth was coming, and their expectancy was an agony. Rex and I agonized with them, just as if we'd never seen the scene a hundred times before. Then finally, mercifully, there was Booth's stealthy entrance that not everybody could see, quickly followed by the shot. For an instant the theatre was in an uproar, but then just as instantly, everything quieted.

Abe Lincoln—Jim Bart—was standing up over there across from us. The spotlight was up, and we could see his eyes, empty, haunting, like the eyes of a dying or a dead man. His tall body swayed like a tree just before the last axe blow. Then it crashed to the railing, hung there at the armpits, with the head and arms dangling limply down. Beautiful, just as rehearsed.

Nicolo's performance that followed was just as effective. He was up there now on the railing spouting that dreadful line, making it sound thrilling. Then his snarling laugh, and finally the leap through space. While he was in the air, nobody in that theatre breathed.

Tumult followed. Nicolo made his rehearsed exit through the actors onstage, and then the second act swirled on to its end. There were the planted shouts to stop Booth. Soldiers in Civil War uniforms ran down the aisles, onto the stage, and disappeared into the wings.

But gradually our attention and the attention of the audience swung back to the presidential box. The spotlight was fading slowly. Jim Bart was alone in it now, his long arms hanging down, his shaggy head toppled askew. We couldn't take our eyes off him. The spot faded out in utter silence.

It wasn't till the theatre was completely black that the applause came. The biggest, most thunderous applause I'd ever heard. My girlie shows had never been applauded like that.

"We've got a hit!" Rex shouted into my ear. "This'll run a thousand performances."

So when in Jim Bart's dressing room, the doctor claimed that our Lincoln was really dead, neither Rex nor I believed him. Then finally when we did start to believe him, I thought first of Nicolo.

The acrobat was standing over in the far corner, looking pale and confused. "I didn't do anything to him," he pleaded.

"You used real bullets!" I screamed. "You shot him!"

The doctor put a restraining hand on my arm. "This man wasn't shot," he said.

"Wasn't shot?" I echoed. "Then how . . . "

"I wouldn't be able to determine just how he died," the medical voice answered calmly, "without a complete examination. But there are the symptoms of a sudden, violent heart attack. His heart simply stopped beating."

I looked at Rex. "I don't get it," I said. "I just don't get it."

"I don't either," Rex said helplessly.

"It's your fault, Rex," I said, "for hiring an actor with a weak heart. I guess he got so scared he had a heart attack. Why didn't you find out about him? Why didn't you ask him if he had a bad heart? You hire a guy and you don't know a thing about him."

It was then I remembered the letter Jim Bart had given me. I took it out of my pocket and without any regard for the sanctity of the mails, I tore open the envelope.

Inside were two fifty dollar bills and a single piece of smudged white paper. I dropped the bills, unfolded the paper and read it. Once through silently and then the second time aloud.

"Dear Wilma. I got a chance to earn some money and I took it. Here's a hundred dollars that I saved up, and you can get the rest that's due me if you write Mr. Sam Kemmer at this address. This is a funny way to earn money, and I

don't know if it's legal, but they wanted to shoot somebody on stage, so I said they could do it to me. My life ain't worth much anyway since we broke up, and I hope this money and the other money from Mr. Kemmer will help out with the baby. I still love you a lot. Jim."

I still didn't understand, but I guess maybe Rex did. He paced back and forth for a minute, then stopped and faced me.

"Jim didn't know a thing about theatre or plays," he said. "He thought I meant it literally when I told him to live the part. I remember now too that I told him to really die. I didn't mean it that way, but that's the way he took it. We explained to him the difference between rehearsal and performance, that performance was the 'real thing,' and he took that wrong too. Jim was the kind of simple, uneducated, uncomplicated soul that you and I don't know much about, Sam. He was really prepared to die tonight, to really get shot . . ."

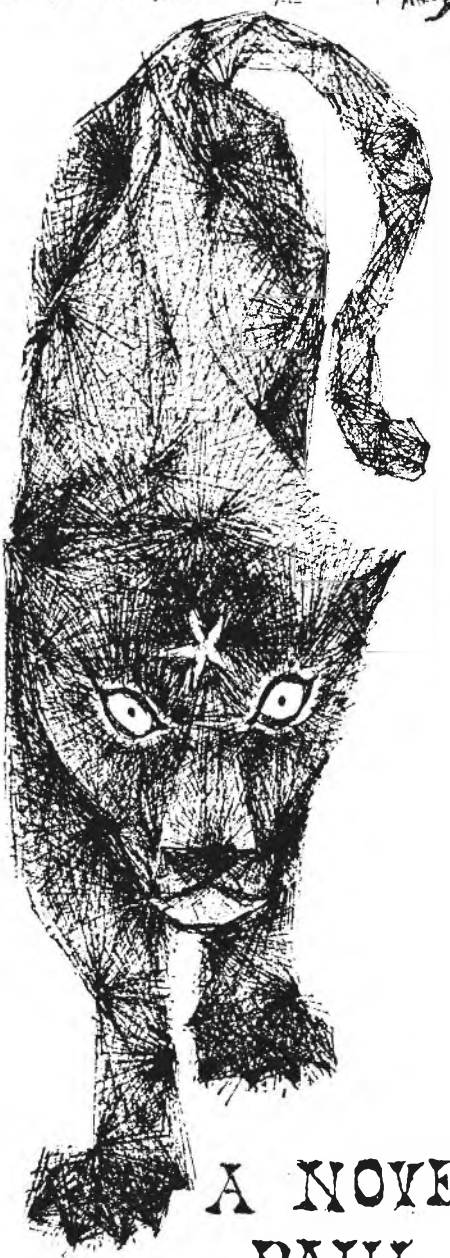
"But he didn't get shot," I objected.

Rex shrugged. "He was living the part like no other man ever lived a part," he said. "He had an imagination, Sam. The best imagination I ever came across. He was a great actor, that's what he was, the greatest."

"But didn't anybody explain to him that we weren't rehearsing for just one night?" I yelled. "We were planning to run for years."

"Shut up, Sam," Rex said, not too unkindly. "You know the risks of show biz. So just shut up, will you?"

PANTHER, PANTHER



A NOVELETTE BY PAUL W. FAIRMAN

If this final account—the end of the Cozenka story—satisfies you, you're an exceptional person. It didn't come anywhere near satisfying me. But then, I'm a pretty ordinary person. I like things neatly tied up and rounded off at the corners.

And I don't like murder.

Or at least I keep telling myself that I don't. But the fact remains—I'm a writer. I make my dubious living reporting on extraordinary people and places and things. So perhaps I was subconsciously conditioned to stand back and let it all happen.

I hope not, but I can't be sure.

I was even witness to the tragedy in a professional capacity. I'd interviewed Cozenka in New York on her arrival from Africa and had been invited to drop out to "their little hideaway," as she termed it, to look over the animals she'd brought back.

She and Peter Wyndham.

And I certainly had no reason to

IN THE NIGHT

suspect that I was being invited for any other reason.

I was getting the story for a top magazine and had a liberal expense account, so the trip into the southwest, halfway across the country, was no problem—merely a pleasant excursion on someone else's money.

Thus, a week later, I was picked up at a loney whistle stop and driven twenty miles to Ken Bender's place by a chauffeur in a custom-built station wagon, a pith helmet, and what appeared to be the hiking uniform of an African scoutmaster.

Of course, Cozenka is no stranger to you, her picture having appeared in every important magazine and newspaper in the nation, the sultry Eurasian beauty's romance with Ken Bender holding the national spotlight strictly upon its own merits.

A glamour natural; the merging of oriental loveliness with Texas oil millions; east is east and west is

If one looks down one's nose at things, it is said, they are immediately put in their place. I personally have tried it on the MGM lion with good results. And there are trailblazers who feel this device may even be used effectively on people.

west and the twain met head-on to make a fool out of Kipling.

There was plenty of post-marriage ammunition, too. Cozenka's love of Africa, the *safari,* and all the noble beasties of jungle and veldt. Ken Bender's apparent acceptance of handsome Peter Wyndham as Cozenka's guide and companion both here and abroad. The money he poured out like water at her slightest whim, turning a portion of his endless lands into an African replica as a sanctuary for the animals she brought back and couldn't bear to part with.

A colorful background with ever-potent possibilities news-wise.

So the three of them were in the papers as often as Khrushchev and that was the situation when the knobby-kneed chauffeur dropped me off in front of Bender's twenty-room lodge.

Bender himself was waiting for me and there was nothing stiff about our meeting because I'd interviewed him several times before and we'd gotten on well together.

A big, shapeless man without veneer or polish; no touch of the sophistication one would expect in the man Cozenka chose as a husband.

He seized my bag and crushed my hand and bellowed, "Marty, you old wrangler! Great to see you. Zenka's down at the sheds with Pete. A sick monkey or something. How about a brandy? And by the way, you've never seen this place before. How do you like it? Great place, isn't it?"

That was Ken Bender; a man who seemed always to be tumbling eagerly forward through life; a study in clumsiness, physical and otherwise. But honest, open, and as friendly as a stray pup.

"Nice of you to let me come," I said. "I'm finishing up a piece on Cozenka's latest trip and I'm out here to check on the deer and the antelope, African style."

"Great," he boomed. "Stay a month. Stay a year. But now, how about that brandy?"

So we had a couple of Texas-sized snifters and then—because it never occurred to Bender that anyone ever got tired—we headed for the sheds.

The trip was a five-minute drive into the heart of the Dark Continent—a million-dollar never-never land carefully recreated out there in the middle of nowhere.

And there were animals to go with it. I saw a pair of sullen water buff, a giraffe nibbling its mate's ear way up there in the stratosphere, a rhino in its own private puddle, and a zebra that looked completely bored with the whole impossible business.

Cozenka and Wyndham were not in the monkey house, but in a shed further on where we found them standing very close together in front of a cage that housed a gorgeous black leopard.

Very close indeed, I thought. But

Bender took no notice at all and I couldn't help wondering about his blindness. I couldn't help thinking also, what the scandal sheets would do with an eye-witness account of this situation.

Not that I'd ever had any dealings with such outfits. I merely wondered about the true relationship between Bender and the woman he'd married.

Nor did Cozenka react from guilt. As we approached, she dazzled us with her famous smile and flowed into Bender's arms and when he kissed her I envied him.

There was something about Cozenka that conjured up visions in a man's mind—in my mind at any rate; thoughts of Javanese dancing girls, ancient temples, orange-robed Buddhist monks, and fragrant tropical nights. Arrestingly attractive, she still symbolized beauty rather than radiated it; a beauty so fragile, I was loath to reach for it even with my mind for fear it would shatter like a Ming vase.

Moreover, Cozenka needed no atmospheric background. She could produce this illusion in riding britches, a cocktail gown, or—so I suspected—even an old flour sack.

She turned from Bender's kiss to give me her hand and say, "How wonderful of you to find us way out here, Marty darling. You must stay a long, long time. You know Peter of course."

I knew him mainly as Cozenka's eternal shadow. He was a striking brute of a man who'd proved it wasn't necessary to look like Gregory Peck in order to fill the white hunter role to perfection. He was blond and made the most of it; a shock of carelessly perfect sun-bleached hair, conspired with bushy, overhanging eyebrows to give him just the correct touch of masculine ruggedness. Yet he would have been at home in a dinner jacket at the Savoy.

He took a bull dog pipe from his mouth, just long enough to say, "Payne, old fellow—delighted to see you looking so fit," and put it back again.

I replied in kind and we turned our attention back to Cozenka. She was gripping Bender's arm and staring into the leopard's cage as though hypnotized. "Darling," she said, "if I'd lived in pagan times I'm sure I would have worshipped the cat god. Just look at him crouching there in all his savage black symmetry! What murderous thoughts he must be thinking. How he must hate us!"

Bender smiled, more at Cozenka than the cat, and said, "I sure wouldn't want to meet him on a dark night with a gun in my—"

"Watch it, Payne! Stand away! Have a care, man!"

The warning came from Wyndham—rapped out sharply—and I jumped as though bee-stung.

"Sorry," he went on. "Didn't mean to frighten you, but those cats are the soul of treachery—that

one in particular. A little closer and you could have lost an arm. You certainly could have."

"Sorry," I mumbled, still shaken.

"Not the right kind of cage for his breed. He should really be paneled off with steel netting."

I viewed the beast with new respect. It lay facing us, satiny black except for the white star on the sleek head that rested gracefully between its barbed front paws, looking more classically beautiful than dangerous.

But I saw that Wyndham could well have been right. The animal's eyes, though motionless, were pools of living green flame and I was able to read into them all the hatred and treachery of which Cozenka and Wyndham had spoken.

Cozenka broke the silence with a laugh.

"Come, darlings," she said, "Marty will give us a bad press—bringing him here to be scared to death by our lovely Demon. We must try now to be good hosts and perhaps he will forgive us."

"Right you are," Bender said heartily.

"Quite," Wyndham intoned and put a match to his pipe.

And good hosts they were, with a dinner few cosmopolitan restaurants could have hoped to match; with coffee and brandy on the screened patio later, where Bender —boring and voluble—told of his pre-millionaire struggles; where Wyndham's manner implied he was graciously contributing his presence; and Cozenka, without effort, overshadowed everyone and everything with her electric aura.

It was either a trio that represented rarely achieved compatability, or a lot of color and personality wasted on the desert air—I couldn t tell which.

But late the following afternoon, a new insight into the picture was furnished by Bender himself. He and I had ridden out together, Bender acting as guide, so that I might get some idea of how much land he owned.

We each had a canteen strapped to our saddles and gradually it dawned on me that Bender's had been filled with brandy, most of it having gone into the big man by the time we started.

I realized this, when he began swaying in his saddle and we were drawn down to a walk. Then he stopped his horse and got off and sat down on a rock and said, "They're going to kill me, Marty old pal. They're going to kill me as sure as—"

He stopped and rubbed a big hand over his face as I got off my own horse and sat down on the rock beside him.

"I think maybe you've had a little too much sun and brandy," I said.

"Sure, I'm drunk—as drunk as I ever get—but I always keep my head." He shook it groggily as

though to prove it hadn't gone anywhere, and said, "Were you ever in love, Marty?"

"A couple of times. But I was always too busy to follow it up."

"There's love," he said, "and then again—there's love."

"I don't quite follow you."

"The kind that's a good thing and the kind that's dope, a drug—all the drugs on earth rolled into one. And when this second kind hits you, you're done, man—finished—all washed up but good."

It was beginning to be a little embarrassing, but I could hardly ride away and leave him there; at least, that was the excuse I gave myself for sitting tight with both ears wide open. "You were pretty lucky in that particular department," I said.

"You're crazier than a spooked herd." And there seemed to be more weariness in his voice than drunkenness. "I got cursed the day I set eyes on her and I been cursed ever since."

I measured my next question carefully. On one side, I put the wisdom of minding my own business; on the other, the fact that he'd opened the subject, not I, and asked, "Is it Wyndham?"

He thought that over, giving the impression of a bewildered man trying to penetrate the logic behind a swarm of flies. "No. He's incidental. It's me—the way I feel about her—because if I didn't feel the way I do, I'd throw him right out and kick him clear back to Africa."

"Exactly how *do* you feel about her?"

"Like I said—she's dope to me. I want her so bad it makes me sick—so bad I ain't been the same man since I met her. She's so damned important to me that I'm afraid to open my mouth about Wyndham or that idiotic zoo or traipsing off to Africa or anything else. Scared for fear she'll walk out on me. The way it is now I'm willing to settle for whatever little bit of affection she'll give me."

"I'd say that's a pretty dangerous attitude. Aren't you afraid it's just the kind of thing that might kill her love for you altogether? I don't think a woman like Cozenka could care a great deal for a spineless man."

He looked at me in disgust, for being so stupid. "Her love for me? Why, you fool—there isn't any. There never was. She told me that when I chased her all over the world, begging her to marry me. But I was willing to settle for any scraps she was willing to kick my way, so long as she'd give me a chance to make a fool of myself on a permanent basis."

"I don't think that's the situation at all. I think that somehow you've completely lost your perspective. What actual proof do you have that she doesn't love you?"

"Are you blind? Look at me. I know what I am. A big loud-

mouthed slob—not her kind at all. The only excuse for me being in the same county with her is that I've made a lot of money and Cozenka needs money like she needs God's breath."

I raised a hand in protest. "Now wait a minute—"

But he rushed on. "I know how she looks to you, Marty. The way she looks to all the men she isn't married to—a woman of beauty, warmth, but that's only on the outside. Actually, she takes everything she can get and gives nothing in return."

"Then why don't you face up to what you've got to do. Get her out of your system. Divorce her. Pay her off. You can afford to make it worth her while."

"Sure I can—financially, but that's not how it is. In plain words, I can't. If I sent her away, I'd be on her heels begging her to come back before she'd gone no more than a mile."

So this was the reason for his blindness where Wyndham was concerned. Not blindness at all, but a fear of accusing Cozenka of anything lest she walk out on him.

I could partially understand his position, having been around Cozenka's beauty enough to realize it would be dangerous to fall in love with her. I said, "Look here, Bender. You've got to take hold of yourself. Because one thing is certain, the answer doesn't lie in the direction you're going. In fact, I think you're distorting the whole situation."

He was a man who needed reassurance and he snatched pathetically at what I was offering. "Do you really think so?"

"It's obvious. Give things a little more time. Then, if you can't see that you're wrong, go away alone somewhere and think it all out. You'll land on your feet, believe me."

"That's a good idea."

"And forget this nonsense about your life being in danger. You're way off base with that kind of thinking."

He jerked suddenly to his feet and said, "Sure—sure. Sorry, Marty—putting my problems on you this way."

I wanted to make him understand that I thought none the less of him for it; that I saw the outburst for what it was, not the maudlin whining of a weak man, but rather, the blowing of a strong man's safety valve.

"You needed to get it off your chest," I said.

"We can forget it, then?"

"Of course."

He scowled. "Look—if you've got any idea of putting this little talk into the piece you're writing about my wife—"

"Now you know I wouldn't do that."

Again he was abjectly sorry. "Sure you wouldn't. Forget I said that too."

He grinned, now. "I really do things up right, don't I? When I sound off, I pick a writer out here for a story—"

"You did nothing of the kind. You picked a friend."

"Thanks, Marty. And now we'd better get back to the lodge. You'll be plenty saddle sore tomorrow, I bet."

We headed back and I was glad he'd blown off. I was sure it had done him some good, especially getting that murder fantasy out of his system.

But it wasn't fantasy at all.

They killed him that night.

They killed him right under my nose.

The evening began pleasantly enough. We had as fine a dinner as the night before and another session on the patio with Bender having sprung back to his old self. The way he felt about Cozenka was quite obvious.

Cozenka fairly outdid herself as the gracious hostess and showed Bender such marked affection that I felt he had to be wrong in his doubts of her love.

"Darling, shall I change? Shall I look beautiful for you and our guest in an exquisitely beautiful evening gown?"

"You look just fine in that riding outfit, honey, and I know Marty feels the same way about it."

That sort of thing, with Wyndham sitting back—as he had the night before—and generously lending his presence and its continental glamour.

It was Bender who suggested the movie, an hour-long affair that we watched in his den; the color-film record of Cozenka's last trip; a dazzling parade of lions, tigers, zebras, monkeys, and ton after ton of elephant with Cozenka and Wyndham always showing off to good pictorial advantage.

Cozenka tip-toed out before the film ended, so the three of us watched it out to the finish and then went back to the patio to wait for her.

I visualized her returning in some ravishing Parisian creation and looked forward to it with anticipation. But I was disappointed. When she came back, a little while later, she was still wearing the riding habit.

Then, some ten minutes later, the curtain came up on the heart of the drama.

It was raised by a running man; a man in coveralls who rushed into the patio breathing heavily, his voice reflecting unrehearsed fear.

"The leopard, Mrs. Bender. The black cat! It got loose. It ain't in its cage."

Cozenka stiffened and Wyndham sprang to his feet.

She asked, "You mean the beast is out and running around in the shed?"

"He's running around loose on

the grounds—anywhere. I came by on my midnight check and—"

"You went into the shed and baited him," Cozenka shrilled, and it was the first time I had ever heard her speak in other than throaty, liquid tones. "You disobeyed orders, you stupid, senseless clod-"

"I didn't—"

"You angered him."

"No. No. Why should I?"

"Because you are a fool! You know Mr. Wyndham and I are the only ones who tend him. All others are ordered away. He was quiet as a lamb when we left him at five o'clock."

The man wouldn't be cornered into any damaging admissions. He shook his head stubbornly. "I just did like I always do—opened the shed door and flashed my light—no more. And the first thing I saw was the cage door open. I stayed just long enough to make sure he wasn't anywhere in the shed Then I ran up here to tell you."

Wyndham's eyes met Cozenka's. "The cat could have broken out," Wyndham said.

"Not unless he was annoyed. This fool—"

"I'm not so sure. We debated putting a heavier lock on the cage—don't you recall? And the upper windows were open. Fifteen feet would have been no problem to Demon."

"This oaf is to blame," Cozenka insisted.

Wyndham turned to the man. "Go around to the kitchen and wait there until you're sent for. We don't want anyone roaming the grounds until something's done."

The man left, obviously hurt by Cozenka's ill-treatment and Wyndham tried to smooth her down.

"It doesn't really make any difference who's to blame," he said. "We both know what has to be done now. We'd better get at it."

He didn't have to draw her a picture, for her anger flared even higher. "No! I refuse. I will not see him destroyed—shot down like a common alley cat. He is the royalty of his kind. It would be a sacrilege."

Wyndham's face was grim. "I agree. It's a bloody shame. But better the cat than—"

"Not so fast," Bender cut in. He'd remained silent, leaving decisions to the experts, but as Cozenka's shoulders drooped he put his arms around her and scowled at Wyndham. "Zenka loves that cat. We aren't going to just walk out and kill it simply because you think that—"

"But Peter is right, my love. Demon is a killer. It is his nature to kill. We must think of the helpless human life at stake. We have no other choice."

Wyndham knocked the ashes from his pipe. "You people stay as you are. I'll go out and get a wind on him. It shouldn't take very long to do that."

But Cozenka objected. "Alone? You would leave me here to wait and suffer? Peter, sometimes you have no regard for how—"

"But this is a man's job."

"When have I not done as well as a man? I am as capable as you."

Wyndham shrugged, appealing silently to Bender as the latter said, "You and I will handle it, Pete. Zenka stays here with Marty."

Cozenka brightened as she kissed Bender. "No, you and I, my love. We two—together. We will find our beautiful Demon. Our bullets alone will destroy him."

She appeared to be throwing this as a challenge at Wyndham. The Englishman shrugged again. "Very well. Let's get about it. No telling what deviltry that killer is up to. I'll swing to the west of the sheds. You two take the eastern side. We should surely turn him up in fairly short order."

So they trekked off into the night with lights and rifles. I stayed behind, happy to agree that my experience with an air gun at the age of ten hardly qualified me for a job Wyndham wouldn't even allow the animal handler to attempt.

I saw them off, three flashlights bobbing in the gloom, and then sat back to wait. But no finishing shots broke the heavy silence and it grew lonely there on the patio. I waited awhile longer and then got up and went back into the den where we'd left the brandy.

It was more comfortable there—and safer, with four stout walls around me instead of the patio screening. Much safer, until I raised my eyes and looked straight into those of the black leopard.

It had come in the window; the soft thud of its four paws on the thick carpeting and there it was; death in a satiny black skin.

I dropped my brandy and my first thought—when my brain functioned again—was why had the beast sought me out. There must have been others far more conveniently located.

Then a lot of thoughts skittered through my head: disgust with myself for not having had the sense to close the window; resentment at my hosts for not realizing I wouldn't have the sense and had to be reminded; anger at the leopard for looking so incredibly evil as it squatted there obviously understanding my predicament and enjoying it.

There was no chance to reach the door even if I'd had the strength to get up out of my chair. There was nothing in my favor except a faint hope—something I'd heard somewhere—that certain animals ignore you if you remain motionless.

I remained motionless, but the cat did not ignore me. It came up on its four sturdy legs and stretched fore and aft as it contemplated the coming slaughter. It opened its maw and showed me its fine white teeth. It moved toward me, slowly, gracefully."

Then, as its whiskers practically brushed my paralyzed knees, a suspicion was born in my mind. It was soon quite clear to me that the ape-jawed expression was only a grin, that the menacing rumble in its throat was not a snarl, but a purr.

And immediately the cat verified my dawning doubt as to its ferocity by rolling over on its back to make kittenish passes at me with open paws.

The animal was as tame as a house cat. Lonely out there in the dark, it had seen my open window and come in search of company. It quite obviously wished misfortune to no one.

Reaction drained me of what little strength I had left, and I was on the verge of a nervous giggle as I extended a timid hand of friendship and actually patted the beast's head.

But we were given little time to cement relations because a few moments later a shot sounded somewhere out on the grounds—a sharp report that brought the cat to its feet, and sent it back to the window where it crouched, a black bundle of uneasiness.

Then scream upon scream from the same direction as the gunfire, sent the leopard back out the window into the protecting night.

I left also, through the patio, guided by the continuing screams, until I saw a light to the east of the sheds. I ran hard and came finally upon Cozenka crouching over the still body of Ken Bender. They were both within range of a flashlight that lay on the ground nearby, its beam marking the bloody wound in Bender's chest.

It took no medical experience—only common sense—to know that Bender was dead.

Cozenka had stopped screaming. Her face was empty, her eyes stared and she swayed rhythmically back and forth.

"I killed my love. I killed my love. Oh, God forgive me. I killed him."

I knelt down. "How did it happen?"

She stared at me as though not comprehending. I shook her, rather roughly, by the shoulder. "How did it happen?"

"We were hunting separately. I was not using my light—watching for the glow of Demon's eyes. My darling must have veered over—gotten in front of me. But Demon was here. I swear it—I swear it. I saw the green of his eyes. I was sure he charged me as I fired. But of course it was—"

A pounding of feet cut off her flow of words and Wyndham arrived. He took in the scene like a white hunter should—no panic, no shock. "What's happened here?"

"Cozenka shot Ken. She thought he was Demon. She thought he had green eyes."

If Wyndham found my tone sarcastic, he gave no sign as he turned away to sweep his light in a circle.

"The cat isn't here now," he said. "Go to the sheds. Bring a blanket to cover the body and someone to stay with it. Leave him one of the guns. Then you take Gozenka back to the lodge. I've got to keep going until I find that bloody cat."

"It shouldn't be too difficult," I retorted. "Just sit by an open—" But he'd trotted off into the night and I went about obeying orders.

Ten minutes later, leaving a stunned guard with the body, I led the now-silent Cozenka back to the lodge. As we entered the patio, we heard the bark of Wyndham's gun from beyond the lodge. A few minutes later, he returned to find us waiting for him in the den.

He knocked off a stout shot of brandy before saying, "What a mess What a bloody mess!"

Both Cozenka and I asked the obvious question silently, with our eyes, and Wyndham nodded. "I found him in that brush patch, out away from the house—on the den side. I got in a good, clean shot. He's dead."

Cozenka had recovered somewhat, to just the extent that would be expected after what she'd been through. I paid her unspoken tribute as an actress when she said, "My love is dead. My beautiful, beautiful love."

"Are you referring to your husband, or the cat?" They both looked at me sharply. I wondered suddenly about my own chances of surviving the night, and pondered the wisdom of keeping my overly big mouth shut.

But my sense of outrage was too great. "I should have paid more attention to what Ken told me this afternoon," I said.

Wyndham waited. Cozenka asked, "What did my darling tell you?"

"Your darling said you two were planning to kill him. I think he was indirectly asking me for help, but I was too thick to understand. And by the way, I don't like to seem pickishly technical, but shouldn't someone call the police?"

"I took care of that on the way in," Wyndham said. "The County Sheriff. He comes from Kenton—a small village. A half hour's drive."

"You were speaking of Ken," Cozenka said. "But you're lying, of course. What sort of nonsense are you—"

"I took it for that, but I was wrong. I thought he was a little drunk and emotionally upset. But he obviously knew more than I let him tell me."

At this point, Wyndham won my respect as a cool operator if not as a human being. He sat back, masking the concern he must have felt, listening, saying nothing.

Excitement intensified Cozenka's foreign way of speaking. "Marty, darling—has this terrible tragedy shocked away your reason? What madness in heaven's name is this—what delirium?"

"Stop it. Your whole murder plot

went down the drain. The cat that Wyndham was so desperate to shoot just now, paid me a visit earlier—just before you shot Ken Bender down in the coldest kind of blood. The cat was lonely. It wanted to be petted and played with. It was as tame as a kitten."

"What utter insanity. If Demon was here, you're fortunate to be alive!"

"Perhaps I am. But I was never in any danger from the cat. The soul of treachery Wyndham spoke of out in the shed lies elsewhere—the cat never possessed it."

Wyndham was still content to let me do the talking, and Cozenka had assumed the role of a cruelly persecuted innocent. "But why, Marty? Why? What motive could I have had. Why would I kill the man who gave me everything?"

"He did give you everything. But all his love and money couldn't change the fact that he was a crashing bore—a big, clumsy child-like man with only one qualification for your exquisite attentions. He was rich as Croesus. He, in short, had plenty of dough—you know, money. So you were quite willing to take everything he had except the one thing he wanted you most to except. Himself."

"Marty—please—"

"So you figured out a foolproof way to kill him and have it called an accident. So foolproof it almost worked."

Wyndham had exhibited only one sign of uneasiness. He'd let his pipe go cold. He took it out of his mouth, now, and said, "Do you plan to tell all this to the sheriff, old man?"

"I do. That is unless you feel you can explain away two corpses as easily as one. There's a rifle standing two feet from your hand."

Wyndham smiled a thin smile. "Good heavens, no. In fact with things as they are now, it will be deuced difficult to explain away one."

Cozenka had no doubt been frightened, but she drew courage from Wyndham's refusal to panic. "Marty, you're being very, very, foolish."

"That's right, old fellow," Wyndham added. "I don't think you'll get very far with the constable—not with that silly yarn."

"I see no reason why he shouldn't be interested."

"Oh, no doubt he will be, but the cat's dead. And the law likes witnesses to such startling bits of revelation."

He was right, of course.

I began to realize how right, when I talked to the sheriff. He was a small man with a hat and boots that appeared too large for him. He came to the lodge in an officially marked station wagon, and the first thing he did after looking at the body was to go to the phone and call the coroner.

He talked to Cozenka privately, then to Wyndham. I had no opportunity to learn what they'd said, although I was inclined to think they would both stick to their original story.

He questioned me last, in the den, alone also, and I told him the whole miserable story beginning with Bender's fears and ending with my accusations before he'd arrived.

He listened politely, putting in a question here and there. Then, when I'd finished, he said, "Those are pretty grave charges, Mr. Payne."

"I'm aware of that."

"And are you aware that you have nothing with which to support any of it?"

"There's my word as a reasonably honest citizen."

He'd spent a great deal of time outdoors and there were skeins of tiny wrinkles at the corners of his clear blue eyes. These made him appear to be looking into a high wind as he studied me and said, "A newspaperman, too."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said you were a newspaperman."

Not quite that, but I saw no point in explaining the difference. "What's that got to do with it?" I asked.

"Nothing, maybe. But you *are* out here looking for a story. These poor people haven't been left alone ten minutes since they got married. Writers and newshawks snooping around—snooping in their business—practically peeking in their bedroom windows."

I could have explained also that the publicity they gave her was very important to Cozenka, but the sheriff was too close to antagonism as things now stood. "I don't see what that's got to do with the case. I really don't."

"Well, you might find it real easy to exaggerate—make yourself a sensational story. The leopard for instance. Are you sure it was tame. Are you dead certain you know the difference between a purr and a snarl?"

"If it wasn't tame, why didn't it attack me?"

"Conceding it was there in the first place, I can't say. Maybe it was blinded by the light and didn't see you. Or maybe it was more interested in hiding, than in killing someone at that particular time."

"All right. Suppose we concede that it was vicious and I was just lucky. That still puts the cat in the den with me, when Cozenka claims she saw it out by the sheds."

The sheriff shook his head. "She didn't tell me that. She said she *thought* she saw it. She's making no claim whatsoever that it was actually there."

I began to heat up under the collar. "Sheriff, tell me are you on their side?"

"I'm not on anybody's side. I'm interested only in the facts. But

you don't have to worry about that. You'll get a chance to tell your story at the inquest tomorrow—that is, if you still think it's a good idea."

"Why shouldn't I tell the truth?"

"You should, by all means. But in matters of this kind, the truth has to be supported by a little tangible evidence and I don't think you've got much."

"It seems to be my word against their's."

"And I'd give a little thought to the libel laws, Mr. Payne. You can be certain Mrs. Bender's legal battery will know all about them. They might take a dim view of unsupported accusations. You could get into serious trouble."

"I'll think it over."

"In the meantime, it's Mrs. Bender's wish this tragedy doesn't leak out—at least until after the inquest tomorrow."

"And you're cooperating with her?"

"Why not? She has a right to privacy. So don't try to use a telephone tonight. If a mob of reporters flood down on us, I'll know who to blame."

I was angry with him even while knowing I had no right to be. Actually, I'd given him nothing to sink his teeth into. The "word of a decent citizen" bit wouldn't hold water in court. I'd suspected that even before talking to the sheriff. But to let those two icy-veined killers get away with it—

I boiled over that for awhile and then remembered what he'd said about the inquest. Put up or shut up.

He was right. If I went ahead with my accusations, I could get myself into a serious jam.

I retired to my room before the coroner arrived and no one bothered me any more that night. Only my conscience, as I pondered the advisibility of keeping my mouth shut.

Ken Bender, a fine man who hadn't deserved it, had been murdered by two calculating killers. I knew it. Yet there was absolutely nothing I could do.

Nothing except pace the floor all night thinking about the old chestnut—*there is no perfect plan for murder*. The killer always makes a small mistake—one that gets him convicted and hung.

But where was the mistake here? This one was so good, they could get away with it even when luck turned against them. Certainly it was only their bad luck that had sent that black cat into the den.

And yet their plan hadn't been seriously damaged.

I knew now the reason for Wyndham's almost casual attitude when I'd accused them. A much faster thinker than I was, he knew instantly that things would work out as they'd planned.

Of course, he hadn't threatened my life. There was no need to.

And I realized that the perfect murder was not only a possibility, but a fact. The fallacy in the old saying was that the perfect ones were never uncovered.

Fuming and fretting, I finally got to sleep; so late I didn't wake up until ten the next morning. I showered and shaved and went down stairs to find the sheriff alone in the dining room with a cup of coffee and a note book.

He was neither friendly nor hostile as he looked up. Simply impersonal. "Good morning, Mr. Payne. Sleep well?"

"Not very, but that's beside the point. Do you still think the death of Ken Bender was nothing more than an accident?"

"Nothing's happened to change my mind."

"By the way, I didn't get your name last night. You do have a name, don't you?"

"Henderson—Milt Henderson."

His answer was annoyingly mild, and I was fully aware that I was deliberately trying to irritate him—using him as a target for my own frustrations.

And the keen-eyed little lawman sensed the same thing because he said, "I don't want you to misunderstand what I said last night, Mr. Payne."

"Misunderstand? Why should you care one way or the other?"

"For two reasons. I do my job and I don't want anyone to think otherwise."

"And the other?"

"This case is going to cause a national stir when it breaks. As a reporter on the scene, your copy will be in demand and you could easy make me the goat. You could make it look like I covered up for Mrs. Bender—that her money and position made me tip my hat and say yes, ma'am, and no, ma'am. Do you see?"

"And that isn't true?"

He scowled for the first time since I'd known him. "You're damned right it isn't. Mrs. Bender and Wyndham get no more from me than any other resident of my county. You know yourself you've got nothing that will stand up. So go find something that will hold in court, Mr. Payne. You do that and I'll back you to the limit. But don't expect me to accuse people of murder when it isn't proved."

He was right, of course, and maybe what he said was just what I needed. At any rate, it started me thinking along positive lines instead of sitting around feeling sorry for myself because nobody would believe me.

Not that it reaped any immediate harvest. With Sheriff Henderson's parting instructions to be on hand for the inquest that had been scheduled for two o'clock, I wandered out toward the sheds trying to figure out a way to back my story with some proof the law would recognize as such. There had to be a hole in their scheme somewhere.

I think now my anger was centered mainly around having been played for a fool. Cozenka's invitation, putting me on the scene at the time of the murder had not been coincidental. I'd been carefully chosen as an amiable, not-too-bright slob who would automatically back up their play and give it the prestige of a witness who's copy appeared nationally in top magazines. An accessory, in essence, to bolster the vicious plot with blindly sympathetic testimony after the fact.

This made me mad. Together with the sheriff's prodding, it forced my mind to labor mightily and bring forth a hunch, one that sent me rushing back to the lodge and up to Cozenka's room.

She answered my knock, incredibly beautiful in a black lace gown. She'd done something to her eyes to make them appear red from weeping, and sight of her—even with what I knew—was a strain on my determination. Could this sorrowing creature be anything but a grieving wife? I had to bring in a quick image of her as she must have looked with her rifle arimed at Bender's chest.

"You have come to apologize, Marty dear? Then I will accept your sorrow. I will forgive you. Do come in."

I went in and found Wyndham sitting on the edge of the window seat with a scotch in his hand. The streaming sun turned his blond thatch into a halo. He looked like a good friend for one to have in time of grief.

He said, "Hello, Payne," and then knocked off the rest of his drink.

With what I had in mind, I didn't want their antagonism. All I wanted was a little time alone in Cozenka's room. Not that I was sure I would find what I hoped to, but it was the logical place to look and the sooner the better.

So I smiled engagingly at Wyndham and patted Cozenka's hand. "I guess I was a little cruel last night, but Ken was my friend. Perhaps we can—"

Wyndham, pipe in hand, suddenly turned grimly serious, the first hint of hostility that he'd shown. "I'm afraid it isn't quite as simple as that, Payne."

"I don't understand."

"Good lord, man! You aren't so stupid as to believe you can throw vicious charges all around the place and walk off scot-free, are you?"

"But we were all upset last night. I—"

"You called us murderers to our face. You also gave the same ridiculous story to the sheriff. That means it will get around. Your ugly accusations are no doubt on every tongue in the place right this minute. Do you think we can just stand by under such circumstances?"

"What do you plan to do?"

"Drag you into court. Sue you to the very limit. Any other course would indicate fear of your charges

on our part. Therefore, in countering, we must strike deep, so the magazine you're representing must also be named as a defendant."

Wyndham took a baleful puff on his bull dog. "I wouldn't be surprised if when we get through with you, you'll not only be a pauper, but you'll be blackballed in every editorial office in the country."

Obviously, Wyndham had considered all aspects and decided they had nothing to fear from me. That made his sudden turn to the offensive entirely logical. An attack of the sort he'd outlined would block me off permanently from gaining any official sympathy. I would become a persecutor of upstanding manhood and the defamer of a woman crushed by tragedy.

I wondered who the executive of this team was—Wyndham or Cozenka? The turnabout could have been advocated by either of them. I turned to Cozenka. "Do you really think I deserve this?"

She chose to pout. "But, Marty darling, you said cruel things to Pete and me. We have our good names to think of. And the world must know how deeply I loved the man I married."

"I think I know. And there's something else. I think you loved Demon. I think you truly grieved for the animal when he had to be sacrificed."

"I did love him because I love beauty. And Ken loved him too. I loved Demon, yet I did not flinch from turning my rifle on him to save human life."

"And the fact that you hit Ken only added to your grief."

"Marty—you are so cruelly sarcastic."

She was right. I was doing a bum job of placating this pair and I knew I had to get out of the room or there would be fists flying. "I'm sorry it sounds that way."

"You are cruel—cruel—cruel."

Then my clumsy approach worked inadvertently in my favor, when Cozenka flared into sudden resentment. "We were waiting here for a visit from Mr. Henderson. He has been so kind—so thoughtful. But we will not wait. We will go to him. I cannot stand this man's presence a moment longer."

"She is telling you to get out. Payne. That should be clear, even to you."

I got out, hoping Cozenka meant what she said about going to the sheriff. I was in trouble—with only the slimmest chance of clearing myself, and very little time left for even that.

I went back to my own room at the end of the hall where I could watch Cozenka's door through the keyhole. And a few moments later, she and Wyndham emerged and went downstairs.

The moment they vanished, I was out of my own room. And before they reached the bottom of the stairs, I was snooping through Cozenka's personal belongings like

any other common sneak thief. I didn't enjoy it.

It was a big room and there was a lot to go through and I spent the most uncomfortable fifteen minutes of my life. I heard them back at the door every time I opened a fresh closet, but I kept right on, reconciled to being caught in the midst of things if it should happen that way.

They didn't return. and I found what I was looking for—or hoped I had. There was no way of really telling. I didn't have enough time, because my discovery, like the hunch it had sprung from, came too late to give me an opportunity for complete investigation. I could only sneak out of the bedroom and trot downstairs with my find in my pocket—before they came hunting for me—to attend the inquest.

I only had time enough to say a small prayer and hope I had what I needed to trip up Cozenka, Wyndham and Company.

There were six men on the coroner's jury—all recruited on the premises from among the help—the coroner himself being a Doctor Wendell whom—I later learned—hadn't even told his wife what had happened there at the Bender lodge.

Such was the prestige and power of Bender's millions. The same millions, I thought nervously, that might soon be turned like cannon in my direction.

Doctor Wendell was a man in his sixties, quietly efficient, with something of a judicial bearing. He was admirably suited to the job of presiding. He'd obviously been briefed by the sheriff as to my contribution to the general confusion, because he regarded me with marked interest as I entered and took my seat.

But there was no over-leaping of routine procedure. He questioned Cozenka first, and she did very well, so well that every man in the room wanted to come forward and comfort her personally. Not that they were callous and unmindful of Bender's tragic taking off, but he was dead and absent and Cozenka was very much alive and present.

And she was Cozenka.

Wyndham came next and he also handled himself beautifully. They both stuck to the story as it was originally laid out in their plan. Cozenka tearfully admitted her carelessness in acting hastily—admitted it most convincingly—and they lied with sincerity about the exceptional viciousness of the cat, giving justification to Cozenka's nervousness and fatal mistake.

In short, they stuck to their story right down the line.

Then the slightest of chinks appeared in their armor, the first one since Cozenka's shot had rung out the night before. This when Wyndham leaned casually forward and placed his lips close to my ear.

He said, "A deal, old man. You can only hurt yourself with that

fool yarn about a tame cat, so let's call it a stalemate. Forget the nonsense and I'll forget what I said upstairs. No point in our flailing each other."

"You're scared," I whispered.

"Not scared. Just sensible. And you should follow suit, because you know damned well that if you open your mouth I'll crucify you."

With that cheerful reminder, I was called to the stand.

Doctor Wendell, possibly from a keen sense of the dramatic, worked backwards in his questioning. He started with my hearing the shot and the screams and running out to investigate. I verified everything Wyndham and Cozenka and the watchman had told him of the actual tragedy, a girl—recruited from the late Mr. Bender's small office force—taking down every word meticulously.

Then Doctor Wendell jumped clear over to the arrival of the sheriff and the removal of the body.

After that, he fired a question that was the business, the showdown. "I understand that shortly after Mr. and Mrs. Bender and Mr. Wyndham left the lodge to hunt down the leopard, you had an extraordinary experience. I'd like to hear about it."

This was my last chance to back down.

And I won't deny that I was frightened for my career and future as I agreed with Doctor Wendell that it had been most extraordinary and gave it out, for the record, exactly as it had happened.

There was a time of silence after I'd finished, probably longer to me than anyone else. I used the time to steal glances at Cozenka and Wyndham. Cozenka was crying softly into a black lace handkerchief, crying in a way that made the coroner's jury hate me and my story—I was sure of that.

Wyndham took it with perfect aplomb, tapping tobacco into his pipe as though he had been indirectly accused of nothing more than swatting a troublesome fly.

Finally Doctor Wendell spoke. "Mr. Payne, do you have any proof whatever, other than your unsupported word, that the incident in the den, the coming and going of the leopard, actually occurred?"

"I hope so, but at the moment I can't be sure."

"That's a pretty ambiguous statement."

"I realize that, but it's all I can tell you at the moment."

"When do you expect to be able to tell us more?"

"When we run this off and see what's on it," I said, and took from my pocket the reel of sixteen millimeter film I'd found on a shelf in one of Cozenka's closets.

"You don't know what's on it?"

"No. You see I haven't had time to check."

"How did you happen to come into possession of this film?"

"As a result of what I hope will

turn out to be logical thinking on my part. From observation, I believed that Mrs. Bender entertained a definite affection for the black leopard named Demon, that she was sincerely sad when the cat had to be sacrificed as a part of her plan.

"So it seemed strange to me that the leopard did not appear anywhere in the hour-long film covering her last trip to Africa. I viewed the film last night, and saw enough to convince me that Mrs. Bender considered motion pictures of her activities over there and the animals she captured as being very important.

"So why no pictures of the animal she obviously regarded more highly than any of the others?

"From that point I proceeded on the belief that such films or stills actually existed and went about hunting for them. This is what I found and only viewing them will prove me right or wrong."

But I knew I was right. Cozenka went pale as death and while Wyndham didn't jump up and break any windows, he tightened up in a manner that was almost the equivalent for a man of his self-control.

Cozenka did spring to her feet. "No! No! He is wrong. He is deliberately torturing me. That film is most personal. I beg you not to run it off. You have no right to shame me!"

She was making a desperate all-out effort and Doctor Wendell was most polite in his ruling. "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Bender, but this is an investigation into a man's death and as such takes precedence over any personal feelings. Grave charges have been raised. Is there a film projector available?"

It was all there: highlights in the taming of a black leopard named Demon; shots mainly of Wyndham and the cat that could probably have been used in a course of instruction on how to take the viciousness out of jungle cats; a record from the time Wyndham first entered Demon's cage, somewhere in Africa, to the high point where Cozenka frolicked with the happy and gentle beast on a sylvan meadow.

There was a sound track, too, and during the final sequence I couldn't resist turning to Sheriff Henderson to say, "I think you will agree, Sheriff, that the cat is purring, not snarling."

I was instantly regretful. After all Henderson hadn't been against me. He'd only been doing a difficult job as well as he could.

The verdict said nothing about accidental death. It merely stated that Kenneth Bender had died of a gunshot wound under circumstances that warranted further investigation, and it enjoined Sheriff Henderson to continue with that investigation.

I wish I could report that the film did the trick—confounded two

vicious murderers and that full payment was demanded.

But I can't. That wasn't how it finally worked out.

I left the lodge of course, but I stayed on a few days in the sheriff's town. Some disturbing rumors made me seek him out.

He was busy in his office and so I got right to the point. "What's this I hear about charges being dropped against Mrs. Bender and Wyndham?"

"Nothing was dropped. Charges were never made. The grand jury, upon advice of the County Attorney, refused to indict."

"And how did that gross miscarriage of justice come about?"

"Through orderly, logical thinking."

I was thoroughly disgusted. "Then we'd better have more disorderly and illogical thinking. It's an outrage."

"I can understand your point of view," Henderson said, "but let's look at facts as they really are."

"I've looked at them."

"But you haven't seen them as they are. What was there, really, that would have a chance of getting a guilty verdict from twelve jurors?"

"Proof that their vicious cat was as tame as a kitten."

"Sure, but that isn't proof. It's merely a point for argument in court. Bender and Wyndham would have had a battery of the country's finest defense attorneys, but even a mediocre one would have thrown doubt upon whether a black leopard, regardless of the evidence is ever really tame. And their reason for hiding the fact could have been any of several that would have nothing to do with murder. Mrs. Bender could admit not being the hunter she claimed to be; that she wanted the prestige of owning a vicious cat without the danger."

He stopped to light a cigarette and then added, "Do you see my logic?"

"I'm beginning to."

"And your story about Bender's fear of death probably wouldn't even be admitted as evidence."

"I see."

"And one last point. Would you care to go before a jury made up principally of men and try to get Cozenka Bender convicted on the evidence we have?"

I thought it over for a moment. "No, but just the same they're both guilty."

"I think you're right," he agreed. "And now, how about a drink. I'll buy."

Perhaps there is some consolation in the fact that Cozenka and Wyndham gained nothing but tragedy from the tragedy they instigated. So it seemed.

They were both dead within six months after Cozenka fired her fatal bullet.

Wyndham, in Africa, where he was pounded into the mud by a water buffalo after he missed a hun

dred-foot shot and had no time for a second. He went back there, alone, two months after Bender's death. And three months later, Cozenka was killed when her sports car rocketed off the road one dark night.

It would be nice to think that she did away with herself because she couldn't face the guilt of her crime. But if her death was other than an accident, it was probably because Wyndham refused to step into Bender's shoes, and she realized that his clinging to her had been for the money she no doubt settled on him, not for love of her.

I think she truly loved Wyndham; ironically, in the same hopeless way Bender had loved her. And perhaps realization that Wyndham was one man in this world that she couldn't have was sufficient grounds for suicide.

Then too, there's another possibility. Could I have been wrong from the beginning? As Sheriff Henderson said, my conversation with Bender probably wouldn't have been allowed in court, and there were many reasons why Cozenka could have covered the true situation relative to Demon.

And one thing is certain. Even though I was sure of their guilt, I wouldn't have wanted to pull the switch personally on either of them. Not on the evidence that I actually had.

So, in the final summing up, I was sure of only one thing.

The cat was tame.

And now that you have finished reading Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, how did you like it? I should also be very pleased to receive your reactions to the stories in it. Write to me c/o Post Office Box 256, Bronxville, N. Y.

—Continued from Back Cover

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