

ALFRED

# HITCHCOCK'S

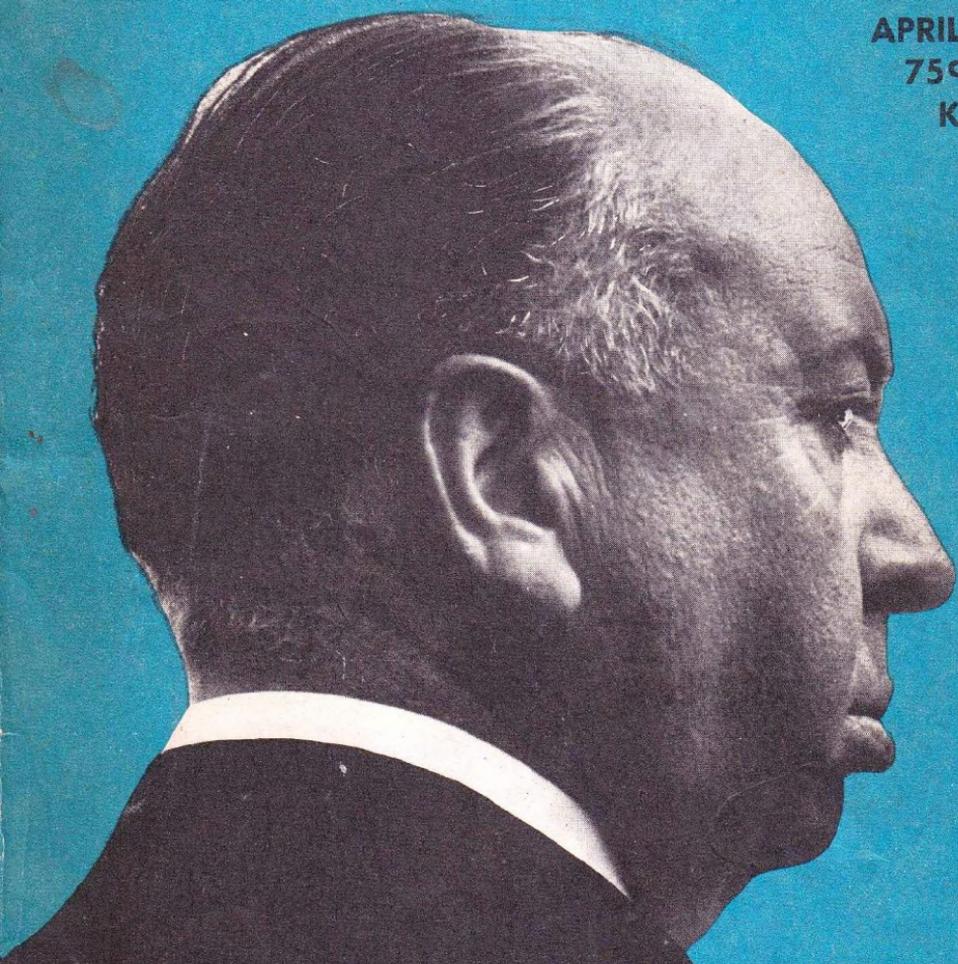
## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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



April 1972

Dear Reader:

I am sorry—but not very—if the stories within should interfere with your spring cleaning. After all, it may be to your advantage to keep up with the best of the new in matters that are not swept under the rug, but are brought out for

close inspection.

A number of charming (in their own way) personages are dealt with in a straightforward manner herein. Captain Leopold cleans up his share in *A Melee of Diamonds* by Edward D. Hoch, and so it goes, to Jack Ritchie's novelette, *Let Your Fingers Do the Walking*, in which an efficient private investigator ultimately finds a limit to Ma Bell.

You will observe no dust on these stories. Every one is new, as you always expect and invariably get between these covers. Speaking of covers, if you wish to pull the bedding over your head at some point within, remember it is wiser to remain alert to your surroundings.

Good reading.

*Alfred Hitchcock*

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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

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*When things start making sense, it may be time to retrace one's steps.*



# A Maze of Diamonds

not pause until he'd reached the corner of Union and Madison. There, he seemed to hesitate for a moment at the windows of the Midtown Diamond Exchange. He glanced quickly to each side, as if making certain there was no one near, and then smashed the nearest window with his silver-headed cane.

The high-pitched ringing of the

**T**HE MAN with the silver-headed cane turned into Union Street just after nine o'clock, walking briskly through the scattering of evening shoppers and salesclerks hurrying home after a long day. It was a clear April evening, cool enough for the topcoat the man wore, but still a relief at the end of a long winter. He glanced into occasional shop windows as he walked, but did



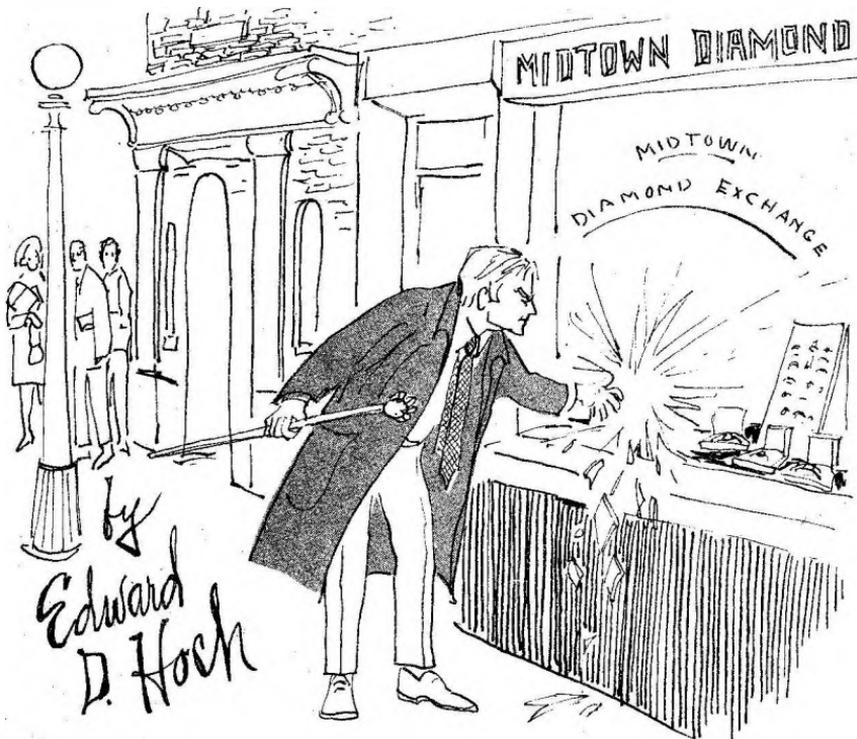
alarm mingled with the sound of breaking glass, as the man reached quickly into the window. A few pedestrians froze in their places, but as the man turned to make his escape a uniformed policeman suddenly appeared around the corner. "Hold it right there!" he barked, reaching for his holstered revolver.

The man turned, startled at the voice so close, and swung his cane at the officer. Then, as the policeman moved in, he swung again, catching the side of the head just beneath the cap. The officer stag-

gered and went down, and the man with the cane rounded the corner running.

"Stop him!" a shirt-sleeved man shouted from the doorway of the Diamond Exchange. "We've been robbed!"

The police officer, dazed and bleeding, tried to get to his knees and then fell back to the sidewalk, but a young man in paint-stained slacks and a zippered jacket detached himself from the frozen on-lookers and started after the fleeing robber. He was a fast runner, and



he overtook the man with the cane halfway down the block. They tumbled together into a pile of discarded boxes, rolling on the pavement, as the man tried to bring his cane up for another blow.

He shook free somehow, losing the cane but regaining his feet, and headed for an alleyway. A police car, attracted by the alarm, screeched to a halt in the street, and two officers jumped out with drawn guns. "Stop or we'll shoot!" the nearest officer commanded, and fired his pistol into the air in warning.

The sound of the shot echoed along the street, and the running man skidded to a halt at the entrance to the alleyway. He turned and raised his hands above his head. "All right," he said. "I'm not armed. Don't shoot."

The officer kept his pistol out until the second cop had snapped on the handcuffs.

"Damn it!" Captain Leopold exploded, staring at the paper cup full of light brown coffee that Lieutenant Fletcher had just set before him. "Is that the best you can get out of the machine?"

"Something's wrong with it, Captain. We've sent for a serviceman."

Leopold grumbled and tried to drink the stuff. One swallow was all he could stomach. The men in the

department had given him a coffee percolator of his very own when he'd assumed command of the combined Homicide and Violent Crimes squad, but on this particular morning, with his coffee can empty, he'd been forced to return to the temperamental vending machine in the hall.

"Get me a cola instead, will you, Fletcher?" he said at last, pouring the coffee down the sink in one corner of his office. When the lieutenant came back, he asked, "What's this about Phil Begler being in the hospital?"

Fletcher nodded in confirmation. "There's a report on your desk. Phil came upon a guy stealing a handful of diamonds from the window of the Midtown Diamond Exchange. The guy whacked him on the head with a cane and started running. They caught him, but Phil's in the hospital with a concussion."

"I should go see him," Leopold decided. "Phil's a good guy."

"They identified the fellow that stole the diamonds and hit him as Rudy Hoffman, from New York. He's got a long record of smash-and-grab jobs."

Leopold nodded. "Maybe Phil Begler's concussion will be enough to put him away for good."

Fletcher nodded. "Hope so, Captain, but there is one little problem with the case."

"What's that?" Leopold asked.

"Well, they caught Hoffman only a half-block from the scene, after a young fellow chased and tackled him, and fought with him till a patrol car arrived. Hoffman got \$58,000 worth of diamonds out of that window, and he was in sight of at least one person every instant until they arrested him."

"So?"

"The diamonds weren't on him, Captain. No trace of them."

"He dropped them in the street."

"They searched. They searched the street, they searched him, they even searched the patrol car he was in after his arrest. No diamonds."

Leopold was vaguely irritated that such a simple matter should disrupt the morning's routine. "Haven't they questioned him about it?"

"He's not talking, Captain."

"All right," he said with a sigh. "Bring him down. I'll have to show you guys how it's done."

Rudy Hoffman was a gray-haired man in his early forties. The years in prison, Leopold noted, had left him with pale complexion and shifty, uncertain eyes. He licked his lips often as he spoke, nervously glancing from Leopold to Fletcher and then back again.

"I don't know anything," he said. "I'm not talking without a lawyer. You can't even question me without

a lawyer. I know my rights!"

Leopold sat down opposite him. "It's not just a little smash-and-grab this time, Rudy. That cop you hit might die. You could go up for the rest of your life."

"He's just got a concussion. I heard the guards talkin'."

"Still, we've got you on assault with a deadly weapon. With your record, that's enough. We don't even need the felony charge. So you see, you're not really protecting yourself by clamming up about the diamonds. Even if we don't find them, we've still got you nailed."

Rudy Hoffman merely smiled and looked sleepy. "Those diamonds are where you'll never find them, cop. That much I promise you."

Leopold glared at him for a moment, thinking of Phil Begler in a hospital bed. "We'll see about that," he said, and stood up. "Come on, Fletcher, we're keeping him from his beauty sleep."

Back in Leopold's office, Fletcher said, "See what I mean, Captain? He's a hard one."

Leopold was grim. "I'll find those damned diamonds and stuff them down his throat. Tell me everything that happened from the instant he broke the window."

"I can do better than that, Captain. The kid who chased him is outside now, waiting to make a

statement. Want to see him now?"

Neil Quart was not exactly a kid, though he was still on the light side of twenty-five. Leopold had seen the type many times before, on the streets usually, with shaggy hair and dirty clothes, taunting the rest of the world.

"You're quite a hero," Leopold told him. "Suppose you tell us how it happened."

Quart rubbed at his nose, trying to look cool. "I work over at Bam-  
baum's nights, in the shipping department. I'd just finished there at nine o'clock and was heading home. Down by the Diamond Exchange I saw this guy with the cane smash a window. I wasn't close enough to grab him, but as he started to run away this cop rounds the corner. The guy hit him with the cane, hard, and knocked him down. Now, I don't have any love for cops, but I decided to take out after this guy. I ran him down halfway up the block, and we tussled a little. He tried to conk me with the cane too, but I got it away from him. Then he was up and running, but the other cops got there. One cop fired a shot in the air and it was all over."

Leopold nodded. "How long was the robber—Rudy Hoffman—out of your sight?"

"He wasn't out of my sight. Not for a second! I went right after him when he knocked the cop down.

Hell, I thought he might have killed him."

"You didn't see him throw anything away, into the street?"

"Not a thing."

"Could he have thrown anything away as he raised his hands?"

"I don't think so."

Fletcher interrupted at this point. "They caught him at the entrance to an alleyway, Captain. Every inch of it was searched."

Leopold turned back to Neil Quart. "As you've probably guessed, we're looking for the diamonds he stole. Any idea what he might have done with them?"

The young man shrugged. "Not a glimmer. Unless . . . We were wrestling around some boxes."

"They were all checked," Fletcher said. "Everything was checked. The police were there all night, looking."

"You still did a good job," Leopold told the young man. "You weren't afraid to get involved, and that's what counts."

"Thanks. I just didn't like to see him hit that cop."

Outside, Fletcher asked, "Satisfied, Captain?"

"Not by a long shot. What about Hoffman's clothes?"

"We went over every stitch, including his topcoat. Nothing there."

"All right," Leopold decided,

grim-faced. "Let's go see where it happened."

The Midtown Diamond Exchange still showed the scars of the previous night's robbery, with a boarded-up window and a little pile of broken glass. The assistant manager, who'd been on duty the previous evening, was a sandy-haired man named Peter Arnold who looked pained by the whole affair.

"Just tell us how it was," Leopold told him. "Everything you can remember."

"It was just closing time, a few minutes after nine. The other clerk had gone home, and I'd locked the front door. That was when I heard the window smash and saw him scooping up the diamonds."

"Let's go back a bit, Mr. Arnold. How many diamonds were in the window?"

"Dozens! We had a few large rings mounted on cards giving the prices, and then we had perhaps twenty-five or thirty smaller stones, unmounted. A melee of diamonds, to use the trade term—although that usually refers to stones of less than a quarter carat. Most of these were larger."

"They were valued at \$58,000?"

Peter Arnold nodded sadly. "I've already heard from our New York office about it."

"Do you always leave that many

diamonds in your store window?"

"Not at all. They're in the window only while the store is open. My first duty after locking the door would have been to remove them from that and the other display windows and lock them in the vault for the night. I had just locked the door and was starting for the window on the other side when I heard the smashing of glass. I looked over and saw this man scooping the diamonds out of their trays. The window alarm was ringing, of course, and as he started away Officer Begler appeared around the corner."

"You know Phil Begler?"

The jeweler nodded. "He's been on this beat maybe four or five years. Usually he's right around this corner, but at nine he goes up to direct traffic out of the parking ramp in the next block. It was only a fluke he happened to get back just when that man broke the window."

"Any idea what he did with the diamonds during his escape?"

"I'm baffled. If he'd dropped them, I should think at least a few would have been found."

Leopold walked to the boarded-up window, and pulled aside the black velvet drape so he could peer into it. The diamond trays were still there, speckled with broken glass, but there were no gems. "He got everything?"

"No, there were four rings on

cards and six unmounted stones that he missed, but he made a good haul. We estimate \$58,000, or even a bit more."

Leopold let the drape drop back into place. He took out a picture of Rudy Hoffman. "Ever see him in the store before the robbery, casing the place?"

"I don't remember him, but of course someone else may have been on duty."

"I'll leave this picture with you. Show it to your manager and the clerks. See if anyone remembers him."

"You think it was well-planned?"

"He got rid of the diamonds somewhere, and that took planning."

On the way out, Leopold paused at the little pile of broken glass and bent to examine it.

"Find something, Captain?" Fletcher asked.

"Ever think about how much broken glass and diamonds look alike, Fletcher?"

"Are there any diamonds in that pile?"

"No, just broken glass."

On the way back downtown, Fletcher said, "They did an X-ray on Hoffman too, in case you're thinking he might have swallowed them."

"Never considered it for a moment." He stared through the car's

dirty windshield at the passing scene. Police headquarters was separated from the main Union Street shopping area by some ten blocks of abandoned, run-down buildings—many of them doomed by a much-postponed urban renewal project. Those that still had tenants housed record shops and adult bookstores on their lower levels, renting the rooms above to bearded young people and transient types. It was a shabby section of the inner city, but the crime rate was not as high as might be expected.

"They should tear it all down," Fletcher commented.

"I suppose they will, one of these days." Leopold had another thought. "What about the men who searched the street? Could one of them have pocketed the diamonds?"

Fletcher thought about it. "We've got some bad eggs in the department, Captain—like any other city—but I'd trust any of the men who were out there last night. I know them all, from Begler on down. They're honest cops."

Leopold said no more until they reached his office. Then he asked Fletcher to bring him Rudy Hoffman's clothing. They went over each piece together, though the clothes had been searched earlier, and they found nothing.

Leopold frowned and went to

stare out the window at the crowded parking lot that was his only view. "How about a wig, false teeth, something like that?"

Fletcher shook his head. "Nothing, Captain."

Leopold turned suddenly. "Damn it, Fletcher, why didn't I think of it before? There's one thing we've completely overlooked, one thing that's missing from Hoffman's possessions!"

Fletcher looked blank. "What's that, Captain?"

"The cane, of course! The silver-headed cane he used to break the window and crack Phil Begler's skull! Where is it?"

"I suppose they've got it tagged as the weapon. It would be in the evidence drawer, or else already at the D.A.'s office, for presentation before the grand jury."

"Find it, Fletcher, and let's take a look at it."

Lieutenant Fletcher was back in five minutes, carrying a long black walking stick with a silver head in the shape of a ball held by a bird's claw. Leopold snorted and turned it over in his hands.

"Doesn't really go with Hoffman somehow," Fletcher commented. "Not his style."

"No." Leopold turned it over in his hands, and tried to twist off the top. It seemed solid, as was the shaft of the cane. "He probably

stole it from somewhere. There's certainly nothing hidden in it."

"Let's think about it," Fletcher suggested. "Maybe something will come to us by morning."

Leopold glanced at his watch and nodded. It was after three, and he wanted to stop by the hospital and see Officer Begler on his way home. "Good idea," he agreed. "See you in the morning."

"Say, how about coming over for dinner tonight, Captain? Carol was just mentioning the other day that she hasn't seen you since the Christmas party."

"Thanks, Fletcher. I could use some of your wife's cooking, but let's make it another time. Give her my best, though."

He drove over to Memorial Hospital and spent a half hour with Begler, who grinned from beneath his bandages and seemed in good enough spirits. Leopold paused in the lobby to chat with a couple of nurses, and then headed home to his apartment, encountering the rush-hour traffic he usually tried to avoid. Driving along Union Street, he remembered the empty coffee can in his office and pulled over at a neighborhood grocery.

The place was cluttered and crowded. He picked up a can of coffee and found a clerk to take his money. "Anything else, sir?"

Leopold shook his head. "That's

it." Then he noticed the dark-haired girl who'd entered behind him. She pretended to be choosing a loaf of bread, but she was really watching him. No one takes that long to choose bread, he knew, and when she finally moved up to the clerk with her selection her eyes were still on Leopold.

The clerk slipped the coffee can into a paper bag, and Leopold left the store. Before he could cross the sidewalk to his car he heard the girl's voice behind him. "You're a detective, aren't you?"

He turned to her with a smile he hoped was friendly. She was a good-looking girl, in her early twenties, but her face seemed drawn and tired at the moment. "You might say that."

"Do you want the loot from the Midtown Diamond robbery?"

In all his years of police work, nothing like it had ever happened to him before. He'd spent a full day trying to locate the diamonds that had disappeared by some sort of magic, and now this girl walked up to him outside a grocery store and offered them, just like that.

"Do you know where it is?"

She nodded. "I can take you there, if you'll promise not to arrest me or my boyfriend."

"Who is your boyfriend?"

"Names aren't important. He didn't have anything to do with the

robbery. Have I your promise?"

"Then how'd he get the diamonds?"

"He's supposed to take them to New York and sell them—you know, like a fence. I don't want any part of it. I want you to take them."

"How'd you know I was a detective?"

"I followed you from the hospital. You were visiting that policeman who was injured. I went there to find out how he was, and a nurse pointed you out as a detective."

"You're concerned about Officer Begler?"

"Certainly. I never knew it would be anything like this when Freddy agreed to handle the stuff. I want out of it, before we all end up behind bars."

"Can you take me to the diamonds?"

She glanced quickly down the street and nodded. "Leave your car here. We'll go in mine."

He followed her to the corner and slid into the front seat of a little foreign sedan, still clutching his pound of coffee. She drove like a demon, weaving in and out of the rush-hour lines of traffic. In five minutes they'd reached the run-down section of Union, where the buildings waited for demolition, and he knew this was her destination. She parked the car and led him up a narrow flight of dimly lit

stairs to an apartment above a vacant barber shop. In view of the long-haired residents, Leopold could easily understand why it had been forced to close.

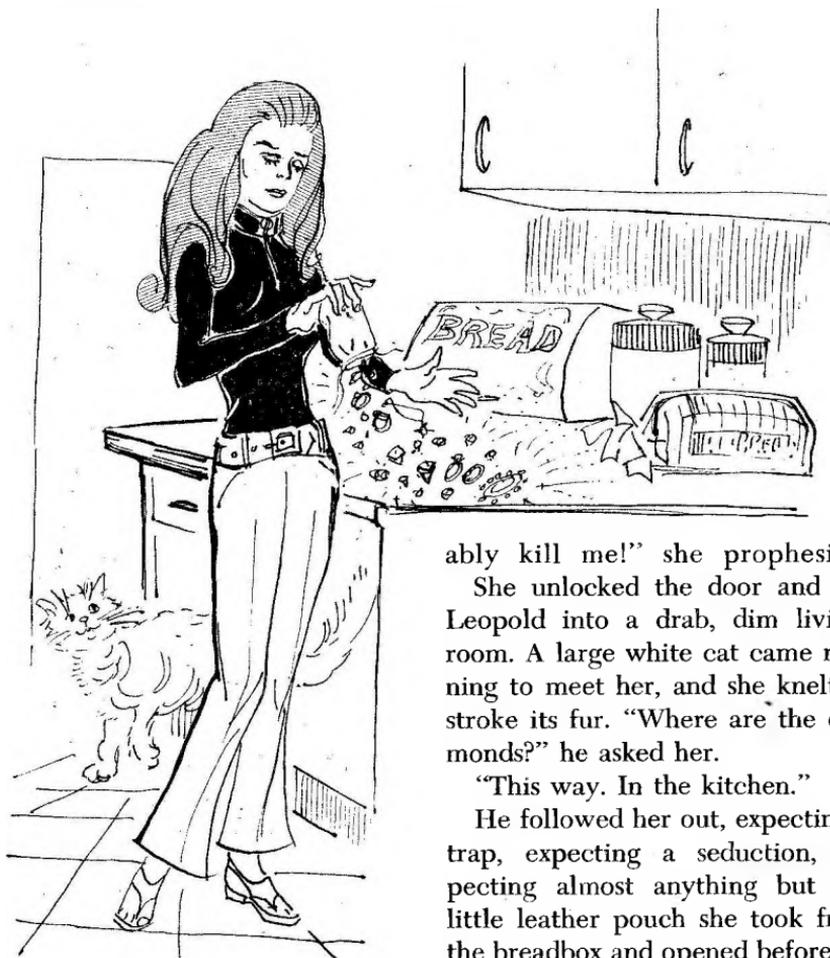
"Is Freddy here?" he asked the girl, shifting the coffee to his left

hand so his right would be near his gun.

"Who told you his name?" she asked, startled.

"You did."

"All right. No, he's not here. If he knew what I was doing, he'd prob-



ably kill me!" she prophesied.

She unlocked the door and led Leopold into a drab, dim living-room. A large white cat came running to meet her, and she knelt to stroke its fur. "Where are the diamonds?" he asked her.

"This way. In the kitchen."

He followed her out, expecting a trap, expecting a seduction, expecting almost anything but the little leather pouch she took from the breadbox and opened before his eyes. She poured them out on the

counter—big diamonds, little diamonds, some in rings but most unset. Leopold simply stared, almost at a loss for words. "These are all of them?" he asked finally.

"Yes."

"How did Hoffman get them to you? He's in jail."

"He has an accomplice who brought them to Freddy. Now take them and go, before he comes back!"

But as Leopold's hand closed over the little pouch of diamonds, they heard a sound at the apartment door. It was a key in a lock, and a moment later they heard the door open. "Is that him?" Leopold whispered.

"Yes, yes! He'll kill us both!"

"Go out and try to stall him."

She hurried through the swinging kitchen door, her face white, and Leopold looked around for a way out. There was only a door to a dead-end pantry, and a window that looked out onto a back alley. He tried the window and found it painted shut, unbudging. He turned back toward the door to the livingroom, listening to the muffled voices on the other side, and slipped the revolver from his holster. He stared down at the jewels for a moment and an idea came to him.

Two minutes later, he stepped through the swinging door with his

gun drawn. "Hold it right there, Freddy."

There was a gasp from the girl and Freddy turned, startled at the voice, but it took him only an instant to realize what was happening. "You damned little double-crossing tramp!" he shouted at the girl. "Glenda, I'll kill you for this!" He started for her, but Leopold waved him back with the gun.

"You'll kill no one. I'm Captain Leopold of Violent Crimes, and if anything happens to her I'll have you behind bars."

"What did she tell you?"

"She brought me here to give me the diamonds, to try and save your skin, but somebody beat us to them. They're gone."

Freddy was on his feet. He was a little man with mouselike features, and he moved now like a rodent who discovered the trap does not even contain a piece of cheese. "What do you mean, they're gone? They can't be gone!"

Glenda's eyes had widened in wonder, as she tried to decide what Leopold was up to. "Look for yourself," he told Freddy, and lowered his gun.

The little man lost no time in getting to the kitchen. He tore through the breadbox, the wastebasket, the cupboards, while Leopold stood in the doorway. Finally, after ten minutes of searching, he asked, "Where

are they, Glenda? Get them now!"

"It's like he said, Freddy! Honest!"

"You hid them somewhere," he accused.

"No! Honest!"

"Would she have brought me here if she'd hidden the diamonds somewhere else?" Leopold argued.

Freddy eyed him with open distrust. "How do I know they're not in your pocket?"

Leopold put away his gun and raised his arms. "You can search me if you want." Now that he'd seen Freddy in action, he knew he didn't need the gun to take him, if it came to that.

The little man stepped close, eyeing Leopold, and ran his hands carefully over his body, checking his topcoat and pants cuffs and sleeves. It was a good search, but he found nothing. Leopold removed his gun to show the inside of the holster, then opened the revolver itself to show that the chambers held nothing but bullets.

"What's in the bag?" Freddy asked.

Leopold smiled. "A pound of coffee. I was on my way home when Glenda contacted me."

Freddy took out the coffee can and looked into the bag. Then he replaced it in disgust. "All right, I believe you—but if the diamonds aren't here, where are they?"

"I'm as anxious to get them as you are," Leopold assured him. "It seems to me there's only one other person who could have them."

"Who's that?"

"The guy who brought them to you in the first place—Rudy Hoffman's accomplice."

Freddy thought about that. "Why would he take them?"

Leopold shrugged. "With Hoffman in jail, maybe he figured he could keep the loot for himself. By delivering the diamonds to you, and then stealing them back, he'd be in the clear."

"Yeah," Freddy said, beginning to go along with it. "That damned double-crosser would pull something like this!"

"Want to tell me who he is?"

Freddy's eyes narrowed in distrust. "I'll handle it, cop."

"Look, you're on very thin ice. If I catch you with those diamonds, I could arrest you for receiving stolen property."

Freddy thought about it. "No," he decided, "I'm not telling you. Maybe the guy didn't take them."

Leopold sighed and turned to the girl. "Glenda, who is Hoffman's accomplice?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him."

"She's telling the truth, cop. I'm the only one who knows, besides Hoffman—and he's not about to talk. Even if he gets sent up, it

wouldn't be for too long, and when he gets out he can still work his sweet little scheme in other cities."

"Are you part of his scheme?"

"I was going to fence the gems, that's all. Don't bother taking notes, though, because I'll deny everything."

"If you won't tell me who the accomplice is, call him up. Tell him you know he took the stuff and get him over here."

That idea seemed to appeal to the little man. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Maybe I could do that."

"If I get the diamonds and the accomplice, Freddy, you're off the hook."

"All right, I'll call him."

He walked to the phone and Leopold shot Glenda a look that told her to play along with him. Given a bit of luck, he'd have the accomplice and get her off the hook with Freddy.

"Hello? This is Freddy Doyle. Yeah, yeah . . . Well, something's gone wrong. The diamonds are missing . . . You heard me, missing! . . . Well, you damned well better get over here to the apartment . . . Yeah, right now! And if you've got those stones, you better have 'em with you!"

He hung up and Leopold said, "That was good. Did he admit taking them?"

"Hell, no! He thinks I'm pulling a

double cross, or that's what he said anyway. He'll be here."

They sat down to wait, and Leopold watched the darkness settle over the city. He felt good, knowing the next hour's work would probably wrap up the case. "Get me a drink," Freddy ordered the girl at one point, and she hurried out to the kitchen.

It was just after seven o'clock when the buzzer sounded and they heard someone starting up the stairs. "Expecting anyone else?" Leopold asked.

"No, that'll be him. Better be careful—he might have a gun."

"Let him in. I'll be right behind you at the door."

While Glenda stood terrified in the kitchen doorway, Freddy Doyle opened the apartment door. He peered into the now-darkened hall and asked, "Is that you . . . ?"

Leopold cursed silently. He tried to step back quickly and pull Freddy with him, but it was too late. Three quick shots came with deafening suddenness from the darkness, and Freddy toppled backward into his arms.

"Stop!" Leopold shouted. "Police!"

He heard the running footsteps on the stairway, and allowed Freddy's limp body to sag to the floor. Behind him, Glenda was screaming. Leopold made it to the

banister and fired a shot down the stairway, but he had no target. The street door was yanked open, and Freddy's assailant was gone. By the time Leopold reached the street there was no sign of him.

He climbed the stairs and went back into the apartment. Glenda was on the floor, kneeling in a widening pool of blood. "He's dead!" she shouted, close to hysterics.

"I know," Leopold said, feeling suddenly old. He walked to the telephone and dialed headquarters.

Fletcher found him in his office, staring glumly at the wall. "I came as soon as I could, Captain. What happened?"

"I bungled, that's what happened, Fletcher. I was trying to pull off a neat trick, and I got a guy killed."

Fletcher sat down in his usual chair, opposite the desk. "Tell me about it."

Leopold ran quickly over the events of the evening, from his visit to the hospital, through the shooting of Freddy Doyle. "I didn't think our man was desperate enough to commit murder," he admitted.

"Why would he kill Doyle?"

"Because he saw it was a trap. Maybe the bullets were aimed at me, too, but Doyle was in the way. I suppose he suspected something when Freddy called to say the dia-

monds were missing, because he knew he hadn't taken them."

"But where were they?" Fletcher asked. "You said you saw them."

Leopold nodded. "They're right here—my one accomplishment for the night." He took the can of coffee from its paper bag. "I had only a couple of minutes alone in that kitchen, but I got the idea that Freddy could lead me to Hoffman's accomplice if he thought the accomplice had returned and stolen the diamonds back again. So I used a can opener to open the bottom of this coffee can part way. I emptied just enough coffee into the sink so there'd be room in the can for this pouch of diamonds. Then I bent the bottom shut the best I could, and capped it with this plastic lid they give you, just so no coffee would run out. When Freddy was searching for the diamonds, he actually lifted the can out of its bag, but the top was still sealed and he never thought to examine the bottom."

Fletcher opened the pouch and spilled a few of the gems onto the desk top. "A clever trick, Captain."

"Clever—except that now Freddy is dead and we've got a murder on our hands. Our man isn't one to stand still for games."

The lieutenant was frowning down at the gems. "If Hoffman used an accomplice, it had to be somebody who came in contact

with him during those few minutes after the robbery. He couldn't have hidden the diamonds anywhere, because the street was searched, and there's only one person he had physical contact with—only one person he could have slipped the jewels to."

Leopold nodded. "I've been thinking the same thing, Fletcher. Put out a pickup order on Neil Quart."

The young man sat uncomfortably in the interrogation room chair, looking from one to the other of them. "What is this, anyway? You drag me down here at midnight like a common criminal? Just this morning I was a hero!"

"That was this morning," Fletcher said.

Leopold sat on the edge of the desk, close to the man in the chair. "Look, Neil, I think it's time you told us the whole story. It's not just robbery now—it's murder."

"Murder! I don't . . ." He started to rise and Fletcher pushed him back in the chair.

"Hoffman passed those diamonds to someone, who delivered them to a fence and later killed the fence. You're the only one who had physical contact with Hoffman after the robbery."

"But I ran after him! I wrestled with him! I held him till the police

got there! You know I did!"

"And while you were conveniently holding him, he slipped you the diamonds."

"No! You're crazy! I didn't . . ."

Leopold began pacing the room. "There's no other way it could have been. You have to be the accomplice, Quart."

"Look, it doesn't make sense! He was getting away! Why should there be this elaborate scheme to pass me the diamonds when he was getting away with them? If I hadn't grabbed him, he'd have made good his escape."

Leopold thought about that, trying to sort out the facts in his mind. What Neil Quart said made sense, too much sense. "Where were you tonight around seven o'clock?"

"Working in Bambaum's shipping department, like every night. You can ask them."

"All right," Leopold said with a sigh. "Get out of here. Go on home. We'll check it in the morning."

Fletcher looked surprised. "But Captain . . ."

"It's all right, Fletcher. I was wrong—again. This is my night for being wrong."

Fletcher followed him back into his office. "Let me fix you some coffee, Captain."

Leopold handed over the can. "I've lost it, Fletcher. I can't even think straight anymore. I jump on

some poor kid and try to make a murderer out of him. I get some guy killed for nothing."

"You recovered the diamonds, Captain."

"Yeah."

Fletcher was filling the coffee pot. "Well, Hoffman sure did something with those diamonds. He had them when he hit Officer Begler, and he didn't have them when they grabbed him a few minutes later."

Leopold sat up straight. "How do we know that, Fletcher?"

"What? Well, hell, he sure didn't crack Begler's skull because he *wasn't* carrying the diamonds."

"Fletcher," Leopold said very slowly, "I think that's exactly what he did."

They were waiting for Peter Arnold in the morning, when he unlocked the door of the Midtown Diamond Exchange. He glanced up, surprised, and said, "Captain Leopold! You look as if you've been up all night."

"I have," Leopold said, following him inside the store. Fletcher came too, but stayed by the door. "I've been getting people out of bed, checking on your finances, Arnold. I didn't want to make another mistake."

"What?"

"It was a damned clever plan, I have to say that. I suppose Rudy

Hoffman thought it up, and then got friendly with some jewelers around town till he found one who needed the money."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do, Arnold. You closed the shop at nine o'clock the other night, and quickly removed the diamonds from that window. Rudy Hoffman came by as scheduled, broke the window and ran. You pocketed the diamonds and called the police. Then you took the diamonds to Freddy Doyle, who was supposed to sell them. The plan had a great advantage—Hoffman didn't have to spend precious seconds scooping up the loot in the window, and if he were arrested a block or two away, he'd be clean. No diamonds, no evidence. He probably planned to dump the cane and topcoat and keep on going. Only Officer Begler wasn't where he was supposed to be, directing traffic. Hoffman knew it was too soon to be arrested—right by the window. He didn't have the diamonds and the whole plot would be obvious, so he hit Begler with the cane and ran. That's when he had more bad luck—a young fellow named Neil Quart chased after him. You had the diamonds all the time, but unfortunately Hoffman didn't even have a chance to pretend he'd dumped them. We had an impos-

sible crime on our hands, even though you didn't plan it that way."

Peter Arnold continued staring at them. He ran a damp tongue over his lips and said, "I assume you have some proof for all this?"

"Plenty of proof. You're in bad financial trouble, and aiding in the theft of your company's diamonds was an easy way out for you. We've got the gems back, and with you in jail I'm sure Hoffman can be persuaded to tell it like it was."

"There were witnesses who saw Hoffman at the window, though."

"Yes, but they only saw him reach inside. He would hardly have had time to scoop up all those loose diamonds, and only you, Arnold, actually said you saw him do that. You said you saw it while you were locking the door, even though there's a velvet drape at the rear of the window that keeps you from seeing anything from inside the store. You didn't see him take the diamonds because he never took them. They were already in your pocket when he broke the window and started running."

"I don't—"

"You panicked when Freddy called you, and especially when you saw me in the doorway with him. You recognized me, of course, and started shooting. That alone told me the killer was someone I'd questioned in connection with the case."

Peter Arnold moved then, as Leopold knew he would. It was only a matter of guessing whether the murder gun was in his coat pocket or behind the counter. His hand went for his pocket, and Fletcher shot him from the doorway. It was a neat shot, in the shoulder—the sort Fletcher was good at.

Arnold toppled against a showcase, crying and clutching his shoulder, as Leopold slipped the gun from his pocket. "You should have dumped this in the river," he said. "We could never have made the murder charge stick without it."

Fletcher locked the front door and called for an ambulance. They had to get Arnold patched up, and booked for murder and robbery, and then they could both go home to bed.



*Only by guarding what lies behind can there be safety from what may lie ahead.*



# The Missing Tattoo

by Clayton Matthews

**T**HE CARNIE NIGHT was a kaleidoscope of psychedelic colors and a riot of sound, the whoosh of the rides, the braying voices of concession-joint men and sideshow

barkers, and over and under it all the merry tinkle of the merry-go-round calliope.

Bernie Mather, the front talker for the Ten-in-One freak show, was just beginning his bally, beating on a gong to attract attention, his voice pouring into the hand mike. "Hi, lookee, hi, lookee! Gather down close, folks, for a free show. Hi, lookee, this is where the freaks are!"

I stood on the edge of the gathering crowd before the freak show bally platform. It was going to be a big tip. Montana's Wonder Shows was playing at a fair, and the crowds were satisfactorily large along the midway.

A passing carnie tapped me on the shoulder. "Hi, Patch. I see you're still with it."

"Yeah, I'm still with it."

That's me—Patch. Real name, Dave Cole, but to everybody on the Montana carnival I was Patch. To a carnie, a patch is exactly what the name implies. A fixer, the guy who greases the local fuzz, if grease is needed, to allow the games to operate openly and to permit the broads in the girlie shows to strip down to the buff. Oddly enough, considering the insular carnie world's dislike of any and all fuzz, I also operated as a sort of law on the lot, keeping the peace, seeing that the game agents didn't get too greedy, arbitrating

disputes, whatever. In short, a carnie patch is a troubleshooter. In some ways I had more power around the carnie than Tex Montana, the owner, who paid my salary.

In fact, Kay Foster, the cook-tent cashier, had once accused me of just that. "You know why you stay a carnie, Dave, when you could probably set up a private law practice somewhere? You like the power you have here. Big frog in a little puddle."

Kay and I had a mild thing going, and she hated carnie life. I had practiced law briefly some years back, had run into a spot of trouble, not enough to get me disbarred but close to it.

Anyway, Kay thought I should marry her, quit the carnie and return to being a townie. I was willing to marry her, but wasn't yet prepared for the other. I resented the frog-in-the-puddle crack. I enjoyed the life of a carnie, and the job I had. It had its compensations.

I noticed that Bernie had spotted me in the crowd. He winked and turned with a flourish of his cane. "All right, folks, I'm going to bring out the freaks now, give you a free sample of what you will see inside for the small price of an admission ticket!"

The freak show had ten acts. For each pitch Bernie brought out three

freaks, usually different ones. Those that were mobile, that is. Sally, the Fat Lady, for instance, weighed in the neighborhood of seven hundred pounds, and it would have taken a hoist to get her onto the bally platform.

This time Bernie brought out Sam, the Anatomical Marvel, Dirk, the Sword Swallower, and May, the Tattooed Lady. Some freaks are natural, born that way, others are gimmicked. The Anatomical Marvel was natural, the Sword Swallower gimmicked, and May would have to be placed somewhere in between. I had been with Montana's Wonder Shows for three seasons and had made myself familiar with all the carnies, the Ten-in-One freaks included, but I was still fascinated by May's tattoos. Bernie, who'd been a freak show operator for twenty years, once told me she had the most thoroughly tattooed body he'd ever seen. Bernie was also the inside talker during each performance, so May was right under his nose, in a manner of speaking.

May was thirty, give or take, and had a lovely face. That was all you could see of her on the bally platform. She wore a long robe covering her from neck to toe. I'd seen her on exhibition inside any number of times, wearing briefs and a halter. The rest of her, every visible

inch, was covered with marvelously designed tattoos, like a painting you have to study a long time to get its full meaning. Religious sketches, hunting scenes, profiles of famous men, the American flag, and across her abdomen sailed a two-masted schooner, which she could cause to pitch and toss with contortions of her stomach.

Wise old Bernie only tantalized with May now, flicking at the folds of her robe with the tip of his cane and giving the crowd a teasing peek at a leg tattooed up out of sight.

As I walked away, Bernie had already turned away from May and was pointing at double-jointed Sam, the Anatomical Marvel, who also knew just how much exposure a bally called for. He wagged each ear in a different direction and held one hand straight out while he rotated each finger separately.

It was close to midnight now, and the crowd was beginning to thin out as I strolled to the cook tent. The people remaining were mostly clotted around the show tents as the talkers did their last bally of the night.

The cook tent was beginning to fill up as some carnies had already packed it in for the night. At the cash register Kay was busy, so I flipped a hand at her and went on back for coffee and a midnight sandwich.

I took my time, having a second cup of coffee, waiting for all the shows and rides to close down, so I could prowl the midway and see that it was buttoned up for the night. It wasn't my job to do guard duty—we had two night men for that—but I liked to check things out for myself.

Soon, everything was closed but the cook tent. Many of the carnies lived in house trailers or tents on the lot and could cook there, but most of them came to the cook tent to lie about their night's grosses. I was about to get up and start my tour of inspection when I saw a man I recognized as a canvasman from the Ten-in-One hurrying toward my table.

"Patch, Bernie needs you right away!"

I stood up. "What's the trouble?"

"It's May. She's dead!"

"Dead?"

"Murdered, looks like!"

I remembered where I was and glanced around, but it was too late. Those close to me had fallen silent, and I knew they'd overheard. The word would spread like a tent blaze. I waved the canvasman quiet and hustled him out.

We hurried toward the Ten-in-One, feet crunching in the fresh wood shavings already spread along the midway for tomorrow's crowds. The midway was deserted now, all

the lights off except a string of bulbs down the center. The concession tent flaps were down, like greedy mouths satiated and closed, and the rides were still, like monsters of various shapes and sizes slumbering under their night hoods.

Bernie was waiting for me in front of the show tent. A slender, dapper man of indeterminate age, he leaned against the ticket box, a glowing pipe stuck in a face as narrow as an ax blade.

"What's happened, Bernie? Somebody kill May?" I asked.

"I can't see what else," he said in his raspy voice. "We turned a small tip for the last show and May said she had to . . . Well, she had something to do, so I told her to go ahead, the marks wouldn't miss one tattooed lady. After we sloughed it for the night, I went back to her trailer. The lights were on, but she didn't answer my knock. I found the door wasn't locked, so I opened it and went in. May was lying there, a knife in her back."

"Was the knife from Dirk's trunk?"

Bernie looked startled, at least as startled as he ever looked. "You know, I never thought of that, but it could be, it just could be."

I was silent for a moment, thinking. Before becoming a sword swallower, Dirk had had a knife-throwing act and May, before she'd

been tattooed, had been his assistant. Knife-throwing acts are old hat, not much in demand anymore, so Dirk stopped throwing knives and started swallowing them, and May got tattooed. What was giving me pause for thought was a memory surfacing. Dirk and May had also once had a thing going, a romance that had dissolved when May met Vernon Raines, who talked her into becoming a tattooed lady. Vernon was a charmer and a crook. Not a crook in the carnie sense of a flat-joint operator, but a heist artist, a man with a gun. He had used the carnie as a cover-up, committing townie crimes, such as holding up banks. We hadn't known that, of course—Tex Montana wouldn't have stood for it. Last season, however, Vernon had held up a bank in a town called Midfork, killing a guard, and got away with a hundred grand. He was caught before he could spend any of it. That was when we learned Vernon had a record. Because of that record, and his killing the bank guard, he got life, with no possibility of parole.

The money was never found.

"Well . . ." I sighed heavily. "I guess we'd better go have a look."

We started around the tent to where May's trailer was parked. Bernie said nothing about my calling the police. I would have to do

that eventually, of course, but the carnies wouldn't call them on their own initiative if the midway was stacked knee-deep with corpses.

As we rounded the corner of the tent and came in sight of the Ten-in-One freaks clustered before the trailer, Bernie stopped me with a hand on my arm. "Before you go in there, Patch, there's something you should know . . ." He hesitated.

"Well?"

"It's kind of a queer thing . . . and I've seen some queer things in my years of carnying."

"What's the queer thing? Get on with it, man!"

"One of May's tattoos is missing."

"What?" I gaped at him. "What's missing?"

"Somebody peeled a piece of skin off her back, about two inches square."

I closed my mouth with a snort and began plowing my way through the gathered carnies. The trailer lights were on, and I opened the door and stepped inside. May lay facedown on the floor of the living area, still in the halter and shorts she'd worn for the shows. The brown handle of a long knife protruded from her back just below the left shoulder blade, and lower down on her back, just as Bernie had said, a piece of skin, roughly two inches square, was missing.



There was very little blood, only a little oozing, which meant she had been dead, the heart had stopped pumping, when the skin had been cut away.

Bernie stepped inside, and I asked him, "What tattoo is missing?"

"How the hell should I know? With all the tattoos May had, who

can tell which one is missing?"

"I don't suppose any pictures were ever taken of her tattoos?"

"None that I know of."

"Somebody should know what one is missing. Vernon maybe—he had her tattooed, but he's in jail."

"Not anymore he ain't."

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"He escaped sometime last night. Didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't know!" I snarled.

"How did *you* know?"

"May told me," Bernie said calmly. "She said Vernon called here, wanted to see her. That's what she was so upset about."

"Did he show up?"

"He could have, but I didn't see him."

"He could have killed her, too! I don't suppose it occurred to you to tell the police an escaped con was on his way here?"

Bernie just looked at me.

"All right! Sorry I asked. You could have told *me*, at least."

He shrugged. "I didn't think it was any of my business."

"It figures," I muttered, then sighed. "I hope you don't mind too much if I call the police now, but I'd like to talk to Dirk first. I didn't see him outside."

"I imagine he's in his tent getting bombed. You know he still had a thing for May and the stupid broad

told him that Vernon was on the loose."

"Seems everybody knew Vernon was out but me."

"No reason for you to know, Patch. Who'd have thought he would kill her? What reason did he have?"

"If he did," I muttered, walking out of the trailer.

Neither of us put it into words, but I knew the same thought had to be in Bernie's mind. Obviously May had been killed for the two-by-two tattoo, and if Vernon had killed her, it could only be for one reason. The tattoo was a map of where the bank loot was hidden. That was ironic in a way. For over a year May had been walking around, on exhibition before thousands of people, with directions on her back where to find a hundred grand, except nobody could have recognized it as such. Yet, if Vernon had killed her, why would he do it for that reason? To save splitting the loot with her?

I told Bernie to stay behind and keep everyone out of the trailer. He was filling his pipe from a cavernous leather tobacco pouch as I left him.

Dirk's tent was up the line about thirty yards. Dirk had been hitting the booze, all right. I could smell it when I pushed the tent flap back and went in. I fumbled overhead for the light cord.

When the light came on, Dirk, lying fully clothed on the cot, stirred and sat up, which meant he couldn't be too drunk. He threw an arm up to shield his eyes from the light and said blearily, "Huh? What is it?"

Dirk was in my age bracket, around forty. Nobody knew his real name. Around a carnie, you don't ask that question. He was over six feet, thin as a board, with an emaciated look. As a part of the act he swallowed a lighted neon tube—you could see it through the outer wall of his stomach. It was pretty weird, watching that tube of light travel down inside his skinny frame.

"Oh . . . it's you, Patch." He blinked at me. "What's up?"

I decided to use shock treatment. "May's dead, Dirk. Murdered."

"May's what . . . ?" He started away from the cot, staggered and almost fell. "Murdered?"

I snapped the questions at him. "Were you in May's trailer tonight, Dirk?"

"No . . . Of course not. Right after my last turn I came in here for a drink or two. May left earlier."

"Were you still in love with her?"

"No . . . Well, yes, but May . . . The marriage was over, Patch, you knew that."

I should explain that a carnie "marriage" is often without benefit

of license or clergy and could last anywhere from a week up to a lifetime. A carnie doesn't consider this as illegal or immoral. If it works, who's hurt? If it doesn't work, it's much less trouble to dissolve, one or both parties deciding it's over. Carnies did this long before the hippies did, proving there's little that's new. But understand, many carnie marriages, probably the majority, *are* legal in every sense of the word.

"Did you know Vernon was on his way here to see May?"

Dirk hesitated a moment before replying. "Yes, May told me."

"Did you see him tonight?"

"No . . ." He took a step toward me. "Did Vernon kill her?"

"I don't know. Did *you*?"

He literally staggered, reeling as from a blow. "I wouldn't kill May, Patch!"

"Let's see your knife case, Dirk."

"Why?"

"She was killed with a knife, a throwing knife."

"And you're thinking—?"

"Dirk, let's see it!"

"Okay, okay!"

Dirk pulled a trunk from under his cot, from which he took a special case, flat like an attache case and slightly larger. He put it on the cot and opened it.

I stepped closer. The case, lined in velvet, held two rows of knives in graduated sizes and shapes, all fit-

ted into niches in the velvet and held in place by leather straps. There were twenty . . . No, eighteen. Two were missing.

Dirk gasped. "Two are gone!"

"And I know where one is. In May's back."

"Patch, I swear . . ."

"How long since you've looked in the case?"

"Oh, weeks, I guess. I open it now and then to clean and polish them, keep them from rusting."

"Were any missing the last time you looked?"

"No, they were all there."

"All right, Dirk. Don't suddenly decide to take off. It's time I got the law in on this thing."

"I'm not going anywhere, Patch," he said steadily.

I went up the midway to the office wagon. Tex Montana, a huge man of sixty-odd, flamboyant in his cowboy garb, boots, Stetson, and the rest, was waiting for me. The nearest Tex had ever been to either Texas or Montana was western Missouri, when his carnie played a fair date there once. I briefed him on the situation, and he agreed I should call the town fuzz.

We were in Iowa, high corn country, and I expected a hick. Consequently, I was surprised by my first look at Sheriff Ray Tomlin. He wore a conservative suit, dark tie and white shirt—all business,

with no manure on his shoes. It wasn't long before he showed the usual townie wariness toward, and distrust of, carnies. Then, when he learned that the murder victim was a tattooed female member of a freak show, with a piece of tattooed skin missing . . .

I was sure I could read his thoughts: *Who cares if one carnie freak killed another? Why put myself out? Two more days and they'll be gone from my bailiwick.* Then his second thought, when I'd told him about Dirk and Vernon: *An escaped convict and a sword swallower, either one could have done it and who cares which one lands in jail?*

Naturally his first choice would be Vernon. The capture of an escaped con, a murderer as well, could gain him a headline or two—but Vernon wasn't available, so Dirk would have to do.

After May's body was taken away, and the technicians had left, Sheriff Tomlin settled down to questioning a sullen Dirk. I eased out of the Ten-in-One tent, lit a cigar and strolled the midway, deep in thought.

The midway was totally deserted now. The only light, aside from the single string overhead, came from the cook tent up front. I paused in front of the House of Mirrors. I was uneasy over the second knife miss-

ing from Dirk's case. Yet, if Vernon had been on the lot, had killed May, he'd be long gone by this time.

I dropped the cigar butt into the damp shavings and ground it out under my toe. Abruptly the front of the Glass House behind me blazed with light, the clown heads on each side of the entrance opening and closing enormous, hinged mouths, idiotic, recorded laughter pouring from them. A Glass House, ours called the House of Mirrors, is a structure of complicated glass corridors through which a paying customer wanders trying to find a way out. What he thinks are doors turn out to be mirrors, and vice versa. Most carnivals have one, for even though Glass Houses are usually a losing proposition, they are as traditional as Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds.

I squinted against the glare of light, peering into the glittering mirrors. A wanderer in the glass maze is reflected again and again and can be seen as he blunders nose-first into mirror after mirror, providing a hilarious and free spectator sport.

Now I saw, somewhere in the center of the maze, what seemed to be the figure of a man in a kneeling position, as though in prayer. If you're familiar with the maze, you can walk all the way through and out again without faltering. I'd

never mastered it. I was as much without a sense of direction inside as any mark. I thought of calling out, but I knew I couldn't be heard over the insane laughter, and I didn't know where the switches were.

With a sigh I tentatively stepped inside the House of Mirrors and was immediately lost in the glass maze. I stumbled and blundered, bumping my nose against solid glass until it began to throb like a sore tooth, and all the while I could see the crouching figure, now behind me, now ahead, never any closer. All the while, the canned laughter issuing from the speakers hidden in the hinged clown mouths assailed my ears until I wanted to scream.

After an eternity I made the right choice and stood beside the kneeling figure. I squatted and touched a finger to the back of the neck. Cold as ice. At the pressure of my finger the figure slowly toppled, falling on its side. It was Vernon Raines, his darkly handsome face contorted in death.

I had found Dirk's other missing knife.

Both of Vernon's hands were wrapped tightly around the knife handle, which was driven to the hilt just below the rib cage. Blood was thick and dark on the floor. From the position in which he'd been kneeling, he could have fallen on

the knife, or committed suicide. He was in the typical hara-kiri position. Except Vernon wasn't Oriental, and I wouldn't have thought . . .

I frisked him quickly. I didn't find the strip of skin from May's back. I went through his pockets a second time, looking for signs of dried blood and finding none.

Without warning the canned laughter shut off. I jumped to my feet, shocked by a sudden silence that was almost painful.

Then a voice came over the loudspeakers. "Patch, is that you in there? We can see you . . ."

I couldn't see out, of course. I nodded several times.

"All right, stay there. We'll be right in." It was Bernie's voice.

It took them only a few minutes to reach me—Bernie, Sheriff Tomlin, and two of his men. There wasn't room enough for all of us in the small corridor formed by the mirrors, and the two deputies were stacked up around the turn. Their images were repeated endlessly in the mirrors, and I had the smothering sensation of being surrounded.

Bernie said, "We heard the laughter and wondered . . ." He stopped, staring at the body. "It's Vernon. Is he dead?"

"He's dead."

Sheriff Tomlin said alertly, "Vernon Raines? The escaped convict?"

I nodded. "None other, Sheriff."

"That seems to be it then," the sheriff said with satisfaction. "He came back, killed the woman, then killed himself."

I started to comment, then changed my mind and said instead, "It's too close in here. Let's go outside."

The sheriff turned to one of his men and told him to get the medical examiner back. The man started out and crashed face-on into a mirror. He retreated, cursing and rubbing his nose. Bernie took the lead and guided us out. I drew a grateful gulp of fresh air and busied myself lighting a cigar.

I felt the sheriff's hard stare. "Like I said inside, that seems to wrap it up."

I sighed heavily. "It leaves a lot of questions that way, Sheriff."

"Such as?"

"Such as, why did he kill May?"

"Jealousy. She was playing around with this other guy, this knife swallower."

"That was long over, as I understand it. And it was long over with Vernon and May, too. At least as far as she was concerned. It was over when she learned Vernon was a bank robber."

"But she was still keeping in touch with him. Otherwise how did he know where to find her so quickly, the way you carries jump

from town to town, week after week?"

"That's easy. The carnie bible."

He stared. "The carnie bible?"

"The magazine, *Amusement Business*. It lists show dates and locations of all carnivals. All carnies read it religiously, even one in prison like Vernon."

The sheriff subsided, grumbling.

I went on, "Why did Vernon kill himself, if he did, in about the hardest way possible?"

"How should I know? Remorse, any number of reasons."

"And what happened to the piece of skin from May's back?"

"I don't think anybody can answer that one." He snorted laughter. "Maybe one of your carnie freaks is a cannibal."

It wasn't at all funny, but I let it pass. "I think I know what happened to it."

"Do you, now? Well, I'd be right interested in hearing." His slow voice dripped sarcasm.

"That square of skin is some sort of map showing where Vernon hid the loot from the Midfork bank holdup. He was going to prison for the rest of his life, but he wanted a permanent map showing where the loot was hidden in case he ever managed to escape."

"So? He came back and killed her for it."

"He doesn't have it on him. I

happened to look for the thing."

"What right did you . . . All right, you didn't find it. So?"

"So, somebody, knowing Vernon had escaped and was on his way here for May and the map, killed May, peeled the skin off, then way-laid Vernon and killed him as well. That's why *two* knives were taken from Dirk's case instead of one. Two murders were planned all along. Now the murderer has a clear path to the hundred grand." "Who's got a clear path? Do you know?"

"I think so, yeah. Bernie?"

Bernie, standing beside me and silent all the while, jumped. "Yes, Patch. What is it?"

"What did you do with the tattoo, Bernie?"

"Me . . . ? You're out of your mind, Patch!"

"Not the way I've got it figured." I dropped the cigar butt and ground it out. "You told me you didn't know what tattoo was missing. I don't believe that. You'd know if a freak in the Ten-in-One had so much as a hangnail. And with May right under your nose day after day . . . You knew, Bernie. You may not have known what it meant at first, but you found out. Either May told you or you guessed. It's possible May knew what the tattoo meant and told you. She was conscientious that way and

figured she could trust you. You were biding your time, probably until we played Midfork this year, but suddenly you couldn't wait any longer. With Vernon out of the pen and on his way here, you had to act . . ."

One thing about Sheriff Tomlin, his reflexes were good. As Bernie broke away at a dead run, the sheriff tackled him and brought him down not twenty yards away.

They found the tattoo rolled up in Bernie's tobacco pouch, with tobacco shreds stuck to it.

The sheriff showed me the tattoo. At first glance it appeared to be a beautifully detailed pastoral scene, a clutch of farm buildings, a grove of trees and a pasture with grazing animals. Closer inspection disclosed faint figures etched in. They could only be longitude and latitude markings. Beside one tiny tree was an x, so small as to be almost invisible to the naked eye.

I returned it to Sheriff Tomlin. "I hope you find the loot."

"We'll find it, never fear," he said grimly.

I stood and watched them take a

stubbornly silent Bernie away, the deputies towing him along between them up the deserted midway. It appeared everyone was bedded down now, but I knew this wasn't true. They were watching from various points. One carnie—I doubted I would ever know which one—had turned on the lights in the House of Mirrors so I would find Vernon's body. They would never have told the fuzz, but they wanted me to know.

Now, as the sounds of the siren died away in the distance, the midway was silent and peaceful, at long last buttoned up for the night. I sighed and started up the midway to the office wagon. I knew Tex Montana would be waiting for my report.

I learned later that Bernie finally confessed to both murders and was convicted.

When we played the Midfork Fair a few weeks later, I asked around. They had found the bank loot buried at the base of a tree on a farm a few miles outside of town, exactly where the tattoo had indicated.



*The natural inclination of Homo sapiens, one might note, is remarkably similar, whatever his social stratum.*



**T**HE THREE OF US entered the brightly lighted barroom a few seconds apart, with me the last one through the door. As I stepped from the street, I pulled a stocking mask down to cover my face and took the sawed-off shotgun from beneath my

topcoat. I just stood there, cradling the shotgun in my arms. I didn't say a thing. I didn't have to.

The room was crowded, with customers filling all the seats along the mahogany bar and most of the tables and booths. It was only seconds before a red-faced fat man noticed me and nudged the brassy redhead next to him. The news crossed the room silently, like ripples on water.

When everyone's eyes were on me, Pete and Rocky went into action. They had walked barefaced and unnoticed through the crowd until they flanked the door to the card room. Now they pulled down their own masks and brought out their shotguns.

All conversation had stopped. Pete spoke in a normal tone, but it cracked across the large room like a lightning bolt and the heads swung to face him. "Mr. Larson," he said politely, addressing the bar owner who was seated on a high stool where he could supervise the cash register and his bartenders. "Push the buzzer. Unlock this door."

This had promised to be a profit-

able caper and it was going well. There was a high-stakes poker game going full blast in that back room with only an electric latch separating us from the money. Since the players were almost always made up of big-shot politicians and racket guys, we didn't expect the holdup to be reported in any formal way. No one would want the kind of publicity a police report would bring.

Larson tried to stall, so Pete raised his weapon and spoke over the top of it. "Mister, if you don't push that buzzer, I'm going to blow you all over the back bar."

Larson released the latch, and Rocky opened the door and charged through the opening with Pete on his heels. There was a rumble of voices from the back room and then silence. I stayed where I was so no one would get the idea of leaving before the show was over.

That's when I spotted Blacky Tolger. He was sitting at the end of the bar nearest to me, and from the set of his narrow shoulders I could tell he was wishing he were somewhere else. We'd been in the state prison together five years before and, though we'd never been close, I knew him.

Prison is full of creeps. Only one or two men in a hundred are worth a damn. The rest are all informers

or worse. It's not uncommon for cellmates to knife one another over something petty like a pack of cigarettes, or for the inmate nurses in the hospital to sell the victims their medicine. The lowest animals in prison are the merchants and informers, but Blacky Tolger was neither. He had never sold anything he had stolen from the officials, had never talked about another man to the guards, and had a solid reputation as a good convict. He had stood out like a ten-carat diamond in a refuse pile.

I took a couple of steps to my right. From there I could still cover the entrance, but I could speak to Tolger, too. "Hey, Blacky," I said, speaking low. His head jerked up and he looked at me apprehensively in the mirror behind the bar. "You got a problem?"

He licked his lips and nodded. "I'm on paper," he said.

That was just another way of saying he was on parole, and it explained his nervousness. Parolees aren't allowed in bars, not in this state. If the wrong person saw him there, and the robbery was sure to get people looked at, the glass of beer he had in front of him could cause him to be sent back behind the walls.

Parole is almost always a reward given to the first offenders and creeps. If a man is an informer and

displays a few other traits no sane person would want a neighbor to have, he invariably receives a parole. I was pleased to see that at least one regular guy had won an early release, and I wanted to help him stay out.

"Okay," I said, motioning toward the door with the barrel of the shotgun. "Beat it while you can." Blacky might not have remembered me even without the mask, but with it I was sure he didn't recognize me.

"Thanks, fella," he said, slipping from the stool. He disappeared through the entrance a few seconds before my partners emerged from the back room.

Rocky led the way, knocking people out of his path as he came. He had someone's black trousers over his arm. The legs had been tied with shoelaces to form twin sacks for the loot. Pete brought up the rear, walking backward and swinging his weapon in short arcs. As they passed me, they turned their backs to the barroom and tore off their masks. Then they were through the entrance and gone into the night.

I remained planted where I was, covering their retreat, until I heard the sound of an automobile horn—two long blasts and a short tap. Then I backed through the doorway and threw myself to one side as

the door closed. I was just fast enough. Six bullets ripped through the center of the door from the inside at about the level of my waist. If I hadn't jumped out of the way, I'd have been cut down.

I went back to the door and threw it open. The crowd was surging toward me, led by a weasel-faced man with a revolver in his hand. The cylinder was swung out. He'd already ejected his spent shells and was fumbling fresh loads into the chambers with his left hand as he came. The people around him saw me at once and stopped dead in their tracks, but he must have been looking at his pistol because he took another three strides before sliding to a halt.

I brought up the shotgun and laid it on its side, pulling both triggers. One charge caught him in the chest, throwing him backward with his arms wide, while the other blast turned his face into hamburger.

This time I didn't worry about pursuit. I stepped out into the night and took my time walking to the car.

"Did you waste someone?" Rocky wanted to know as Pete put the car in motion.

"Yeah. There was a wise guy with a revolver."

"Jeez—did you have to?"

I shrugged. "No," I admitted. "I didn't *have* to. I *wanted* to."

Pete kept his eyes on the road and didn't say anything. Rocky's lips tightened and he gave an exasperated snort through his nostrils, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut, too.

We had almost seventy thousand to cut up. That was about twice as much as we'd expected. We divided the loot in Rocky's girlfriend's apartment, and then split up. That same night Pete headed for a Florida vacation, and the following morning Rocky and his girl went west. I planned to cool my heels for a month or so and then recruit another partner or two.

Under normal circumstances I never would have given the caper at Larson's Bar another thought. Unfortunately, it turned out the circumstances were far from normal. The fool who had emptied his gun at me had been an off-duty cop. Now there was a dragnet out for a cop-killer. No one with a police record could stick his nose outdoors without getting picked up for questioning.

That wasn't the worst of it. Half the customers in the bar had seen me speak to Blacky Tolger and let him walk out of the place. His photo had been picked out of the mug books and he had been arrested. He had exchanged a simple parole violation for an accessory-to-murder charge.

I felt guilty about the whole thing. If I hadn't played favorites and let him walk out of the bar, or if I hadn't killed the dumb cop and caused all the heat, he wouldn't have been sitting in jail. I decided to see what I could do to help him. I don't know how much my thinking was influenced by my being fresh out of partners, but that probably entered into it, too. If I could get him out of jail, I figured I could use him.

I spent a few days doing a little investigating of my own, then went back to Larson's Bar. I wore the same topcoat and hat I'd worn during the holdup and carried the same sawed-off shotgun. The place was almost deserted. The regular customers expected the place to be crawling with cops, so they stayed away; and since the police had no reason to hang around when there were no customers to question, that left just Larson, his bartenders—and me.

I pulled down my stocking mask as I entered and quickly herded the three bartenders along the bar to where Larson sat beside his empty cash register.

"Remember me?" I asked with exaggerated good humor. "I'm your friendly neighborhood bandit come to have a friendly, neighborly chat. You fellas have made a false identification, and I think you should do

something about it, understand?"

"We're not the only ones who identified that guy Tolger. Half the customers did, too," Larson said defensively.

"Yeah, well, you four are going to change your minds. You're going to tell the police you've been thinking it over and are sure Tolger is *not* the guy I let walk out of here that night. Tell them Tolger looks something like the guy, but the man was a regular customer you've all seen many times. You'd know him anywhere and Tolger isn't the right guy. Do you have that straight?"

"What if they don't listen to us?" Larson asked. Perhaps his position high on the stool made him feel less vulnerable. Anyhow, he was the only one of the four with enough saliva in his mouth to permit speech. There's something about looking down the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun that dries a man's mouth.

"You'd better hope to hell they do listen. You've a pretty blonde daughter going to City College. How'd you like someone to cut her eyes out with a dull knife some night?"

They all had relatives and friends they wouldn't want hurt. I named one or two for each of them, along with the kind of "bad luck" they might experience. Not once did I threaten anything as unimaginative

as death. They got my message.

"Okay," I said finally. "You're on your own and you'd better be convincing. If the police don't release Tolger, you're all in trouble. I'll hold you responsible, and you'll never be able to get police protection for as long as you, your relatives and your friends will need it."

They were convincing. Four days later the police released Tolger. What else could they have done? When the owner and bartenders swore they knew the wanted man well and that he wasn't Tolger, no amount of customer identifications based on a one-time viewing would be strong enough to get a conviction.

The newspaper printed a photo of Tolger walking down the jail steps with a smile on his face. I was surprised to see he was unmarked. In a hunt for a cop-killer I would have expected him to have been worked over pretty thoroughly. I was pleased to see that police methods really were changing.

I waited a couple of weeks and then telephoned Blacky Tolger at the rooming house where he was staying. "Do you recognize my voice?" I asked.

"I sure do," he answered with a trace of pleased excitement in his tone. "I suppose I have you to thank for the bartenders changing their identifications?"

"That's right," I said lightly. "Think nothing of it. It's all part of the service."

"Well, I really want to thank you, buddy. Can't we meet someplace and have a drink together?"

"Sure," I answered, and told him where to meet me.

I left the phone booth and went to a bar to wait for Blacky. I didn't even get a chance to finish my first drink. In less than five minutes a squad of cops charged in and beat me half out of my mind with their billy clubs before dragging me to jail. I had tried to surrender peacefully, but that wasn't in the script they were following.

Despite the bad turn of events, I was still optimistic. I figured they'd have to let me go. It was obvious to me that they'd been tapping Blacky Tolger's phone illegally. They knew they had their cop-killer, but they could never *prove* it. I didn't keep my work clothes or shotgun in my apartment, so they'd never find them to use as evidence against me. And how could the customers and bartenders make a jury believe they could be certain about the identification of a man whose face had been completely covered? I knew the cops would have to let me go.

They didn't let me go. I'm being

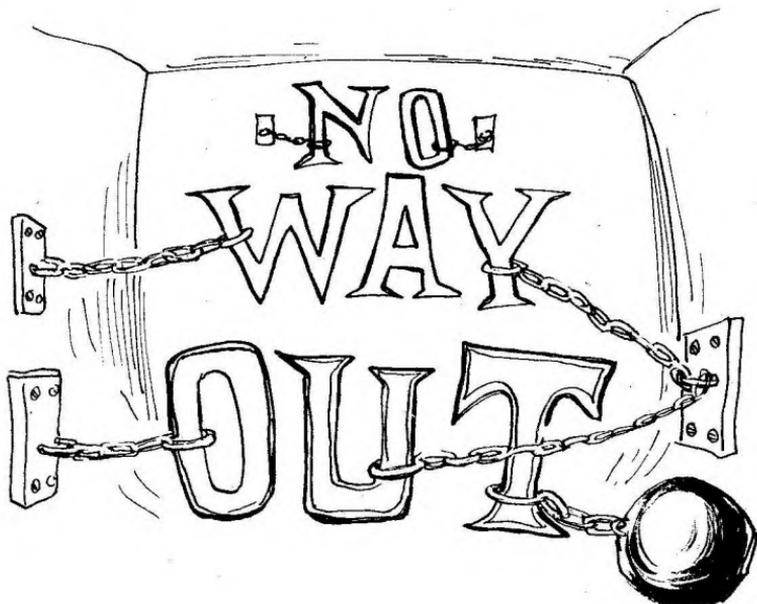
held for trial, and my cell partner just gave me some bad news. He told me Blacky Tolger will probably be the state's star witness against me. He said that Tolger has been a police informer ever since he got out of prison a year ago, and before that, he'd been a fink inside the walls, too. Blacky may have been a good guy when I knew him, the fellow said, but that was a long time ago.

No wonder Blacky was nervous when I spotted him during the robbery. He must've been afraid that my partners or I might *really* know him and blow his informing head off. No wonder the cops hadn't given him a bad time while he was in jail. They knew he was telling all he knew, which was nothing. When I was working hard to get him out, the cops had probably been trying to find an excuse to release him despite the identifications. He was no good to them locked up, and their only hope was that I'd contact him. They didn't have to bug his telephone—they were probably paying his phone bill.

My cell partner said I should have been warned. "How do you think Blacky Tolger had earned his parole?" he asked.

He's right. I should've known.

*One might describe this as running away from a sure thing.*



**T**ARA WELBOURNE was a new arrival at Lindquist, Holt and Bardsdale, a woolen company in New York City where I made my living as a salesman. Fresh from the steno pool, she appeared at my desk one morning for dictation. Her expression eager, she gave no warning of big trouble in her wake. She was as mild and fragrant—and deceptive—as a tropic breeze followed by the wildest of storms.

Just 22, she was very special in the looks department with her wide and wistful blue eyes, her tawny hair spilling around a small heart of a face, sweetly composed. She was rather tall, and about the artful distribution of her figure was that compelling balance of rich abundance and absolute economy.

Tara had come recently to New York from a small, sleepy town in the Midwest. She had brought with

her a charging enthusiasm for new adventure, an insatiable curiosity.

A pretty girl who is also unspoiled is usually a jackpot find in jaded old New York, so when I discovered during the small talk between letters that, like myself, Tara



was unmarried and at loose ends, I launched our first date.

The first was followed by several more, and soon we were as cozy a pair as you could find. Tara was coming on strong about love everlasting, including hints of a per-

manent arrangement—like marriage, for instance. I wasn't completely sold on the idea, so I stalled.

One Monday Tara had brought sandwiches and we were having lunch alone in the filing room of L.H. & B. Tara had been pressing me to save my money for the day when I might want to take a little house on Long Island, buy furniture and settle down. I told her that a bachelor didn't need a little house on Long Island. To further express my independence, I had remained apart from her over the weekend, dating a gal who had *no* apparent interest in matrimony.

Faking indifference, Tara had gone with a girlfriend to this party she was presently describing over lunch. The party was hosted by a big spender known as Earl Craddock, Tara said. Earl was a distinguished-looking widower who had a swank pad on the East River. Moreover, she related gleefully, one glance at her had practically blown his mind.

Between dainty bites of her sandwich, I also learned from Tara that Craddock had wall-to-wall money scooped from various enterprises about which he was vague, though he made no effort to conceal his interest in a large bookmaking operation. Most of the action, he informed Tara, came from office

workers who like to bet the ponies, people employed by large corporations such as our own Lindquist, Holt and Barsdale.

Having reported these fascinating details, Tara paused, lighted a cigarette and said, "I'll bet there are a whole bunch of horse players right here at L.H. and B."

"No doubt," I said. "Why? You planning to open your own book?"

"Well, not exactly," she said without so much as a twitch of amusement. "But I thought maybe we could drum up some business for Earl."

"We could, huh? Why should we line up suckers for Craddock?"

She made a charming face. "Because, darling, he'll give me a nice fat percentage of the take. I'll canvass the girls, and if you'll tout the men, I'll put the profits in a special savings account—for us. Because some rainy day in the future, who knows what we might need it for. Right? So will you do it?"

Wondering if I would still be around on that 'rainy day,' I said, "Since the state seems about to license off-track bookie joints, I suppose the law against taking bets on the nags has become a joke, but I still don't want to risk making book for Craddock. I'm not looking for trouble."

"What trouble?" Tara laced her hands around the knee of one ex-

quisite leg and smiled sweetly. "Cliff, dear, *we* will take no bets. *We* will do nothing more than inquire softly among our fellow slaves whether anyone would like to place a little wager on the galloping steeds. During lunch hours, a chubby, baldheaded guy by the name of Sammy Kasko will be seated in a rear booth of the coffee shop below. And Sammy, a Craddock runner, will write up the betting slips and take the cash. See?"

"Mmm," I said. "Well, that's a horse of an entirely different color. We don't book, we simply refer. All the same—"

"Really, darling, what's holding you? Just whisper it around, then step aside and let Sammy take over."

"OK," I said. "Seems harmless enough. For you, I'll give it a little push."

In a few days I had at least two dozen of the working stiffs below executive level visiting the Kasko booth in the coffee shop. The scheme had taken off like a big bird and the first payoff would soon be delivered. I wasn't excited over this windfall, however, because *my* share wouldn't come due until the day of the big rain—the day after the wedding—right?

Funny the way it all fell together with only a suggestion to the right people. The word traveled so fast

you would think the information was spread by way of an office memo. The word not only traveled fast, it traveled far—and that was the rub. It traveled *too* far, right into the sacred sanctum of Sanford Wickham, the vice-president in charge of sales.

A stuffy little man who was born ancient, Wickham is most dangerous on those rare occasions when he smiles, and he was smiling when I answered the summons to report to his office.

It began with a lecture on the evils of gambling, continued with the accusation, apparently made by some joker who had lost a bundle, that I was the self-elected company bookmaker and that Kasko was *my* runner.

Allowing no pause to hear my defense, his smile wider, Wickham then pronounced sentence: "Therefore, Hanson, though you have an excellent record in all other respects, under the circumstances I have no alternative but to ask for your immediate resignation."

Naturally, I did not implicate Tara, and for some curious reason she came out of it unscathed, her job intact. She was tearfully contrite, insisting that it was all her fault. I agreed.

Tara was a walking disaster, and I had to escape while there was still something left for me to salvage. So

I avoided seeing her, composing various excuses. At first she pouted and pleaded, but she finally got the message, and for a time she left me alone.

The rent was overdue and everything worth pawning was in hock when I uncovered a job with a small competitor of L.H. & B., at a major cut in salary—after which, life was far from sweet, but it was bearable.

Then I got a phone call from Tara—and an ultimatum. She had been keeping heavy company with Earl Craddock, that moneybags who lifted his coin from book-making and from mysterious sources unknown. She was going to marry the man, Tara needled, unless I broke from my shell and returned to her nest with an affidavit of love and a promise of eternal togetherness.

I conveyed to her the impression that I was deeply moved and flattered by her devotion, but to straighten out my tangled finances and recover my emotional stability after the traumatic loss of my job with dear old L.H. & B., I would need time. Give me a year, two at the most, I begged, then we would discuss it again.

That did it! Before you could say Earl Craddock, she had signed up with him and they were en route to Europe on their honeymoon.

I gave an enormous sigh of relief.

Three weeks passed in a beautiful vacuum of orderly routine. Then came a hastily scrawled letter from Tara, mailed in Rome.

My dearest Cliff,

Just a few frantic lines because that *beast* who dares to call himself my husband is having me watched by a couple of apes he brought along in the disguise of "servants."

You just won't believe what has happened! I've discovered that Earl is not merely a bookmaker, but an absolute gangster—a jack-of-all-crimes. His specialty is supplying dealers with great mountains of uncut dope. And the whole secret purpose of this miserable excuse for a honeymoon is to buy drugs for smuggling to the U.S. Can you imagine!

The very idea of it made me sick, sick! So in London I tiptoed off to catch a plane home. But those "servant" hoods followed and muscled me right back to Earl. Here in Rome I tried to sneak off again. I was caught once more and delivered to Boss Craddock. He rewarded me with such a wicked beating, I must wear sunglasses to hide the puffy, purple bruise around my eye!

Earl is afraid that I'll inform to the police, so now I'm his prisoner and I'm plenty scared. It's hopeless. I'm beyond rescue because we are

leaping off any minute for some reeking corner of the Far East known only to Earl. I'm going to pacify him until we return to the States. Then I'll bolt for the nearest divorce lawyer!

After which, my darling faithful Cliff, I'll be in a desperate hurry to see you again. Will you be waiting with open arms?

I'll try to slip this into the mail at the airport. What madness! I'm hysterical. I need you!

Always yours,

Tara

Well, I had been overjoyed when Earl Craddock relieved me of the burden of Tara Welbourne, but I didn't want her a beaten prisoner who might even wind up underground in some "reeking corner of the Far East." Yet there was not one thing I could do but await the next communiqué.

It never came, and that was the last I knew of her until nearly four months later when I was returning to New York after a weekend visit with my sister in Baltimore.

On Monday, I climbed aboard one of those fast, early-morning trains, a record-breaking streamliner that takes wing in Washington, D.C., and hurls itself into New York City three hours later, pausing in Baltimore and two or three other cities en route.

For a few minutes, as the train

gathered speed, I sat pensively with an unopened newspaper in my hand. I had often thought of Tara, and just then I was wondering what had become of her. A minute later I got up and went in search of the snack bar. I found it two cars forward and it was when I was returning to my seat with a cup of coffee that I saw Tara!

She was peering out a window at the front of the car in one of those facing seat arrangements. There was a man across from her with a magazine in his lap. Another man sat beside her, napping.

Grinning, I sat down in the empty space which faced backward and was diagonally across from Tara. As I waited for her startled reaction, the man at my elbow with the magazine gave me a cool stare.

"This seat is taken, buddy," he said, and in his soft growl there was a hint of menace.

I ignored him because Tara had turned from the window and now was gazing directly at me. She had allowed her tawny hair to grow longer so that it swept far down below her shoulders, but I could see no other change in her. Although she blinked and her lips parted slightly as she met my grinning stare, her face was otherwise expressionless.

"Tara!" I said, "is it really you?"

"I'm afraid you've made a mis-

take," she answered flatly. "My name is not—Clara—or whatever, and I don't know you. We've never met."

"Tara, you've got to be putting me on," I said. "I'm Cliff Hanson. Don't you remember?"

"Sorry, never heard of you."

"Ah, come on now, Tara. New York, at Lindquist, Holt and Barsdale. We worked in the office together."

"Not me—never!" She turned her head back to the window, dismissing me.

The man beside her no longer appeared drowsy. He was bending toward me and his steel-gray eyes were narrowed, but not with sleep. "Don't push it, friend," he said quietly. "The lady isn't buying and you seem to be annoying her. Now, when the lady is annoyed, we become very upset, so I think you ought to fold your tent and steal away without another word. Know what I mean?" A big man with a lean, decisive face and an uncompromising jaw, he was smiling the way dogs smile when they are coiled to fang each other.

I looked down into the steaming container of coffee absently clutched in my hand. For a moment I was tempted to be generous and let him have all of it, but I checked the impulse and merely took a sip while I thought of an answer.



“What business is it of yours, pal?” I asked him. “Are you her father?”

“Yeah, and I’m her uncle,” said the one with the magazine. “It’s no big deal, buddy—a little mistake. So don’t make waves, OK?”

He was smaller and younger,

with black hair and black eyes set in a long, swarthy face with a sharp stiletto of a nose. He was about as lovable as his friend, but at least he had spoken in a reasonable tone, so I got up and said, “See you, Tara.”

Her head came around and she gazed up at me briefly before she

lowered her eyes and began a minute inspection of her pale-pink nails, but in that pitiful glance there was despair—and recognition.

Moving on to my seat, I sat pondering the problem, trying to build logic from insanity. Apparently, Tara was a captive of those hoods, and quite obviously they were Craddock goons of the sort described in her letter from Rome, perhaps the same watchdogs who had prevented her escape by plane from London.

Therefore, I reasoned, Tara had likely made another run for it when she arrived with Craddock from Europe, but Craddock had uncovered her trail and sent his boys to haul her back again. Now, pretending that I had mistaken her identity, she was actually signaling me that she was in trouble.

A thunderous voice from heaven could not have moved me to become involved with Tara again on any personal level. *No way!* But this was different. She needed help to escape and I was going to dig for a plan to provide it. Should I ask the conductor to send for the police at the next stop? I didn't think he would believe my fantastic story, and if he approached Tara, she would be forced to deny it. Further, if the police came aboard, there was always the chance of a shoot-out in which Tara could get hurt.

No, I would have to rescue her all by myself, and I didn't have idea number one for accomplishing such a miracle.

Deciding to play it by ear, I gulped my coffee and returned to the scene of the problem. I found an empty seat at the rear of the car, screened myself behind the newspaper and covertly watched.

Craddock's boys were again at ease—Stiletto-Nose had same in his magazine, Big-Daddy reclined with the droopy eyes of a reptile basking with deceptive innocence under a lazy sun.

For what seemed an interminable wait, the status remained in quo. Then Big-Daddy stirred, and after winding himself up to full height, muttered to his companion and sauntered toward the rear of the car. His destination appeared inevitable, so when he passed my seat I tossed the newspaper aside and crept after him.

Happily, Stiletto-Nose had his gaze fastened watchfully upon Tara, and the passengers of the car were faced the other way. The polite rumble of the train, as it rolled full-tilt around a gentle curve, covered my approach.

When Big-Daddy opened the door to the men's room. I took one giant step forward and gave him one giant shove that sent him crashing headlong against the unrelent-

ing steel of the interior wall.

The shove carried me right in after him and, as he bounced back, I caught him behind the neck and smashed another helping of steel against his face and head. In the same second, as he began to sag with ugly moans of complaint, I kicked the door shut and locked it.

He almost crushed me in his descent to the floor, for in that tiny space there was hardly room to stand, let alone collapse. I figured that was the end of the game until I saw that he had reached for his gun on the way down and now he was trying to lift and aim it, squinting at me from his battered, bloody face.

I gave his forearm a swift, field-goal kick, scooped up the fallen gun and used the butt to give him what he apparently wanted most—a long, deep sleep, uninterrupted by the distractions of guarding Tara.

After smoothing my jacket and adjusting my tie in the mirror, I stepped out and closed the door tightly behind me.

When I reached my seat I ducked into it quietly, folded the newspaper around Big-Daddy's gun, and went on up the aisle. As I came to the vacant space beside Tara, I sat down comfortably. With the paper in my lap, I smiled pleasantly at Stiletto-Nose.

"Hi, there!" I said amiably. "Just thought I'd drop by for a little

chat. Anything interesting here?"

"You're gonna drop on your head if you're not gone in five seconds flat," he growled as he rose half out of his seat.

I hoisted the fold of the newspaper slightly and let him see the short snout of the .38. He sat down again with the most bewildered expression. "And don't expect any help from your friend," I added to the threat of the gun. "He got sleepy in the rest room and I didn't have the heart to awaken him.

"Tara," I said from the corner of my mouth, "I want you to sit beside the nice gentleman and show him some real affection. And while you're being affectionate, I want you to relieve the man of his nasty little gun like this one, which should be concealed somewhere on his person, perhaps in a holster."

Tara giggled and said, "Oh, Cliff, darling, you are an absolute gem!" Then she shifted to a close position beside Stiletto-Nose. With an arm about him, her free hand patting him lovingly here and there, she soon produced the second .38 which she passed to me inside the discarded magazine of her captor.

I sneaked the revolver into a pocket and sat waiting with a show of cool, though suddenly, in the aftermath of impulsive action at high risk, I was in a sweat of nervous tension and my legs quivered from

the strain. I took a deep breath.

The next step would be the last, and I hoped that we could make our escape before that great hunk of fallen muscle was discovered, or awakened, to complicate the situation. Disoriented, I was trying to remember what the next stop would be, when the train slowed and the conductor bawled the answer.

"Phil-a-del-phia next," he droned. "Phil-a-del-phiaaa."

"We'll be getting off here and you'll be coming along," I told Stiletto-Nose. "You're to walk just in front of us and then I want you to stand nice and still on the platform. At the very last second, on command, you'll say bye-bye and you'll climb back aboard. Get the picture?"

He shook his head. "I'll say this—you got guts, lover. But we'll catch up with you two. You'll never get away with it."

I could see that he meant it, and I felt a chill of self-doubt, but I told him to shut up and move out to the exit door. We followed at his heels to the vestibule, the gun peering at his back from the folds of the newspaper. The train halted with a velvet jolt and we stepped off.

We stood silently on the platform as some passengers got off and others got on. During that time, his jaw arrogantly cocked, Stiletto-Nose

never took his eyes from me and I could almost see the wheels of his mind spinning away, calculating my destruction. I was quite certain that he had some clever, immediate plan to trick me, and I kept a taut finger against the trigger of the hidden .38. In the end, however, when a conductor far up the platform cried, "Booard," and I motioned him on, he obediently climbed the steps, turning once to peer down at us with icy rage, before he vanished abruptly and the train swept out of the station.

Even then, hurrying away with Tara, I darted glances behind us, half expecting the impossible—that by some mysterious back-up arrangement, there were others who would take up the chase.

It was then late morning on one of those days of skin-soaking heat in late spring. We had planted ourselves in the cool sanctuary of a small, side-street bar where we faced each other across the table of a dark, corner booth.

Tara had been drained by the fear and excitement, but after the first frigid martini she began to giggle and then to laugh almost hysterically. Caught up in that nervous storm of glee, I released a few half-hearted chuckles of my own. It *was* kind of funny if you like black humor.

"Cliff, you were truly mar-

velous!" Tara howled. "If you only knew what a miraculous lifesaver you are! How in the world did you happen to be on that particular train?"

"My sister lives in Baltimore," I explained, "and I've been visiting her on weekends. I was on my way back to New York this morning, and there you were on the same train with those creeps, who no doubt forced you aboard at Washington. It's that simple—or is it?"

"Maybe it's fate," she said brightly. "If certain people are right for each other, nothing can keep them apart."

"Yeah, sure, that must be it," I answered with fake enthusiasm. I had decided to see her safely on her way, then hustle back to the comparative normalcy of my own existence, however dull. Lots of luck. "Now it's your turn," I said. "How did *you* happen to be on that train?"

Her wide blue eyes became shadowed and her soft features grew solemn. "It's such an ugly, painful story," she said. "Mind if I skip the details and give you just the awful facts?"

"The awful facts? How ominous. But sure, anyway you like, Tara."

The waiter brought another round and when he had gone she puffed her cigarette and said in a rush of words, "Soon after we re-

turned from Europe I got into a disastrous fight with Earl. But for Max, a butler-chauffeur who secretly despised Earl and adored me, we were alone in the apartment when I made the fatal announcement to Earl that I was going to leave him and get a divorce.

"Earl said he would never let me go because he had this passion for me, and besides, I knew too much. For a few minutes he shouted me down, then he took me to the bedroom, locked the door and informed me that he was going to teach me a lesson I'd never forget.

"I knew what was coming—another beating, worse than the one he gave me in Rome. I snatched his gun from a drawer and warned him, but he only sneered and kept on moving toward me. So . . . so I shot him. I meant to hit him in the leg, but my aim was rotten and he . . . he fell dead at my feet."

"Impossible!" I said. "There was nothing in the news and anyway—"

"At the sound of the shot," she continued, her palm extended to silence me, "Max came on the run. He told me he thought Earl got just what he deserved, but that didn't mean the cops would turn me loose. I would be held for trial and even with a plea of self-defense, there was a chance I would wind up in prison.

"I was plenty scared, and when

Max offered to dispose of the body while I rushed off to hide out with a girlfriend in Washington, I agreed with a sigh of relief. Max worked up a cover story for Earl's little pals—that Earl got a sudden call to San Juan where he had, as they say, a piece of the action, and where he also had some rivals who might be blamed for causing him to vanish permanently. But those hoods didn't believe Max. They tortured the truth out of him, right down to my hiding place in Washington."

"So those two hoods on the train came and got you," I inserted.

"Oh, no!" she gasped. "It wasn't that way at all! But how could you know?"

"How could I know what, Tara?"

"That since Earl's buddies figured they were on the right side of the law for once, they simply thought of turning me and Max in to the cops to get their revenge without risk. The New York police had the Washington cops haul me in for questioning, and when I found that Max had let the cat out of the bag, I confessed. So, after some legal red tape, they sent those

two plainclothesmen to bring me back to New York for trial—"

"Wait a minute!" I bellowed. "Wait just a damn minute! You mean to tell me that the big one I knocked cold, and his sharp-nosed buddy, were cops!"

"Now don't be angry, darling. You could always say it was just a little misunderstanding. But I have a feeling they wouldn't believe you." She chuckled. "As we got on the train, I begged them to take off the handcuffs, just during the ride in front of all those people. And they smiled and said, well, they supposed they could handle one little girl on a train. Darling, can't you see the funny side of this?"

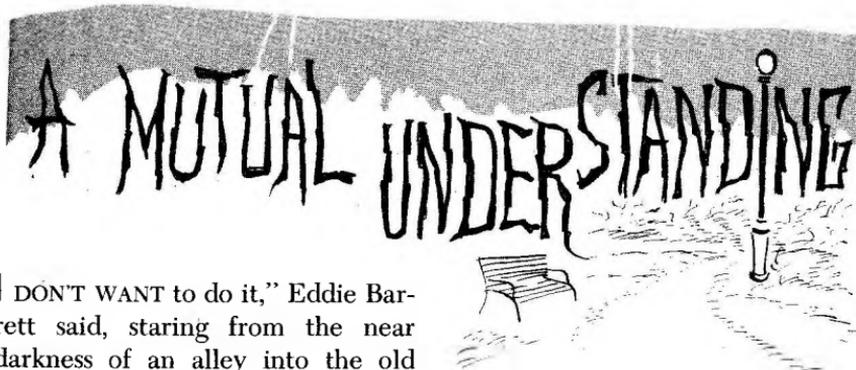
"I've had bigger laughs," I snapped.

"Now, don't you worry," she said confidently. "Earl was generous, if nothing else. I've got plenty of money stashed in a bank under another name. So we'll hide until this blows over, and then we'll sneak out of the country."

"Great," I said. "Just my style." But I thought, *It's beginning again. And this time there's no way out!*



*It takes but one friend to help a nobody become a somebody.*



"I DON'T WANT to do it," Eddie Barrett said, staring from the near darkness of an alley into the old woman's small livingroom.

"You have to!" said one of Eddie's two companions—an exceedingly tall boy for his thirteen years, with long legs, long arms and long fingers, all of which had contributed to his nickname of Monkey.

"I just don't want to," Eddie pleaded.

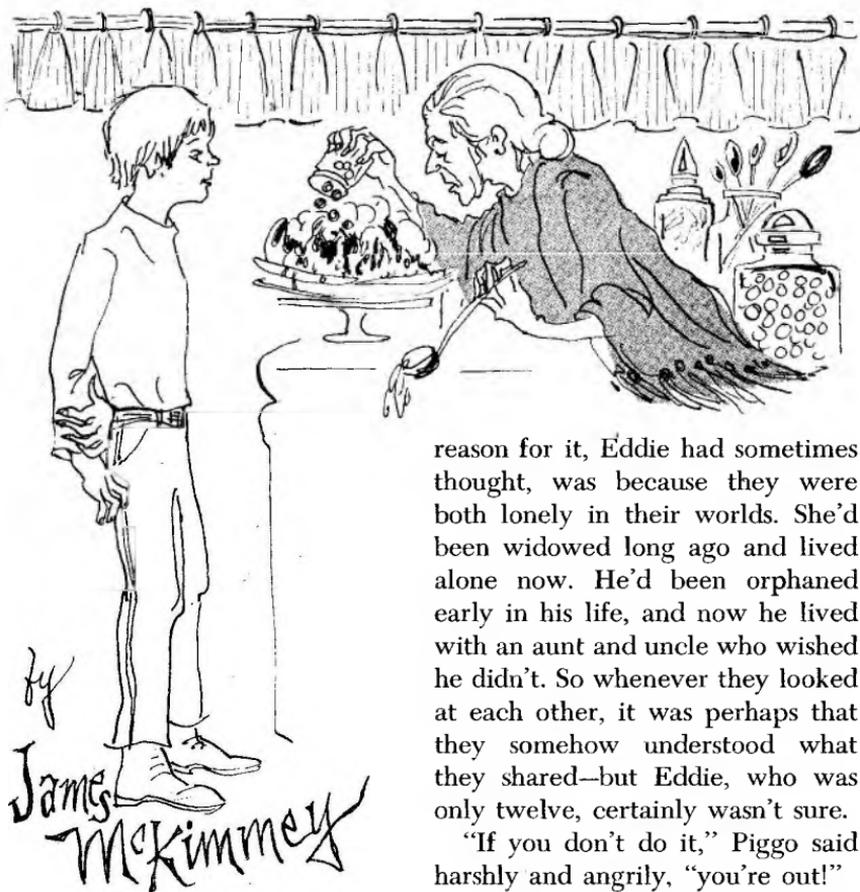
"Now listen," said the third youth, this one a fourteen-year-old called Piggio, a name derived from his short, fat body and his small, close-set eyes. "It's a tough planet, a tough town, a tough neighborhood! You've got to learn how to be hard as diamonds, hard as granite! So you don't want to be a Blue anymore, is that it?"

Eddie stared at Piggio, who was president of the Blue Monsters, and wagged his head in distress. "But I *want* to be a Blue!"

Eddie was neither tall nor short for his age. He seemed to blend into shadows and disappear, although that was only an illusion. He certainly did exist, and now they were asking him to do this.

"It's just that I don't want to do it," Eddie repeated plaintively.

He really didn't, despite the fact that Mrs. Scrant, the old woman in the livingroom who sat like a shawled skeleton on this spring evening, was mostly mean-tempered to anyone who came into her sweets shop behind which she lived. She



reason for it, Eddie had sometimes thought, was because they were both lonely in their worlds. She'd been widowed long ago and lived alone now. He'd been orphaned early in his life, and now he lived with an aunt and uncle who wished he didn't. So whenever they looked at each other, it was perhaps that they somehow understood what they shared—but Eddie, who was only twelve, certainly wasn't sure.

"If you don't do it," Piggio said harshly and angrily, "you're out!"

Monkey stifled a giggle by pressing a long hand against his mouth. "Out!" he said.

"Are you ready?" Piggio demanded.

Eddie's shoulders drooped. "I guess."

"Where's your stuff?"

"In my pockets."

"Get it out! Let's get this done!"

"How do you know that bed-

complained and sneered and insulted while she extracted every penny due her. No matter how much anyone pleaded and begged, she would never give him an extra piece of candy—unless it was Eddie.

Curiously, she had always treated him in a different manner—undercharging him at times, sometimes actually giving him a chocolate bar or an ice-cream cone. Perhaps the

room window's unlocked?" Eddie asked.

"Because I tested it three minutes ago, dummy! What do you think I was doing over there? Let's get going!"

Eddie slipped an old pillow case with two holes cut in it over his head and stared miserably out through the holes. Piggio and Monkey masked themselves similarly. Then, when Eddie wouldn't move, Piggio grabbed one of his arms and yanked him into action.

The three of them ran swiftly to the back of the building, slipped open a window and climbed in. They made their silent way through darkness to a closed door which would lead them into the livingroom. Then Piggio said in a whisper, "Now!"

Fuses of three strings of firecrackers were ignited, the door was thrown open, and the three boys leaped into the old woman's livingroom, whooping and hooting as firecrackers began exploding around the room.

For Eddie, even though he was yelling and dancing up and down and waving his arms, the moment seemed suspended. He kept staring at Mrs. Scrant even in his motion, seeing that her eyes had become wide and frozen-looking as though she had suddenly died from the shock of the invasion and had not

yet fallen. Eddie was frightened.

Then Monkey unbolted her front door, and they ran out of there and down the alley. They didn't stop until they were blocks away.

"Oh, man!" Monkey said, doubling up and giggling, tears of joy running from his eyes.

"Oh, yeah!" Piggio said, despite his snuffling laughter.

Eddie stared at them for a time, then he turned, shoulders drooping again, and walked slowly away in the direction of home.

"Hey, Eddie!" Monkey called, and then convulsed into laughter again.

"Hey, *Eddie!*" Piggio managed, and then fell down on his knees in hopeless mirth.

When Eddie stepped into his own livingroom, his aunt and uncle were drinking beer and watching a movie on television. Both were lean and impassive, and they did not look at him as he went through to the hall and climbed the stairs to his small bedroom where he lay on his back on his bed and stared bleakly upward.

He was trembling inside, and he kept thinking of the way Mrs. Scrant had looked.

Finally, he forced himself not to think of that by thinking of the most pleasurable and delicious thought he owned: Mary Ann Thebold.

Mary Ann was fourteen, but she was in his class because she'd skipped a lot of school days to do . . . what? Eddie didn't know, although he was certain that it had a lot to do with boys. That didn't matter, though—the only thing that did was that she was prettier than any girl Eddie had ever seen before. When they were in class, he often failed to concentrate on anything other than her, staring at her so steadily that sometimes she would swing her long, straight hair from side to side to indicate that it made her angry.

Then, after he'd decided to let them initiate him as a Blue Monster, after they'd done all those things to him he wanted to forget, it had been different—because Piggo, who was also two years behind in school, and Monkey, who was one, both had stopped Mary Ann in the schoolyard and pointed to Eddie, telling her that he was now a member of the club.

"Him?" Mary Ann had said incredulously. "*He's* a Blue?" But she'd looked at him differently then, altogether differently, so that Eddie had been forced to look down self-consciously at his worn shoes.

He still remembered that look, and he was remembering it now as he tried to forget about the way Mrs. Scrant's eyes had become wide

and frozen when they were jumping around her as the firecrackers exploded. But he couldn't forget, so he finally got up and went downstairs and picked up the telephone in the livingroom.

Because he sometimes called to find out if she'd gotten in any new ice-cream flavors, he'd memorized her number, which rang in both her shop and house. So he dialed it, and then he was trembling inside again.

After listening to the tenth ring, he was so nervous he could barely hold onto the telephone, but then she answered in her rasping voice. He carefully put the phone down as his uncle called from his chair, "Who were you trying to get a date with, Romeo? Miss America?"

His uncle laughed derisively, and Eddie's forgettable face colored because he had yet to phone any girl about anything, let alone a date.

"Out, huh?" his uncle called. "Or she knew who was calling and wouldn't answer. How about that, Romeo?"

Eddie's aunt giggled softly, then lifted her beer glass.

Eddie picked up the directory and searched until he found the only Thebold listed. He dialed that number, and when a woman answered, he said, "This is Eddie Barrett. May I please speak to Mary Ann?"

Eddie's uncle suddenly sat up straighter and stared at Eddie, who waited with his heart pounding. Finally Eddie heard, "Yeah?"

"This is Eddie Barrett, Mary Ann."

"She said that. So what do you want?" Her tone revealed definite irritation.

Eddie swallowed, then managed, "I'd like a date, Mary Ann. Are you busy tomorrow night?"

There was a suspenseful silence, then suddenly Mary Ann began laughing. It kept on until she hung up. Eddie stood staring straight ahead for a moment as his face turned pink, then he put his own phone down.

His uncle started laughing, and his aunt, too. His uncle said, "Struck out, huh? Two tries and you're already struck out! You're a Romeo, all right! God's gift, huh?"

They started laughing again as Eddie trudged upstairs and undressed and got into bed. The last sounds he heard in his mind, just before he went to sleep, were all kinds of laughter—Piggo's and Monkey's, his uncle's and his aunt's. But mostly he could hear the laughter of Mary Ann, and he knew that she would never again be a pleasurable and delicious thought for him, not ever again.

Because the next day was a Satur-

day and there was no school, Eddie had sufficient time to study his position. He shut his ears to his uncle's sardonic barbs, and went mechanically through the chores his aunt insisted he do, but he thought.

When darkness arrived that evening, he walked over to Mrs. Scrant's shop, knowing that he was almost an hour ahead of her closing time. She stared at him as he came into the shop, as a hawk views its prey before making the dive. He knew then that she knew. It might have been his voice, or the way he'd moved as he'd jumped up and down in her livingroom, but no matter—she knew.

"What do you want?" she asked angrily in her rasping voice.

"Cone."

"What kind?"

"Double chocolate."

"Where's your money?"

So, for the first time, he had to put the money on the counter in front of her before she made the cone for him. Then, when she did, she shorted him on ice cream, which she'd never done before.

"Thank you," he said.

As he was walking out with the cone in his hand, she called to him: "If you never came back I wouldn't shed a tear over that, I'll tell you."

He nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am," and left the store.

He nibbled at the cone as he

walked slowly over to Blue Street and the old apartment building which housed the headquarters of the club. It was in an otherwise unused room in the basement of the building, and the custodian let them use it for a share of the dues all of them contributed once a month. Eddie went in through the back and down a stairway and knocked on a door five times in the rhythm that would announce to anyone inside that it was a Blue Monster entering.

The only person he saw as he opened the door and went in was Piggio, lying on a cot and reading a horror comic book. He looked at Eddie contemptuously and said, "What are *you* doing?"

Eddie shrugged. "Where's everybody else?"

"Chasing girls. Why aren't you?"

"Why aren't *you*?" Eddie replied.

"I'm not going to argue with you," Piggio said. "That'd be arguing with nothing, wouldn't it?" He continued reading.

"I quit," Eddie said at last.

"What?" Piggio said, looking at him.

"I quit."

Piggio frowned, then smiled. "After all we did to you?" He laughed.

Eddie moved back toward the door.

"Oh, yeah!" Piggio said despite his snuffling laughter. "You quit, all

right, because you're weak, huh? You're so weak somebody's going to chew you up and swallow you before you know what's happened! Wait'll I tell the rest, huh? We'll have a celebration! Do you hear me? We'll . . ."

But Eddie had gone out and shut the door behind him and was going up the stairway, so that Piggio's words became unintelligible.

Hunching his shoulders, pushing his hands into his pockets, Eddie walked toward the business district of the neighborhood. There was a light, warm breeze, and stars and a white moon shone in the sky. Eddie moved through a small park where there was not much light because somebody had stoned out two lamps there and they hadn't been fixed yet, but he could smell the bloom of flowers. He liked that, because he knew a corsage for a girl would smell like that, and one day, he promised himself, he would have reason to buy a corsage for a girl.

He went on into the busy area where there were two bars, a clothing store, a restaurant, a delicatessen and a theater. Stepping back into shadows, Eddie stood with his back to a wall and silently watched the people passing.

They were tall, short and medium. They were old, young and medium. Eddie stared at them, wondering if any of them were

nice. He hoped all of them were, but he knew that wasn't true and it made him sad.

He sniffed and rubbed a finger across his nose, and suddenly Monkey was beside him, all arms and legs, grinning widely. "Hey, *Eddie!*" he said. "Who're you hiding from this time, Eddie?"

Eddie put his hands back in his pockets and hunched his shoulders again. Then he saw that Mary Ann Thebold was coming down the sidewalk with a fellow who was at least twenty and maybe older. She was laughing and had her arm tightly around his middle.

"Oh, hey there, Mary Ann!" Monkey shouted loudly. "What do you say?"

The older fellow looked coldly into the shadows at both Monkey and Eddie. When Mary Ann recognized them, she swung her hair back and forth and went on with her friend into the theater. The film was rated X, but both were admitted anyway.

"Oh, that Mary Ann!" Monkey said with meaning. "But you didn't answer me, Eddie. Who're you hiding from? Somebody scare you, did they?" He giggled, then punched Eddie sharply in the arm.

"Don't do that," Eddie said.

"Why not?" He punched Eddie again. "That's a new club punch, see? You only get to do it to new

Blues, see?" He struck Eddie again, harder. "I just made that up, see, Eddie? On account of you're a new Blue!"

"I'm not a new Blue anymore," Eddie said, feeling it where Monkey was punching him.

"Why not?"

"I quit."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Why?"

"I don't want to belong anymore."

Monkey shook his head sadly, but he was still grinning. "On account of scaring that old woman last night, huh? Is that it, Eddie?" His eyes shifted suddenly as he looked past Eddie down the street. "Oh, but wow, huh? I mean, *look*, Eddie. There she is again!"

Eddie looked down the street to see that Mrs. Scrant was coming out of the delicatessen. She'd obviously bought something for dinner, and now she would be retracing her steps in the direction from which Eddie had also come, to go home.

"Oh, jeez," Monkey said happily, his eyes shining brightly. "Guess what I'm going to do now, Eddie?"

"You leave her alone," Eddie said.

"Ah, *Eddie!*"

"I mean it! You leave her alone!"

"So you told me," Monkey said. "Now let's see you make me!"

He darted off after the old woman, and Eddie followed, his face flushed with anger.

The old woman was moving surprisingly fast, a dark figure wearing a black shawl and a black scarf. Even Monkey, who moved very quickly, didn't catch up with her until she was going through the small park, and Eddie was still a half block behind both of them.

There, in the park, Monkey began waving his long arms and running around the old woman, screeching like a crazy animal. Mrs. Scrant stopped and stood frozen. Eddie ran on, determined that, for once in his life, he would fight.

Just as he reached the edge of the park, he saw the old woman's hand moving. Something glinted as though the moon or a star had been caught in reflection.

Monkey suddenly straightened as though coming to attention, then collapsed to the walk like a rag doll.

The old woman stood looking down at the fallen youth as though dazed now, with her eyes very large. Then she scurried on, obviously in fright, moving much faster than Eddie ever thought she could.

He ran to the sprawled figure of Monkey, who was lying on his back with his eyes open but seeing nothing. Eddie stared down at the

moonlit bone handle of a knife protruding from Monkey's bleeding chest. It had been driven in so hard that a piece of the handle, which had probably been cracked, had come loose and was now on the sidewalk beside the fallen youth.

Eddie stared at the knife handle for several seconds. Then he reached down, jerked the knife out of Monkey's chest, and ran into the darkness.

When the detective and uniformed officer escorted Eddie into a small squad room, Piggo, who was sitting on a straight wooden chair, suddenly rose and moved toward him with fury in his small eyes. The detective and the uniformed officer stepped ahead of Eddie and threw Piggo back into his chair.

"Stay there now!" the detective said. He was older than the uniformed officer, and heavier, with a meaner eye.

"He lied!" Piggo shouted, pointing at Eddie.

"Keep your voice down!" the detective ordered. Then he took the knife from his pocket and placed it on a table beside the chair where Piggo was sitting. "Yours?" he asked Piggo.

"No!"

"Fingerprints don't lie."

"I tell you he came into the club room and handed that thing to me

and said I could have it. He wiped it with his handkerchief when he was giving it to me and said he wanted it real nice and clean! Just for me! I'm telling you!" Piggo got up and started for Eddie again, but again they threw him back in the chair.

Then the detective reached into his pocket once more, drew out a small piece of bone and fitted it to the broken handle of the knife. "This was beside the body. So why did you do it?"

"I didn't!" Piggo roared in outrage.

"Eddie?" the detective said. "Would you know?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

"Piggo was afraid Monkey would take the presidency away from him. They had a real mean argument earlier, in the club room. I heard it. So I guess Piggo decided to wait for him in the park and then stabbed him the way he did."

"Lies!" Piggo cried.

"Is it his knife, Eddie?"

"He's had it a long time," Eddie

said easily, without hesitating.

The detective nodded. "You can go now, Eddie."

Some time later, Eddie stood inside Mrs. Scrant's shop where she had instructed him to go when they were done with him at the precinct station. She'd opened up just for him, and now she was making a banana split on a paper dish. There were two bananas, five kinds of ice cream, that many kinds of topping, and whipped cream and cherries. She finally handed it to him, saying, "There you are, Eddie."

"Thank you, ma'am," Eddie said.

"You come back tomorrow, and we'll see what we can do then, too. You come back every day, Eddie."

"Yes, ma'am," Eddie said.

They stared at each other for a moment, eyes reflecting knowledge and understanding. Then Eddie said, "Good night, Mrs. Scrant."

Mrs. Scrant said, "Good night, Eddie."

Eddie walked out of the shop into the night, eating the banana split, his eyes hard as diamonds, hard as granite.



*Too much proficiency may get you places—though not always where you planned.*



# Star Salesman

by Edward  
Y. Breese

**W**HEN SAM BURGER kicked a panel out of the front door of Phil Smith's house he broke two of the small bones in his right foot. It was unfortunate, because the door wasn't locked. By that time, however, Sam was past caring.

He hobbled into the livingroom, took aim at Phil's heart and pulled the trigger of his shiny new revolver. It failed to fire. He tried again with the same result. He

had forgotten to load the gun.

Sam turned around then and ran for his car, only to discover he'd locked himself out, with the key still in the ignition. When the police, summoned by neighbors, finally showed up he was sitting on the curb sobbing into his silk handkerchief while Phil and his wife fussed over him with cold water and aspirin. He went downtown without any resistance and without saying a word.

Phil was just as puzzled by the whole affair as anyone else. "I can't understand it," he told the detectives when they questioned him. "That was my boss, Mr. Samuel Burger. I can't imagine what he was so angry about. I'm one of his star salesmen. He said so himself. In only two days with his firm I've made the biggest sale in its history."

That was all Phil could say and it certainly didn't explain Sam's attempt to murder him. Nothing about the case made sense. Phil hadn't made an enemy in all of his forty-eight years. He was small and slight and soft-spoken and polite; not in the least the type to make enemies. He hadn't had a fight in thirty years; he'd lost that one.

Even when the plant where he'd worked for twenty-five years had been sold and he'd lost his job, Phil had stayed cheerful and uncomplaining. Despite the strain this put

him under, no one had ever heard a resentful word from him. He was a model husband and helpmate.

The incident baffled the police and neighbors. This is not the sort of man who's normally in danger of being murdered or having his door kicked down.

Sam knew the answers, of course, but Sam wasn't talking. He wept for a while and then he paced the cell and swore under his breath. He repeated the word "hoodoo" several times and then he wept some more. He wouldn't or couldn't stop weeping and cursing long enough to answer questions. None of this helped the authorities.

If the truth were only known, this was the first time in more than twenty years that Sam Burger had been at a loss for words. If ever there were a wordmaster, Sam was it. Words were his living, his profession, his pride and his joy. He used words to create for himself as a surgeon uses a scalpel or a sculptor a chisel. They were at once his delight and his stock-in-trade.

Unlike Phil Smith, Sam was neither a loyal employee nor a respectable family man. He loved other men's wives and his own business, and the only thing on earth that could command his loyalty was cash money in large amounts. He called it by pet endearments like "government lettuce" and "green

velvet” and pursued it with truly fanatic love.

As a result, and also unlike Phil, Sam always wore two-hundred-dollar silk suits and thirty-dollar silk neckties and a two-carat, moderately flawed diamond on his right hand. His breath normally smelled of cheap sour-mash bourbon and expensive cigars, and the sight of a blue uniform triggered a nervous tic under his left eye. However, he never lacked for words.

In the normal course of events fellows like Sam can be pretty impressive to the Phils of this world. When they'd met three days before, Sam had made a fine picture of efficiency and prosperity behind the oversized desk in his rented office.

“Well, well, Phil,” he'd said heartily. “So you feel you could be a salesman?” He paused to let the odor of a two-dollar cigar fill the room. “That's fine, Phil. Just fine. I'm sure you can do it. You have the look of a born salesman to me and I'm seldom wrong about that. Yes, indeed. I can put you right to work.”

Phil didn't know it, but Sam put all job applicants who answered his *Help Wanted* ads to work. He told them all that they looked like salesmen. What he meant was, they looked like pigeons ready for the plucking. The word Sam used was “mooches.” A real salesman

wouldn't have been caught dead working for Sam—but then real salesmen knew better than to answer his ads.

Phil was green. He was respectful and eager and painfully anxious for a job—any job. Since his old firm was sold he'd found out life wasn't easy for a forty-eight-year-old unemployed general office worker. Phil and Janey were very cheerful with each other these days. Still, they were both beginning to panic a little as the savings account continued to melt away. Phil really was a prime pigeon for Sam's style of plucking.

“We've got the best product package in town for selling door-to-door,” Sam said. “Look at them: as pretty a little combination TV and radio as you ever saw, *and* a portable sewing machine. Look at the labels: U.S. made, they say; one year guarantee. Nobody else in this city can offer a deal like our magic combo.”

Sam was right. Nobody could—and neither could he. The machines he sold had American brand names but they were made behind the Bamboo Curtain where any label can be used. They cost him \$37.95 each at the dock. By the time they fell apart or blew up, Sam would be long gone. Phil would still be around.

“Yes, sir, Phil,” Sam said. “With

these twins the world is your oyster. You sell two for the price of one. Why, some of my best men knock off an easy five hundred dollars every week in commissions. The buyers will snatch 'em out of your hands.

"These cost me \$50 each. I got a friend who gets them for me. You sell the pair for \$299.95, and everything over \$200 is your commission. You collect that for down payment and put it right in your pocket every day. No waiting and no expense. We drop-ship, supply your sales literature, cards and printed guarantees. All you do is get out and sell. Nobody can beat that deal. Of course if you cut price to make a deal, that's strictly your business. The cut comes out of your end."

"It sounds all right," Phil said.

"All right? It's the chance of your life, Phil boy. It's old Opportunity knocking with a satchel full of C-notes. The best ever.

"Just one more thing," Sam continued. "Your demonstrator kit. These are special, high-grade machines I sell you at my cost of \$175 for the whole kit, including supplies. That's my cost and I let you have it for that because I'm sure you're gonna be a star salesman."

The demonstrators actually were specially made and of good quality. He wouldn't have dared trust his real product to a salesman. In un-

trained hands they'd have gone bad the first day.

"I don't know about \$175 all at once," Phil had to say.

Sam noted the threadbare suit. "Okay, then, just gimme fifty bucks now and pay the rest outta your commissions."

"I'm too softhearted for my own good," Sam told his current heartthrob, Daisy, that night in a bar. "Besides, some of them mooches really don't have the whole ante in one bite. They're honest, though. I can trust 'em to get it up later."

"What good will a little creep like that do you anyway?" the practical-minded Daisy asked.

"On the average they're good for about six deals apiece with friends and neighbors," Sam said. "Also the profit on the demonstrators. I got twenty on the streets now. In two months they give up and I hire twenty more."

For Sam the whole thing was strictly routine. He had no illusions about Phil having real sales ability. He had no illusions about anything at all. The people he preyed upon kept him in smooth silk suits and smoother women. The only problem was, the tic under his eye kept getting worse. It was the closest thing he'd ever have to a conscience.

Phil took things more seriously than most of those Sam hired. Sam

should have foreseen that sooner or later somebody would, but he hadn't. The bourbon and the women took up too much of his attention.

Phil had read somewhere that real salesmen "thought big," and that's what he started to do—which is why Sam tried to kill him.

What Phil did was forget his relatives and go look for a volume buyer. After all, he had a whale of a price for a radio-TV-sewing machine combo.

He went on thinking big while he took his briefcase, demonstrators and sincerity to see the purchasing agent at Leopold's Department Store. The demonstrators sold themselves. Phil came out with an order for five hundred "guaranteed, American name-brand combos" at \$225 each.

In the morning Phil was first in line at the bank to deposit the down payment before he went to tell Sam the good news.

Sam would rather have been handed a live grenade with the pin out than that contract. As soon as he read it he knew he had to deliver

500 sets of good machines or go to jail. He couldn't palm off *his* junk on Leopold's. They'd put him behind bars if he tried to back out—or Phil would. If he tried to run, there'd be warrants out.

He didn't even have the money to buy good machines and fill the order at a loss. His credit wasn't good anywhere at all. He'd have taken the loss to stay out of jail if he could.

No matter which way he looked Sam was face-to-face and eyeball-to-eyeball with disaster. He was so stunned he even let Phil get away without throwing him out the window of the eleventh floor office.

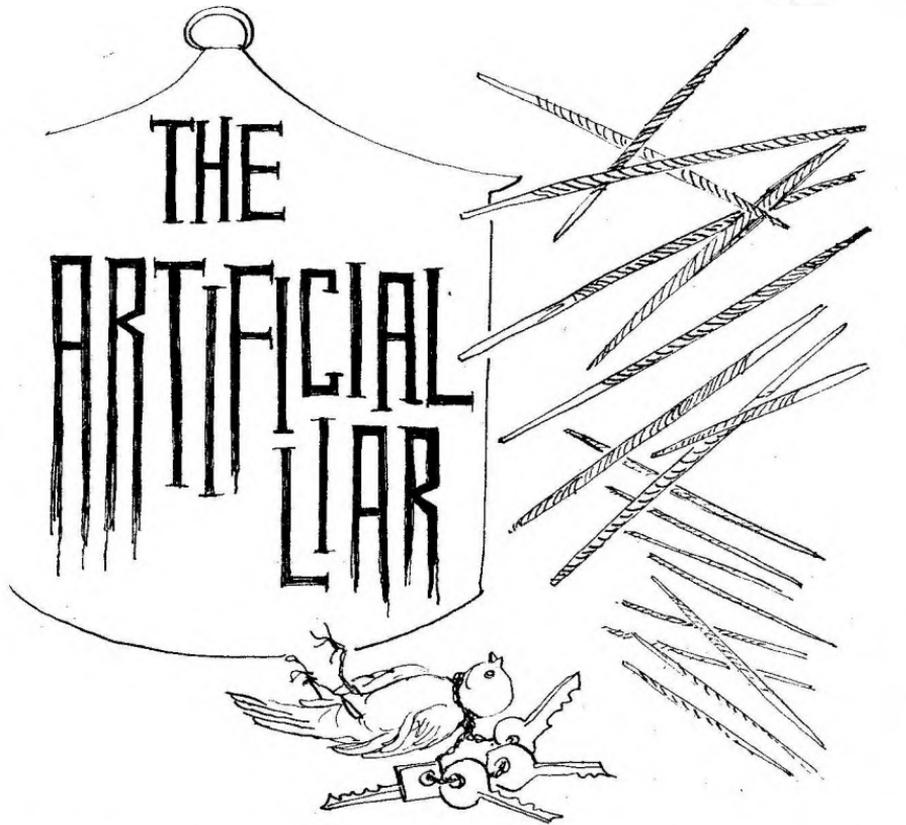
Eight hours and seventeen sour-mash bourbons later, Sam bought a gun—which he forgot to load—and went looking for Phil. When he tried to kick the door down he broke two of the bones in his right foot.

"I can't understand it," Phil told Janey and the cops.

It was all right, though. Inside of a week Leopold's hired him, and he went right on thinking big till they made him a department head.



Many a case has hinged upon a "singing canary" but rarely upon one deceased.



**M**ARLEY WAS DEAD, to begin with.

Major Orin Watkins, chief of security for the government's Biological Research Center No. 27, was familiar with most of Charles Dickens' works; however, he never

expected to have Marley's demise reported to him in his official capacity. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, he believed, should be left to 19th Century London. There was no place for the defunct partner of old

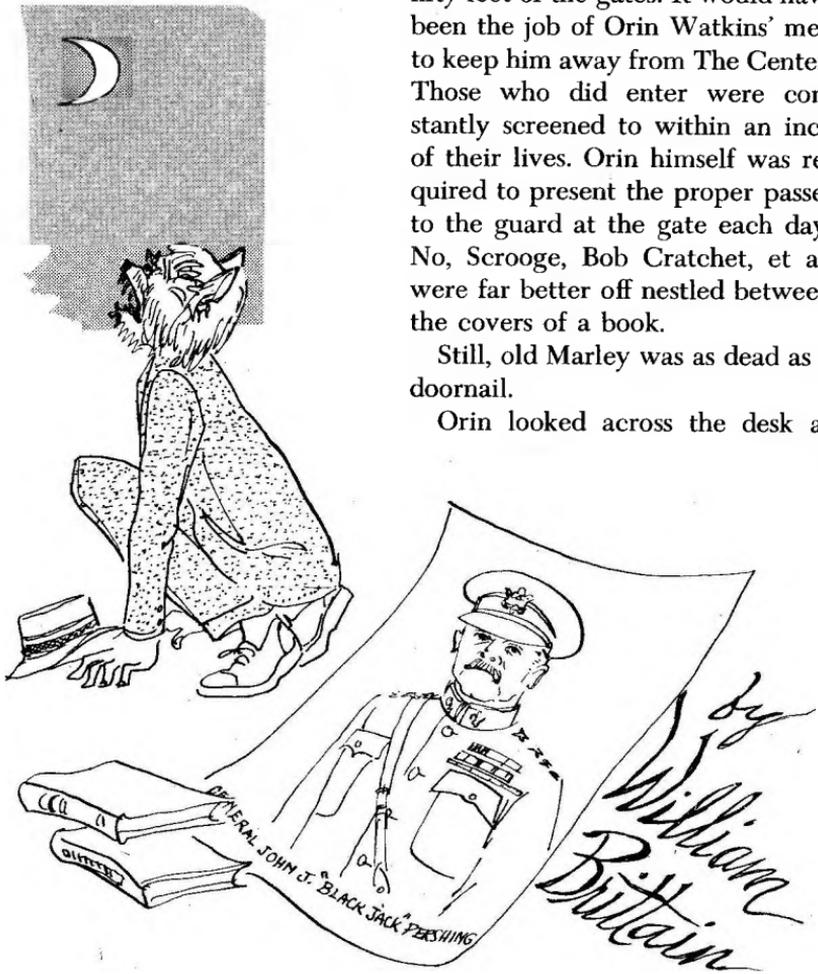
Scrooge in The Center, a thoroughly modern complex of buildings occupying almost a hundred acres, where chemists and biologists with astronomical IQ's spent their working hours developing vaccines and antitoxins against diseases that

in some cases hadn't been developed yet.

Life had been simpler for Scrooge; he had never heard of germ warfare, but it's unlikely that the old miser, had he put in an appearance, could have come within fifty feet of the gates. It would have been the job of Orin Watkins' men to keep him away from The Center. Those who did enter were constantly screened to within an inch of their lives. Orin himself was required to present the proper passes to the guard at the gate each day. No, Scrooge, Bob Cratchet, et al. were far better off nestled between the covers of a book.

Still, old Marley was as dead as a doornail.

Orin looked across the desk at



the small man seated opposite. Augustine Lanier, his wrinkled old face reflecting anxiety and puzzlement, might have been himself a Dickens character. Not Scrooge, of course, not even Micawber. Augustine was too kindly for the one and too slender for the other. Barkis, that was it. Augustine was the very image of Barkis as Orin pictured the old wagoner after reading *David Copperfield*. Even though he was little more than a file clerk at The Center, Augustine was the most conscientious of workers. Like Barkis, Augustine, too, was willin'.

"Marley was my pet canary," explained Augustine softly. "It was probably my imagination, but it seemed to me when I bought him that he resembled a picture I'd seen of Marley's ghost. And now he's dead, sir."

Orin would never get used to having men twenty years his senior call him 'sir.' "Augustine, I'm sorry your pet died," he said. "But is that the only reason you came to see me? I watched you outside the office. You must have paced up and down for twenty minutes before you decided to come in. I thought you wanted to talk about something serious."

"It is serious, Mr. Watkins." Augustine Lanier slid still farther down into his chair and peered dolefully at Orin over the tops of

his steel-rimmed spectacles. "You see, I believe I should be relieved of my duties here at The Center. I might be something of a security risk in the program."

Orin looked at the older man in surprise. Augustine was one of the first employees taken on when The Center was constructed. He'd passed his security check with flying colors, according to the records. Past history, intelligence and psychological tests, polygraph results—all indicated a spotless reputation. Granted that The Center, dealing with the most deadly of pathogenic organisms, needed to be ultraselective in its choice of employees. Still, Augustine Lanier a security risk? Never.

"Look, Augustine, your pet died," said Orin finally, "but that's no reason to go into a blue funk and quit on us. Take the rest of the day off. Visit the pet stores in town. Buy another bird. You'll soon forget Marley."

"Oh, it's not just that Marley died that has me worried, sir." Augustine shook his head emphatically. "You see, he was strangled."

"Strangled? How in blazes did he manage to strangle himself?"

"Oh, Marley didn't do it himself, sir. It was no accident."

"You mean you—"

"I—I don't know." Augustine removed a handkerchief from his hip

pocket and began pressing it into a ball between his palms. "That's part of the problem. And Marley's death was just the first incident. These last few days have been so strange. I think perhaps I'm losing touch with reality, Mr. Watkins."

Augustine made this last statement in an almost apologetic tone, as if somehow he were letting down not only Orin but the whole research center. One hand, containing the ball of handkerchief, rubbed at his eyes. "I'm sorry about disturbing you, sir," he continued, "but I thought you'd need to know."

That the old man had come in at all was a tribute to his faithfulness to The Center, Orin decided. How many people could admit the possibility of a mental breakdown, even to themselves? "Look, Augustine," he said gently, "suppose you begin at the beginning. Now, tell me what's been so strange about these last few days?" Surreptitiously he pressed a stud at the edge of his desk. A concealed microphone in the onyx pen set on the desk began ingesting Lanier's words and feeding them to the electronic tape moving between its reels in the bottom drawer.

"It began last Friday, sir." Augustine's voice reminded Orin of one of his own sons, telling how a window had been broken with a slingshot. "It was in the morning,

and I was afraid I'd be late for work. Generally, Mrs. Carrigan—she owns the house in town where I rent my room—would wake me if I was in danger of oversleeping, but she's gone to visit relatives and won't be back until the end of the month. And Sergeant Pomeroy—he's the other roomer—he's off on a fishing trip until later this week. So you see, I was alone in the house, and I guess I just forgot to set the alarm."

Orin wondered if he would ever come to the point. "Pomeroy," he said conversationally, "that's Jerry Pomeroy, one of the guards at the west gate, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Augustine. "At any rate, when I left the house and went to my car, I found I'd forgotten my keys. That happens rather often, sir. Sorry I'm so absent-minded."

"Just so nobody else gets hold of them," said Orin. "With your keys, anybody who managed to get inside could go almost anywhere, except the culture rooms, of course."

"Oh, Mr. Watkins!" Augustine looked shocked. "They've never been out of my possession for more than a few seconds. Honestly, sir."

"Okay, Augustine. Okay. Get on with your story."

"I went back into the house and up to my room. That's when I found him."

"Him? You mean Marley?"

"Yes, sir. Lying right in the middle of the carpet, he was. And he'd been strangled—with my keys."

Orin shook his head in confusion. "Strangled with keys," he said slowly. "I don't get that, Augustine."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. It wasn't with the keys exactly. I keep my key ring attached to a chain, and it was the chain that was wrapped around Marley's neck. It was so tight it almost beheaded the poor thing."

As he began to speak, Orin became the soul of sweet reasonableness. "It could happen," he said. "When you went out, the bird got loose. It fluttered around the room, and somehow it got tangled in your key chain."

"I suppose it could have happened that way, except—"

"Except what?"

"The chain hadn't just been wrapped around Marley's neck. It was knotted."

Orin sat back, expelling his breath loudly. "No chance that the bird could have—"

"None, Mr. Watkins. It was a square knot."

Odd, but nothing to do with the security of The Center, of course. That is, unless Augustine was going dotty and had at some time blacked out and strangled the bird himself.

"You mentioned a while back that the death of the bird was just the 'first incident'," said Orin suddenly. "What did you mean by that, Augustine?"

"Well, the next thing was the tools in my medicine cabinet, files, to be exact."

"Files?"

"Yes. You see, I had a headache all day Friday, thinking about Marley and wondering how it could have happened. So when I got home that afternoon, I decided to take a couple of aspirin. Mrs. Carrigan lets me keep a bottle in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. I'm often subject to headaches."

"Go on."

"Well, I went to the second floor bathroom and drew a glass of water. Then I opened the medicine cabinet. Oh, the crashing and banging was terrible."

"What crashing and banging?"

"When the files fell out. Long round ones they were, of blued steel. I believe they're the type called 'rattail'."

"Well?" Orin nodded expectantly.

"That's about all. But isn't a medicine cabinet an odd place to keep files? Especially so many. There must have been at least two dozen. I'm afraid a couple of them chipped the sink rather badly. Mrs. Carrigan will be quite upset when she re-

turns and finds the damage.”

“And how did these files get into the medicine cabinet?” asked Orin, a touch of sarcasm filtering into his voice.

“I—I don’t know, sir. They certainly weren’t there the previous evening, and yet I was the only person in the house. That’s what worries me, Mr. Watkins. Is it possible that, without realizing it, I put them there myself?”

“Umm. Possible, I suppose. It’s strange, though, that you’d have no recollection at all.”

“It almost sounds as if I might be . . . well . . . going out of my mind. Doesn’t it?”

“That’d be up to the medics to decide, Augustine,” said Orin. “But I wouldn’t worry about it. There has to be some logical explanation. Besides, I’d expect a man on the verge of insanity to experience hallucinations; visions, loss of reality, that sort of thing.”

Augustine took a deep breath and let it out with a shudder.

Orin, seeing the old man’s reactions, cocked an eyebrow. “Have you experienced any hallucinations, Augustine?”

“I—I really don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Explain yourself.” Orin’s voice was sharper than he intended it to be.

“It was Saturday evening, Mr.

Watkins. I went out for a walk, nowhere in particular. I was having trouble sleeping, what with Marley, and then the files tumbling out of the medicine cabinet. I’d left the house about eleven-thirty, so it must have been after midnight when it happened.”

“When what happened?”

“I had stopped under a street lamp to light my pipe. As I struck the match, I suddenly realized there was a man standing beside me. I hadn’t heard him approach. He must have been wearing rubber-soled shoes.”

“Did the man try to attack you? Did he demand money or anything like that?”

“Oh, no! In fact, he tipped his hat in the most polite manner. It’s just that when he removed the hat, and the light hit his face, I saw that he was wearing a mask.”

“A mask?”

“Yes, sir. It was one of those rubber things that fit over the entire head. Fairly scared the life out of me, it did. You see, the mask was of a . . . a werewolf. Not only that, but the man suddenly went down on his hands and knees and began howling at the moon. Then, just as quickly, he got to his feet, replaced his hat, shook my hand and vanished into the darkness.”

Orin chuckled. “That one’s easily explained, at least,” he said with a

smile. "Either someone coming home from a costume party or a practical joker. Drunk, probably."

"Perhaps. But after the first two incidents, meeting that man didn't do my nerves any good, I can tell you that. And I've been unable to locate anybody else in the area who either saw the man or even heard of such a thing happening."

"It is kind of screwy, but not impossible. Is there anything else, Augustine?"

"Yes, Mr. Watkins. One thing more. It happened just last night—or perhaps this morning. It's hard to say."

Orin could see that Augustine was visibly shaken by the events that had happened. His thin arms twitched alarmingly, and he seemed on the verge of tears.

"Yesterday evening, I cleaned my room, sir; vacuuming, dusting, the whole thing. At the time I went to bed, everything was in its proper place. You've got to believe that, Mr. Watkins. You've got to!"

"Okay, Augustine, okay. Nobody's doubting your word. Go on with your story."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry to lose control of myself. At any rate, I locked the door and went to bed. But this morning when I got up, I found . . . I found . . ." Augustine suddenly covered his face with the handkerchief and burst into hor-

rible and uncontrolled sobbing.

For several minutes, the silence of Orin's office was broken only by the pitiful moans of the old man. Finally, with a tremendous effort of will, he became quiet. Bending over, he picked up a roll of paper from the floor beside the chair and tossed it onto Orin's desk.

"That, Mr. Watkins. I found that on the floor of my room. Held flat with books from my shelves, it was. But I didn't put it there. I've never even seen it before this morning. I swear it, sir! I don't know where it came from!"

Orin unrolled the stiff paper. It was a poster of some kind. The picture was of a military man in his late fifties or early sixties, wearing the uniform of a World War I soldier. The handsomeness of the rugged face with its neat moustache and coolly competent expression was set off by the brilliant display of campaign ribbons and the general's four stars on his uniform. Orin read the few words below the picture: GENERAL JOHN J. "BLACK JACK" PERSHING, commander in chief of the American Expeditionary Force in Europe.

"Nothing frightening about the picture, at least," said Orin finally.

"That's not the point, Mr. Watkins. I never owned such a picture. How did it get into my room? First, my canary was killed. After that,

the files in the medicine cabinet and the man with that hideous mask. And now this. At first, I—I thought about not saying anything to anybody, but—”

“Yeah, that’s what ninety-nine people out of a hundred would do. But you did the right thing, Augustine. Only . . . Oh, dammit!” Orin balled up a sheet of paper from his desk and hurled it into a corner of the small office.

“Are you all right, Mr. Watkins?”

“Yeah, Augustine. It’s just that you’re too nice a guy for what I’ve got to do to you.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Look, you’ve told me some pretty wild things. They just don’t make any sense. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re going screwball. On the other hand, I’m not a doctor. I’m a security officer, and regardless of my personal feelings, my first duty’s to the safety and security of The Center. Right?”

“I suppose so, but—”

“Don’t interrupt me while I’m griping. Now, if these things had happened to one of the scientists here, I might think somebody was trying to drive him insane. But frankly, Augustine, your job as a clerk just doesn’t have that high a priority. Let’s face it, if you disappeared tomorrow, you could be replaced without too much trouble.

Furthermore, you don’t know enough about the operations here for you to give anybody really vital material. I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but that’s the way things are.”

“I’m aware of that, Mr. Watkins.”

“All right, then, if we eliminate the idea that some unknown party’s trying to get you out of The Center, what’s left?”

Augustine stared bleakly at the floor. “What you’re trying to say is that I either imagined these things or I did them myself. Isn’t that it?”

“Yeah, but . . . Oh, hell!” Orin picked up the telephone on his desk and poised an index finger over the dial. “I’m going to have to keep you here at The Center, Augustine,” he said. “You’ll be under guard, and the doctors will be dropping in fairly often. I’ll make you as comfortable as I can, but no word will be allowed out as to your whereabouts. And if you’re thinking about exercising your constitutional rights to habeas corpus, forget it. This is a top-secret government project, not a courtroom.”

“Please don’t worry yourself about my welfare,” said Augustine. “I understood the consequences when I walked in here.”

Orin opened his mouth to speak and then abruptly closed it. What more was there to say? He spun the

telephone dial around angrily.

After turning Augustine Lanier over to two guards who were given strict orders not to let the old man out of their sight until he was given clearance, Orin went to the cafeteria and ate a lunch that could have been boiled cardboard for all the enjoyment he got from it. Returning to his office, he flopped into his swivel chair, spun it away from the desk and considered a ground plan of The Center that was mounted on the wall.

There was the sound of drumming feet outside the building, and he turned to watch through the window as the perimeter guards changed. After a formal exchange of salutes, the new men took their places at the small booths by the gates, while those who had been on duty the previous four hours returned to the barracks just below the office. There, the men who lived on the base could read, talk or catch up on their sleep while the noncommissioned officers who had rooms in town dashed out through the gates to catch a bus. Until eight o'clock that evening, their time was their own.

Orin frowned suddenly, glancing from the window back to the floor plan. There was something he hadn't noticed before. Easy enough to remedy, of course, but a possible breach of security, just the same.

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," Orin shouted impatiently.

The man who waddled through the door had his military shirt fully unbuttoned and was scratching at his hairy chest with one massive hand. Between his teeth was clenched a pipe with a bowl roughly the size of a coffee cup. If Colonel Timothy Doherty, The Center's chief medical officer, hadn't been such a superb physician, he'd have long since been drummed out of the service simply for being a slob. Orin, however, liked Doherty immensely. The fat doctor added a dash of Irish *joie de vivre* to The Center's severely formal military routines.

"Thought you'd like to hear how I'm getting on with your Mr. Lanier," said Doherty, settling into a chair and at the same time dribbling burning embers from his pipe onto the carpet.

"Yeah, Tim. In a minute."

"What do you mean, in a minute? I thought you asked me to let you know as soon as I'd finished looking at him."

"Just take a look at this chart first, will you?" Orin jabbed a finger toward the ground plan. "We're right here, and the guards who just came off duty are downstairs."

"A fair assessment," nodded Doherty, "especially as they're making

enough racket down there to wake the dead."

"But Tim, they're still inside The Center."

Doherty spread his hands wide. "A marvelous bit of deduction, Orin," he said. "What do you do for an encore? Locate Judge Crater?"

"C'mon, be serious," replied Orin. "I want to see if I've got this figured right. Now, we allow the guards who live in town to go out of The Center when they come off duty, without checking them any too closely. If one of them wanted to take something from The Center, he wouldn't have much trouble smuggling it out."

"Take something? And what would one of your own men be wanting to take?"

"There are people who'd be willing to pay quite a bit for information about The Center's activities."

"You mean you don't even trust the guards?"

"In this job, I don't trust anybody. It would be a big temptation. Look, the record-storage area is in the other end of this building. What would prevent one of the guards from walking out of the barracks and into the record area when he came off duty, instead of going right out through the gate?"

"Well, for one thing, somebody'd see him. It's broad daylight. And for the second thing, the record depart-

ment's always kept firmly locked."

"But if it were night? And the guard had a key?"

"Oh, I suppose he could get inside under those circumstances. If he wanted to, that is."

"Then he could look into the filing cabinets at every experiment we've ever done here. Even photograph them, if he had a camera."

"Now, wait a minute, Orin. There's a special watchman right outside the room where the records themselves are kept, and even he doesn't have a key to the rooms or the filing cabinets."

"Okay, but let's say our man comes along this passage. He'd be out of sight of the watchman until the last minute. He could hit the watchman with something and—"

"And even assuming he got all those locks open, the moment the watchman woke up and identified him, he'd be hunted by every policeman in the country. And treason's still a capital offense, I believe."

"What if he wore a mask?"

"What if! What if!" Doherty relit his pipe and peered through the smoke at Orin. "If the thing is really bothering you, just keep the perimeter guards under observation until they actually leave The Center."

"Yeah, I think I'll suggest that to the commanding officer." Orin spun

about and faced the plump doctor. "Now, what about Lanier?"

"I've no official diagnosis yet, but just between us tin soldiers, he's as sane as you or me. Except after hearing you talk, I'm not so sure about you." With a sly grin, Doherty peered from under bushy brows at Orin. "By the way, Lanier's canary really is dead, you know," he said offhandedly.

"Oh? How did you find that out?"

"Lanier mentioned he'd buried it in the back yard. I sent a couple of men out to his rooming house, and they dug up the corpse. Its neck had been broken."

"Sounds like you're doing my job for me," said Orin, grinning.

"All in the line of duty. We've got the bird's body and the picture of Pershing. At least we know those two things aren't imaginary. I strongly suspect, Orin-me-boy, that I'll be forced to give that man a clean bill of health."

"He'll still have to be let go unless we can explain those incidents logically."

"Have you thought of trying the polygraph?"

"The lie detector? What good would that do? If Augustine's lying, he's an automatic security risk. And if not, the things that happened are so suspicious that he'd still be thrown out. What's the differ-

ence?" Orin asked diffidently.

"We might get some insight as to what's on his mind. Orin, you learned to operate the polygraph during security training. You know it isn't perfect. That's why it's not acceptable as evidence."

"Except here at The Center," answered Orin. "If anybody's polygraph chart doesn't stay within reasonable limits, he's out. It may not be fair, but security is maintained."

"All right, but we both know the lie detector can't peer into anybody's brain to see if he's lying. All the machine does is measure bodily responses. A pressure cuff measures blood pressure and pulse. A tube around the chest gets the dope on respiration depth and frequency, and electrodes on the fingers tell how much the subject is perspiring. All these are automatically graphed on a chart."

"Right out of the textbook, Tim. Then the subject is given neutral questions or words—'cat' or 'dog' or something like that to test his usual reactions. Only when Augustine heard the word 'canary', his graph would go right off the paper because of what happened to—Holy Saint Jude Thaddeus!"

"Orin, you're as white as a sheet. Are you all right? Do you want me to get you something?"

"Just the phone." Orin grabbed at the instrument, index finger

stabbing at the dial. "Sergeant Jennings, I want Mr. Lanier brought to my office right away," he barked into the mouthpiece. "On the double!" He slammed the receiver back into its cradle.

"I take it you're onto something," said Doherty calmly. "Or are you just trying for a coronary right here in your office?"

"Oh," muttered Orin, his lips pulled back tight against his teeth. "That clever son-of-a . . . This is one for the books, all right, and it might have worked if Augustine had just kept quiet like any ordinary person. But instead, he came to me. Bless his conscientious heart, he came to me!"

"I think I'll stay," said Doherty. "I've nothing but two cases of blistered feet this morning, anyway. And you'd better be making some sense out of this mishmash, or I've got another room waiting for you, right next to Lanier's."

Three minutes later, Augustine Lanier slowly shuffled into Orin's office and nodded nervously to the two men. Orin offered him a chair.

"Augustine," Orin said when the old man was seated, "I think I've got some good news for you. I think I know the meaning of the things that happened to you."

"All of them, sir?" asked Augustine softly.

"Every blasted one. Listen. A

few moments ago, I described to Colonel Doherty here, how one of the perimeter guards might possibly enter the records area and take material out."

"Really, Mr. Watkins? That's where I work—or where I used to work. I thought it was quite closely guarded."

"No, not only would it be possible for someone to get in, but I think somebody's actually planning to do it. And there are places in the world where the information in those records would be worth a bundle."

"Oh, I hope you'll be able to catch him, sir. Many of the envelopes I've put in the cabinets have been labeled Top Secret."

"I don't think we'll have any trouble on that score. You see, I think the thief plans on staying on right here at The Center. He's going to try and make it seem as if someone else is the guilty person. You, Augustine."

"Me? I don't understand. How?"

"Over to you, Tim." Orin turned his chair to face Doherty. "If a theft like the one I've described actually took place, what would be the first thing I'd do?"

"Oh, seal off the area. Ascertain what was actually broken into. Make up excuses to the commanding officer for your blunders."

"Yes, but when I started

questioning suspects, what then? I'd use the polygraph, Tim. The lie detector. And I'd start with the people who had access to the room. Augustine, here, would be one of the first people tested."

"I still don't get it," said Doherty.

"Think, Tim." Orin turned to the old man. "Augustine, you were set up for a theft of records that may take place tonight, or certainly within the next couple of days. You were going to be the patsy for this job. You'd have been turned into perhaps the world's first artificial liar."

"It's all very confusing, sir."

"Tim," Orin gestured toward the doctor, "imagine Augustine strapped into the lie detector. The machine is attached to his body. His blood pressure, pulse, respiration and skin conductivity are all being monitored. I begin by asking his name or how he feels. Anything to put him at ease so we can get a proper reading.

"But now, we agree that the real thief would have access to keys to the record area. So, after a few innocent words, I say 'keys'."

In his chair, Augustine Lanier jerked involuntarily. The color drained from his face. "Oh, poor Marley," he whispered. "And with my own key chain."

"Saint Patrick, protect us!" mur-

mured Doherty. "With a reaction like that, he'd send the lie detector needles right through the wall." He scratched his head doubtfully. "But what about the other things, Orin? The files in the medicine cabinet, for instance?"

"Try the words 'file cabinet', Tim."

"And the werewolf getup would provide a reaction to 'mask'. But what about General Pershing?"

"'Black Jack'. The watchman would have to be slugged with something, remember? We'd be given a perfect suspect. Not because Augustine had done anything wrong, but because he'd been psychologically conditioned to respond to the very words we were bound to use in our investigation. Meanwhile, as we concentrated on Augustine, the guilty party would be laughing up his sleeve at us. However, in one way, Augustine didn't act the way he was expected to. Instead of keeping those odd events to himself, he told me about them."

"And the real thief, the one who's been doing all these things to Mr. Lanier? Have you got him pegged, too?" asked Doherty.

Orin leaned back, grinning. "Sure," he said. "Augustine, you've been telling me all along that for the past few days you'd been alone in the rooming house. You weren't, you know."

"You mean my landlady—" Orin shook his head. "She'd hardly qualify as a guard here," he said. "But—"

"Sergeant Pomeroy," breathed Augustine, his eyes wide with amazement. "His room's right across the hall from mine."

"Now you're catching on, Augustine. You see, I don't believe Pomeroy ever went on his fishing trip. He may have left the house while you watched, but it's my guess he stashed his luggage somewhere and sneaked back. He's been lying concealed in his room ever since. You said you'd forgotten your keys several times. He could have slipped over to your room and made clay casts of them in seconds, before you returned to pick them up. Since you're a file clerk, those keys would have let him into any part of the record area. The same thing with Marley; how long does it take to kill a tiny bird? He just waited until you'd forgotten your keys once more, came into your room, opened the cage, and that was that. The other occurrences would have been

even easier to set up. All Pomeroy had to do was wait until you were out of the house and he could set up your room any way he liked."

"An interesting theory, Orin-me-boy," said Doherty. "Going to be a bit difficult to prove, though, isn't it?"

"No trouble at all," said Orin.

Two nights later, a figure dressed in a dark shirt and pants unlocked the side door of The Center's record area, opened the door, and quickly slipped inside. He pushed the door shut behind him. As he turned, someone in the darkness whipped away the black bandana handkerchief which had been wrapped around his face. Startled, he dropped a large ring of keys to the floor just as somebody turned on the overhead lights. In front of the man, four soldiers held their bayoneted rifles at the ready.

"Welcome, Sergeant Pomeroy," said Orin Watkins, placing the black handkerchief carefully in his pocket. "We've been waiting for you."



*One confession may be good for a pair of souls.*



I DIDN'T GO to work the day Henry Gifford stole fifteen hundred dollars from the office safe. As a matter of fact, I didn't even learn Henry had taken the money until four days later, and then only because Henry himself told me.

The reason I was absent was because I'd picked up a summer cold. I wasn't in bed, and could get around all right, but I have a 'thing' about constantly sneezing in public, spreading germs and maybe in-

# Second Thoughts

fecting others. So I phoned Mr. Holcomb, our office manager, and told him I didn't think I should come in.

He wasn't too happy about it. "Very well, Miss Daniels," he conceded, "but I trust you'll be able to make it tomorrow. Your filing's considerably behind, you know."

Aside from Mr. Holcomb, there were five of us in the office of Fidelity Savings and Loan Company: Henry and I, and a Mr. Winder, a Mr. Zivic, and a Miss Corsi. The last three were strictly out of Henry's league. Charlie Winder was a bright-lights boy with dark good looks, an endless supply of racy stories and a little black book to keep his evenings full. Fred Zivic was married but wasn't working too hard at it, had a ready eye for our younger female customers. Rita Corsi wasn't exactly a sex symbol,



but I had to admit her dusky features were attractive and she knew how to wear provocative clothes.

Henry himself was a mild character in his late twenties. Unmarried,

he didn't drink or smoke, was bookishly inclined and nourished a secret ambition (confided to me) to become a writer.

As for myself, I wasn't truly Henry's introverted type, but he had a certain appeal and he tried to come out of himself in his quiet way. We'd had a few movie dates, but nothing serious. I just liked him, you understand.

Stealing the fifteen hundred dollars was, of course, completely out of character with Henry. He'd acted spontaneously, on a sudden impulse that had zeroed into his consciousness.

It all happened when a lone bandit hit the office an hour before closing that day. Brandishing a nickel-plated revolver, the gunman had herded the office force and two women customers into one corner, and started to scoop banded money packets from the open safe into an airline flight bag.

Then one of the customers made an inadvertent move and the bandit whirled, triggered a wild shot and bolted, gaining a car he'd parked at the curb outside and racing away.

Pandemonium had followed. Both women customers began screaming. Mr. Holcomb stormed in the robber's wake, shouting and waving his arms. Traffic snarled. Pedestrians clotted the sidewalk, trying to peer into the office. Rita

Corsi finally jumped to the phone to call the police—and Henry deftly transferred from the open safe to the bottom shelf of an adjacent supplies cabinet, underneath some cartons of business envelopes, three five-hundred-dollar money packets.

During the police investigation that followed, Mr. Holcomb assigned Henry the task of ascertaining precisely how much cash the holdup man had taken. Henry busied himself for several minutes with ledgers and the safe's contents. It appeared the bandit had had time to collect only four of the money packets: two thousand dollars.

"It's thirty-five hundred, Mr. Holcomb," Henry said.

When the police finally left, Mr. Holcomb checked his watch. "It's not yet five," he announced, "but I believe we'll close for the day. It's been an—ah—exhaustive experience." He glanced at Henry. "Ready, Gifford?"

Henry was jolted. In the heat of his action he'd forgotten he'd had his own car picked up by a garage that morning for some minor repair work, that Mr. Holcomb had offered to drive him there after work.

His mind raced. He had planned to stay behind and retrieve the money packets from the cabinet after everyone else had departed. Now, to appear completely natural, he could not delay. He steadied

himself, gave a small smile. "Yes, sir," he said, and left with Mr. Holcomb.

Once he had his own car, Henry's immediate thought was to return to the office and pick up the money. In another moment, though, he decided not to. The office was in a commercial building and he might be recognized by the custodial personnel, have to manufacture some pretext for an after-hours visit. Again, the money was safely hidden; letting it remain overnight was no risk. He'd merely go in early in the morning and gather the packets before the others arrived.

True, there was one factor to be considered. If the bandit were subsequently apprehended, the money discrepancy would come to light. Yet the gunman had gotten away clean and fast. Early evening news reports cited the holdup, but there followed no word of an arrest.

For the rest of that evening, then, Henry should have been able to relax, but he couldn't, because already his true character was taking over. His conscience began nibbling at him. He tried to sublimate the emotion and failed. He, Henry Gifford, had turned thief! How could he live with that?

Henry's decision soon followed. He wouldn't have to live with it because he wouldn't keep the money. He'd retrieve those packets, replace

them in the safe, and inform Mr. Holcomb he must have made an error in his original loss estimate.

The following morning, Henry reached the office twenty minutes ahead of time and went to the supplies cabinet with a tight smile of purpose. His smile suddenly faded. The money wasn't there.

A chill traced Henry's spine as his fumbling fingers shifted the cartons of business envelopes, and only confirmed the money's absence. He slowly closed the cabinet, with chest constricted as comprehension flooded him. He'd believed himself unobserved when he'd transferred the money in the height of the heist's furor—but *he'd been seen*. Someone in the office had witnessed his act, and had had an instantaneous inspiration of his own, either lagging behind or coming back to the office after hours to garner the cash, secure in the knowledge that Henry's own guilt bound him to silence.

Who could it have been? Henry's brain was a chaos. Charlie Winder; Rita Corsi; Fred Zivic? Any of the three had a ready affinity for high living and could have recognized a golden opportunity.

The rest of the day and those which immediately followed were untenable to Henry. There was nothing he could do. Vulnerable himself, he could not risk any indi-

vidual accusation. Whoever had victimized him had pulled a devilish coup and was home free.

Henry began to brood. The fact that he'd been thwarted at a crime his essential rectitude had betrayed him into committing, and which he'd already determined to negate by returning the money, ate at him like acid. He couldn't eat, lost weight, became haggard . . .

Aside from the news reports of the holdup itself (the bandit never was caught), I of course was privy to none of what Henry had done, nor his subsequent anguish. But I had noticed the change in his demeanor and his obvious health loss, so one noon at lunch in a cafeteria we both favored I put it to him.

"Henry, what's wrong?"

Behind thick lenses, his pale eyes blinked. "Eh?"

"You've been looking like a ghost for days. Care to talk about it?"

For a long moment, his gaze held mine. Then he said simply, "Yes, I'll talk about it. To you. I—I've got to talk about it."

So he told me.

"For Heaven's sake," I said when he finished, "why did you ever do a thing like that?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I swear I don't," he said. "It just struck me, all at once. Some crazy idea about getting some

money ahead to pay for a writing course I've heard about—"

He broke off, then said, "Believe me, Janet, I know I was wrong. I was going to return that money." His voice grew taut. "Who took it? That's what's bugging me out of my mind! Whoever did is sitting right there in the office, acting perfectly normal—and laughing at me!"

I said, "People are looking."

He gained a modicum of control. "You know I don't like any of them, really, but nobody acts any differently. Fred had me out to the house for dinner the other night. Rita loaned me an adventure novel she said she thought I'd enjoy. Charlie keeps telling me the latest jokes he's picked up—" He stopped again. "I've got to know! It's like an obsession. I can't sleep, trying to figure who."

I said, "Suppose you did know, for sure. You're in no position to blow the whistle. What could you do?"

"Face down whoever it is and insist we return the money." Henry's pale eyes blazed. Then, recognizing the inanity of the remark, he finished lamely, "I don't know *what* I could do."

"Then let it go at that," I counseled quietly. "You were euchred, Henry. Accept it."

"No!" he came back. "I'm going to find out who it was."

"Just how will you do that?"

"There'll be some way. Maybe Fred is planning an extensive trip. Or Charlie will add a couple of expensive blondes to that harem of his." His mouth quirked. "Maybe I can find out if Rita has cleaned up any sizable bills lately."

"That still will be no proof."

His lips twisted again, but he made no rebuttal. Suddenly, he shoved back his chair and left.

The next several days, the patent intensity which Henry evinced was more than enough to tell me he still was determinedly pursuing his objective in his own way. I stood it as long as I could, and then I capitulated.

"It wasn't anyone in the office who saw you that day and later took the money from the cabinet," I told Henry in the cafeteria. "It was me."

Those pale eyes bugged. "You? But you were out with a cold."

"I came in after hours," I said, "when I wouldn't contaminate anyone. My filing was behind and I wanted to catch up. I'd learned about the holdup on the newscasts, and when I accidentally discovered those money packets as I shifted the envelope cartons to get at some filing folder, I had a sudden hunch what someone might be pulling."

I paused, looked at him directly. "I didn't know it was you, Henry. I

didn't even suspect you. I thought was Charlie or Rita or Fred, and I decided to cross up whoever it was, keep the money myself."

"B-but after I told you, after you knew I was the one . . ."

This was a delicate point I didn't care to expound upon. "A girl has to look out for herself. She can always use fifteen hundred dollars," I said stubbornly. Then I added, "But I started having conscience twinges of my own."

Henry sighed. "So now what, Janet?"

I said, "Now it looks like all we have to do is return that fifteen hundred dollars."

He made a vague gesture. "How? The books won't balance, and it's too late now to say I must have made a mistake in my original count."

That of course was true, but I still smiled at him. "We'll think of something," I said.

Two days later, Mr. Holcomb called us all into his office. The morning mail had just arrived and he had unwrapped a small package. The package contained several banded money packets, along with a brief anonymous note Mr. Hol-

comb passed around to everyone.

*Here's fifteen hundred dollars back, the hand-printed note read. I held up your place because I needed money for an operation on my kid, plus hospital expenses. Two thousand did it. Call the rest conscience money I can't keep. Sorry I gave you a bad time.*

"Most amazing, I must say," Mr. Holcomb mused. "I'll inform the insurance company at once. Now, let's get back to work, shall we?"

I didn't concoct that phony note; Henry did, which sort of augurs well for his creative ability and his writing aspirations, don't you think?

As for that delicate point I touched on, conscience did play some part in my confession to Henry. Mainly, though, it was because he wasn't getting over his obsession, was driving himself up the wall, making himself ill. I suddenly realized I couldn't let that continue. I told you in the beginning I just liked Henry, but all at once I sensed it was more than that. Maybe it was . . . well, a lot more.

Of course, I couldn't tell Henry that. Even in this age of women's lib, a girl has to have some pride.

*In this particular instance, one might possibly say, with reason, that one good friend deserves another.*



ONE CIRCUMSTANCE of my first meeting with Brentford could be viewed as foreshadowing the future: he was reading a mystery novel, the book jacket of which illustrated a voluptuous redhead sitting cross-legged in a witness chair facing a jury. Brentford had booked for London in the old *Ambassador*, a medium-size combination passenger and cargo liner then in postwar service between New York and the United Kingdom. After watching the pilot climb down into his launch off Ambrose Lightship, I strolled into the smoking room. Brentford was sitting alone at one of the tables, his long legs stretched out beside it, his free hand curled around a tall glass of black stout. He looked up from the novel as I entered, and his attractive, broad face lighted up with a friendly smile.

"Rather quiet in here," he remarked, with a glance around the empty tables.

"Things will liven up once the rest of the passengers have finished unpacking and get all straightened away," I said.

Brentford invited me to have a

TRUE

FRIENDS

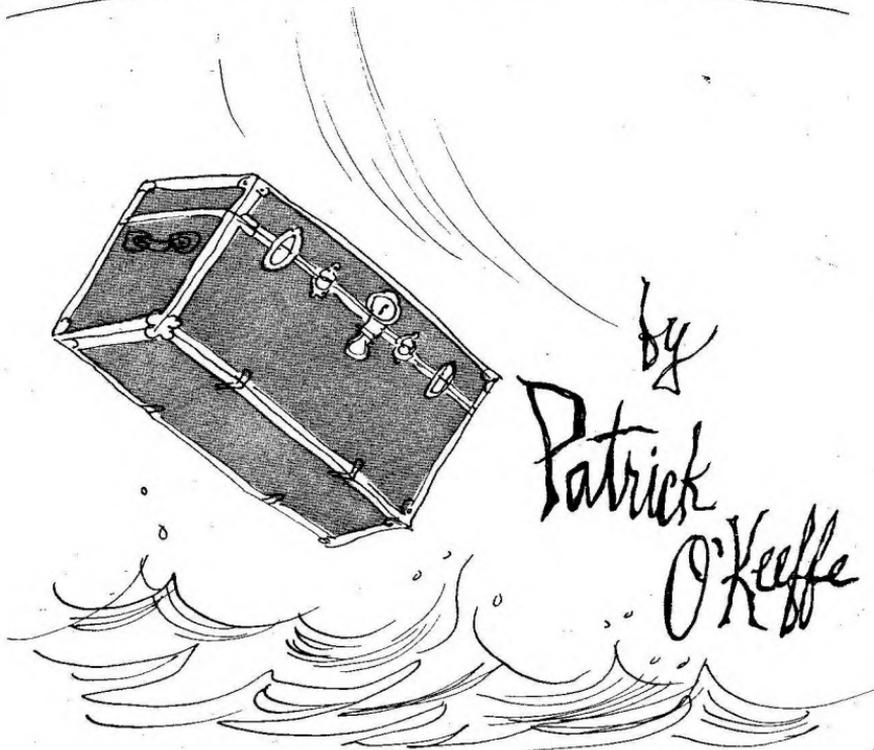
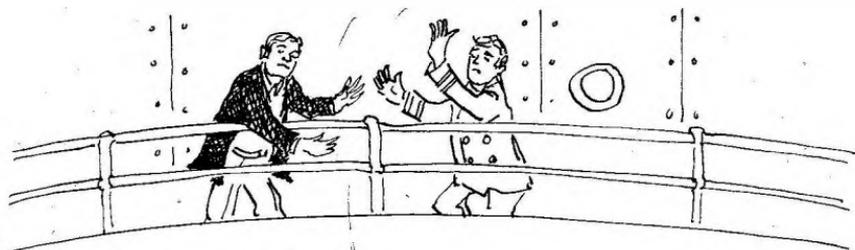
drink, but I declined, saying I didn't feel like one just then. However, I pulled out a chair and engaged him in conversation. Nodding at the caduceus under the three gold rings on my sleeve, he remarked that I must be the ship's doctor. I replied that I was, and I'd probably have said little beyond that, but Brentford had such a pleasing way of listening to you, as if your affairs were of extraordinary interest to him, that I went on to tell him that because of a heart condition I'd abandoned all thoughts of private practice and taken up the less exacting life of a physician afloat.

Brentford told me he was making

a hurried business trip to England representing the New York firm of Art Metal Crafts. During the war, he had been attached to a British Government purchasing commission in Washington, and had returned after the war to take a posi-

tion with Art Metal Crafts. He had also married and settled down.

"Speaking of art metal," I said, "my daughter and her husband recently bought a home in suburban Connecticut. I visited them recently, and my daughter spoke of



coming to New York soon to pick up some decorative metal furnishings for the lawn and the patio."

"Before I leave the ship," said Brentford, "I'll give you a note to Avelardi. He's in charge of our showrooms. He'll be happy to take her around and advise her, and extend the courtesies of the firm."

I thanked him, and he said, "Doctor Jenks, I find it most delightful to talk to you. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to sit at your table, if I may be so bold as to ask for that privilege."

I returned his compliment by saying that it would be equally pleasurable to me to have him for a table companion provided, of course, that the seats hadn't already been assigned. The chief steward told me they had, but he transferred a man who was indifferent about seating, and gave his place to Brentford.

The others at my table were a ship's chief engineer, a law clerk on a visit to maternal relatives in Cardiff, and a vice-president of an oil company, due in London for a conference with officials of a British subsidiary.

The four of them formed a congenial group—a fivesome, in fact, when I was free to join them—with Brentford the breezy center of cohesion.

Although Brentford spent most of

his time with his table group, he held honorary membership in all the other groups and cliques into which even a passenger list as small as the *Ambassadors'* seventy or so will inevitably divide. I'd sometimes come upon him chatting merrily with elderly couples, twitting a knot of middle-aged matrons, as often as not teasing younger ones. He could slip into any gathering as smoothly as the chaplain. Even the most standoffish couldn't have passed his tall, lanky figure without returning his cheerful smile and exchanging pleasantries, and he was a familiar guest at the captain's private cocktail parties.

It was during the third evening out that he first spoke to me about his wife, though with no hint of his unhappiness. We were sitting alone in the smoking room, the other three being at the horse races in the lounge. He was telling me about the secluded cottage he'd rented upstate as a kind of weekend retreat from the noise and clamor of the city, and he took out his wallet to show me a snapshot of it.

The snapshot showed a shingled house with a run-down appearance and in need of paint, and an open garage attached. "It isn't much to look at," said Brentford, "but it's awfully cozy. It's a little haven of quiet just off a country road. Margot and I use it to get away from

the city during weekends, especially in the hot summers. The old farmer who owns it wants me to buy it. Perhaps I will, but I wanted to try it first. I'd renovate it throughout, pave the garage and put doors on it. That's Margot."

Margot was the good-looking but unsmiling woman standing outside the garage. She appeared to be several years younger than Brentford, whom I judged to be about forty, with a small but attractive figure and what he said was reddish hair.

"I became acquainted with her during the war. Her widowed mother was active in Bundles for Britain, and Margot used to help her. Margot still does a little charitable work of that sort." Brentford shook his head amusedly. "She seems to think the war's still on and there's a desperate need of old clothing for bombed-out families. She filled a trunk for me to bring along. I told her it was ridiculous, that there's absolutely no need for such now. She said I could turn the trunk over to some benevolent organization. I flatly refused to take it. Unknown to me, she had it delivered to the pier, and it was put into my stateroom just as we were about to sail. Heaven only knows what I'm going to do with it.

"I almost didn't make the sailing myself," Brentford went on. "It was only by the skin of my teeth I got

my passport renewed in time. I reached the consulate almost at closing hour, and the clerk told me I'd have to come back next day. I told him I was booked to sail next day provided my passport was in order, and I wanted it renewed right then and there. I told him I was a friend of the consul-general, and, by George, I'd phone Sir Henry himself, if necessary, to get that renewal." Brentford chuckled. "I don't know Sir Henry from Sir Bumbleton, but that clerk really got busy."

Next evening, Brentford invited me to his stateroom for a quiet nightcap together. I regarded it as a compliment that he should wish to share my company alone. When I looked in, around ten-thirty, he was waiting for me with Scotch and ice, soda and glasses. He seated me royally in the easy chair and then mixed a couple of highballs. Handing one to me, he lounged back on the settee, stretching out his long legs, and raised his glass.

"Cheerio and down the hatch, to make it appropriate to the milieu." He took a long drink and then extended his glass in the direction of the sizable steamer trunk standing in one corner. "I've finally made up my mind what to do about that miserable encumbrance—overboard!"

"Overboard?" I repeated, not thinking him serious.

"The ideal solution. Margot neglected to send the keys, or if she did send them, they weren't delivered to me. So I won't be able to open it for customs inspection. I'd have to break the locks. I don't intend to put on an exhibition like that on the pier, like some idiot tourist."

"If you inquire around," I suggested, "someone may come up with a key that'll fit. Trunk keys are very much alike, I've found. Or the ship's carpenter may be able to open it for you."

"Doc, old chap, I heartily dislike foisting my troubles onto third parties."

"It seems a pity to throw all that clothing overboard. Why not leave it behind? Tell the room steward what's in the trunk and let him do whatever he likes with it."

"And have him look daggers at me for the rest of the voyage, thinking that's to be the handsome tip I promised him in return for handsome service?"

"How will you explain to your wife?"

"Quite simple: it got lost—not an unusual happening with luggage, I think you'll agree. I needn't add that it was lost overboard. So, if you'll kindly lend me a hand—"

Brentford put down his glass and went to the trunk. I gave up trying to dissuade him; he had obviously

made up his mind. Brentford hooked back the door and, each of us taking one of the thick leather handles on either end, we carried the trunk out into the passageway. It seemed somewhat heavy for clothing, and I remarked so to Brentford.

He chuckled. "I wouldn't mind wagering that Margot thinks they're still on war rations, too, and threw in some cans of corned beef hash."

A young woman in evening dress was coming along the passageway. The sea was a little choppy, and we weren't too steady on our legs. She pressed close to the wall to let us by, as if fearful for her gown. She eyed us curiously, as if astonished to see the ship's doctor and Brentford doing porter's work. She treated Brentford to a big smile, and offered no comment.

A few doors from Brentford's stateroom was a short passage leading out to the lower deck. The deck was dimly lighted, and deserted except for a few passengers gathered along toward the forward end. We carried the trunk out to the rails, heaved it up to the topmost one, and then pushed it overboard. It struck the dark sea with a loud plop.

"Many thanks," said Brentford. "That's a load off my mind now, as well as off my hands. Now to cele-

brate a little with the nightcaps.”

At breakfast next morning, when I told about giving the trunk the deep six, Brentford came in for some banter as a wife deceiver, and we all laughed when Liebman, the law clerk, said, “Doc, you’re an accessory after the fact, aiding and abetting in disposing of the *corpus delicti*.”

Brentford didn’t win the shuffleboard or any of the competitions, but there was little doubt who would be chosen to present the prizes before the passengers assembled in the main lounge for the occasion. Brentford delivered a witty speech suited to each award, and when the winner went up to receive it, I’m not sure the loud applause wasn’t as much for Brentford as for the prize winner.

Before disembarking in London, Brentford shook my hand warmly. “If you get up to the city while in port, you’ll find me in the bar of the Savoy any day around opening time.” He then handed me his business card. “For your daughter.”

On the back he had penciled a note to Mr. Avelardi, requesting that all courtesies be shown to the lady named therein. “An infinitesimal token of my deep appreciation for making my voyage most enjoyable,” said Brentford. “I suggest you take it to Avelardi during your next stay in New York. He’ll

be leaving on his vacation soon.”

Next morning I had occasion to go up in the neighborhood of the Savoy toward noon, and I looked into the bar, anticipating a pleasant interlude with Brentford. There was no sign of him. I lingered until one o’clock and then left, disappointed.

On returning to New York, I telephoned my daughter from the ship that evening; being a widower, I lived aboard in the home port. My daughter hadn’t been down to New York yet to look at art-metal furnishings, and so I told her about Brentford and Avelardi. On sailing day, after doing a little shopping, I called at the Madison Avenue showrooms of Art Metal Crafts, and as I walked in among the vast display of ornamental tables and chairs, gates and arches, a salesman approached me.

“May I speak to Mr. Avelardi?” I asked.

He led me to a small office off one of the side rooms, where a man sat behind a desk on a wrought-iron chair with a filigree back. Avelardi was swarthy, with black, alert eyes under heavy brows. The afternoon was warm, and his black silk jacket was spread over the back of the chair. He rose to receive me.

I introduced myself and then said, “Mr. Brentford suggested I call on you.”

I handed him Brentford's card, note side up. Avelardi read it and turned it over. He appeared sunk in thought for a moment or so, and then glanced up at me.

"Dr. Jenks," he said, "I'll be most pleased to attend to your daughter. I must tell you, though, that Mr. Brentford is no longer with us."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I hastened to say. "I hadn't the slightest idea. If I'd known—"

"Not at all, Doctor. It will be a privilege to show your daughter around and advise her." Avelardi spoke with an accent. He seemed to run his eyes over me and my packages in appraisal. I was in civilian clothes, of course, nothing indicating I was a ship's officer. "May I ask if you're an old friend of Brentford's?"

"Not exactly an old one, but long enough to be a good one, I hope. He gave me that card a few weeks ago and suggested I take it to you next time I was in New York."

Avelardi seemed to hesitate, and then asked me to sit down. He resumed his chair behind the desk. I put my packages to one side and sat in another metal chair facing him, my curiosity aroused.

"As you're a good friend of Brentford's," began Avelardi gravely, "I feel I should perhaps let you know why he's no longer with us, since you're bound to hear of the

reasons eventually. Brentford phoned me about four weeks ago to say he was ill and wouldn't be able to come in for a few days—feverish, with high temperature. After two weeks went by and no sign or word of him, I phoned his apartment, but got no answer. The same result when I called next day. I could only conclude that he'd gone off with his wife somewhere, for rest or recuperation, perhaps, but I was puzzled that he hadn't let me know. It wasn't like Brentford. A couple of days ago I received a telephone call from his mother-in-law in California, inquiring for him. Yesterday, two police detectives came here to question me as to his whereabouts."

Avelardi paused, as if to allow time for the import of his last remark to sink in. "The detectives told me that both he and his wife had disappeared. They had returned from one of their customary weekends at their country cottage. Next morning, Monday, Brentford got the superintendent to bring up his big trunk from the basement storeroom. Neither Brentford nor his wife has been seen since early that week. The superintendent told the detectives that, so far as he could remember, it was the first time Brentford had used that trunk since moving into the apartment. The detectives asked me if he'd ever used it on business trips. I told

them he wouldn't need to, since all he carried were portfolios and catalogs. They gave me the impression of having dark suspicions about what the trunk might contain." Avelardi shook his head slowly in disbelief. "I know Brentford wasn't happy with his wife, but I find it unthinkable he'd—he'd do away with her."

I'd have been every bit as incredulous if I hadn't known what happened to that trunk, and if I hadn't been overwhelmed with sudden recollections that took on new meanings—Brentford saying he'd only just made the sailing, had managed to get his passport renewed in time by the skin of his teeth, would by George, phone Sir Henry himself if he had to; Liebman saying I was an accessory after the fact—true words said in a joke.

Something like shock must have shown in my face, for Avelardi hastened to say, "Of course, I may be seeing it all in the worst light, and Brentford and his wife will turn up safe and well."

I could have told him that a body inside a trunk at the bottom of the Atlantic wasn't likely to turn up safe and well anywhere—but I didn't. An innate sense of loyalty to a friend, even a comparatively new one, froze my tongue. I wanted to be far from Avelardi's office, to be alone and free to think.

I stood up. "I'm most distressed about Mr. Brentford, and sincerely concerned for him. I'm sorry I must leave so abruptly, but I have another engagement. I dropped in to give you the card. I'll call again next time I'm in town and hope you'll have good news of Brentford."

I hurried back to the ship, my engagement being to examine some new crew members to be signed on that afternoon. I was so agitated with thoughts of Brentford that more than one taxi or truck screeched to a halt, their drivers shouting obscenities at me for crossing against red Don't Walk signs. By the time I went aboard, miraculously unscathed, I'd come to a decision on Brentford.

As a law-abiding citizen, I should go to the police, but that appeared to me more like betrayal than performing a duty. I shrank from it. A true friend doesn't rush headlong to inform on another friend; he waits until he knows all the facts. Brentford didn't seem like a cold-blooded wife murderer. He might have killed in sudden anger or provocation—justifiable homicide. I decided to let the law take its normal course. The police would inquire at shipping offices and learn that Brentford had booked for London in the *Ambassadress*; they'd learn that the trunk had been delivered

to his stateroom; they'd eventually learn that it hadn't been landed in England. They would then make inquiries aboard the *Ambassadors*. That would be the time for me to decide whether or not to speak up.

I was puzzled, though, as to why Brentford gave me his card and urged me to call on Avelardi without delay. Surely he must have foreseen I'd hear that his wife was missing and that the police were inquiring for him. Or had he overlooked it, in his eagerness to do me a favor? It occurred to me that he may have intended that I should reveal his whereabouts, even to telling that he could be found in the bar of the London Savoy around opening time any day, but it baffled me to see what he'd gain by it. I felt a little resentful at the notion he was actually using me as a kind of accessory after the fact, but decided not to pass judgment on him until I was sure.

On my next return to New York, I half expected that detectives would board the ship to inquire about Brentford, but it was a trial lawyer who came to my office. He told me he'd been retained to defend Brentford on a murder charge, and would like to talk to me about him.

"So he was brought back from England," I said.

"Yes. The police learned through

Scotland Yard that he was staying with a sister just outside London. He waived extradition proceedings and was brought back by air. He made a full and voluntary confession, but told me privately how he persuaded you to help him with the trunk." The lawyer shook his head dubiously. He was young, and eager to enhance his reputation. "The best I can hope for is second-degree manslaughter."

"Then it wasn't premeditated murder," I said, with a feeling of relief.

"Not according to his statements, and I'm inclined to believe him, having become impressed by his personality. In the course of his conversations with you, did he ever tell you his wife was an alcoholic?"

I shook my head. "No mention whatever."

"He had no suspicion of it before he married her a year or so ago. Her mother concealed it from him, anxious to get her married off and herself to a retirement village in California. Brentford was furious when he found out. He tried his damndest to straighten out his wife, to get her to take a cure, but she was stubborn. In a rage, he once told her mother he wished alcohol were like sleeping pills and an overdose would kill, and he said that went for the mother too. You can imagine the effect of that on the

jury when the prosecution puts the mother on the witness stand.”

As the lawyer paused, a quirk of memory brought back to my mind the mystery novel with the voluptuous redhead sitting cross-legged in the witness chair.

“Brentford,” the lawyer resumed, “drove up to their cottage for that last weekend of theirs together. On the Saturday they drove over to the lake and got back late at night. Brentford happened to go into the kitchen as his wife was opening a bottle of whiskey she’d slipped into her weekend bag, intending to start on a binge. He went to take it from her. She tried to crown him with it, but caught him a glancing blow instead. The stinging pain made him lash out at her. She crashed backward over a metal chair and table and ended up on the floor. She didn’t get up. He didn’t know what had happened, but of one thing he was sure—she was dead and he’d killed her.”

“Most likely a broken neck or a cerebral hemorrhage,” I said, venturing a professional opinion.

“As Brentford put it,” the lawyer said, “he was caught with a *fait accompli*, so to speak. He had to get the body out of sight, and fast. He had, he told me, no intention of paying with life or freedom over a woman’s insatiable craving for alcohol. From crime novels, he’d gained

a smattering of criminal law, and he knew that if he could keep the police from finding the *corpus delicti*, as he called it, guilt would have to be proved on circumstantial evidence alone, the body of the crime, the true *corpus delicti*. Moreover, he’s a British subject, and if the matter of extradition arose, a British judge might refuse it on the grounds that there was not sufficient evidence to justify a murder charge.”

“Wouldn’t his flight be a strong evidence of guilt?”

“He was prepared to say he’d deserted his wife, because of her alcoholism. Also that she was alive when he fled from the apartment. He’d made it appear she’d returned from the weekend in the country with him. Their apartment was on the ground floor. The elevator operator, who also doubled as doorman, was about to take the elevator up in response to a tenant’s signal when Brentford hurried into the building. He swept past the elevator operator with the two suitcases, saying that his wife was parking the car. He had a moment’s panic when his mother-in-law telephoned from California later in the evening to tell her daughter she was leaving in a day or two for a cruise to Hawaii and back, and would drop her a card or two. Brentford told her that his wife had come back from the

cottage with a severe headache, taken a sedative, and gone to bed, but he'd tell her in the morning. Next morning—"

The lawyer stopped as a steward knocked and put his head around my door to tell me that the signing off was about to begin. As the door closed again, the lawyer continued. "Next morning, Brentford got the superintendent to bring up his trunk from the basement. He called out to his wife to bring him a dollar for the superintendent, and then, remarking that his wife must have gone into the bathroom, he got the dollar himself. He told the superintendent he was leaving on a business trip in a day or two, and his wife might go down to Atlantic City for a few days while he was gone. When the mother came back from her cruise and couldn't get any answers to her phone calls to the apartment or the cottage, she called Art Metal Crafts. Then she called the New York Police Department. That's where you were expected to come in."

"I don't understand," I said.

"The police were told by the elevator operator that the Brentfords had returned around the usual time from their last weekend at the cottage, and by the superintendent about the trunk. None of the other tenants had seen Mrs. Brentford since her return, but then she usu-

ally kept to the apartment when on a binge. The police found nothing unusual about the apartment, and coat and dress hangers strewn about made it appear that she may have gone off to Atlantic City in a hurry. The car was still parked. It looked as if she had left by train or bus. The police were inclined to suspect she'd gone by trunk somewhere.

"One of the detectives went back to the apartment house, thinking that Mrs. Brentford may have walked out of it after all, and hoping to find or hear something to indicate that she had. Meanwhile, her mother had come east to take charge of the Brentfords' affairs. She told the detective she didn't believe her daughter had gone to Atlantic City. Those empty dress hangers were to fool the police. He'd poisoned her and stuffed her into the trunk. Why, that brute of a son-in-law had made her daughter park the car on that Sunday evening, tired though she was and with a splitting headache, instead of doing it himself as he nearly always did.

"That remark led the detective to question the elevator operator again. The man said he hadn't actually seen Mrs. Brentford come into the building. He'd figured she'd come in while he was up at one of the other floors. Next day the two detectives went to the cottage, ac-

accompanied by state police officers. They found the body buried under the garage."

I stared at the lawyer, dumb-struck for the moment. "Then what was in the trunk?"

He smiled. "Actually, clothing and some canned goods, with a few heavy catalogs for extra weight. That's where the missing dresses went. The trunk was a red herring, to divert suspicion from the cottage by making it appear that she'd been killed in the apartment and her body smuggled away in the trunk. The scheme failed on a chance remark by the mother, but it could easily have failed in some other way. It was a long-shot gamble, but the best Brentford could conceive, given the circumstances. Still, there's a bare chance it might have succeeded. Brentford firmly believes it would have, if you hadn't failed him."

I was bewildered. "In what way?"

"He had planned on getting the room steward to help him throw the trunk overboard, but after the voyage had begun, he saw that the

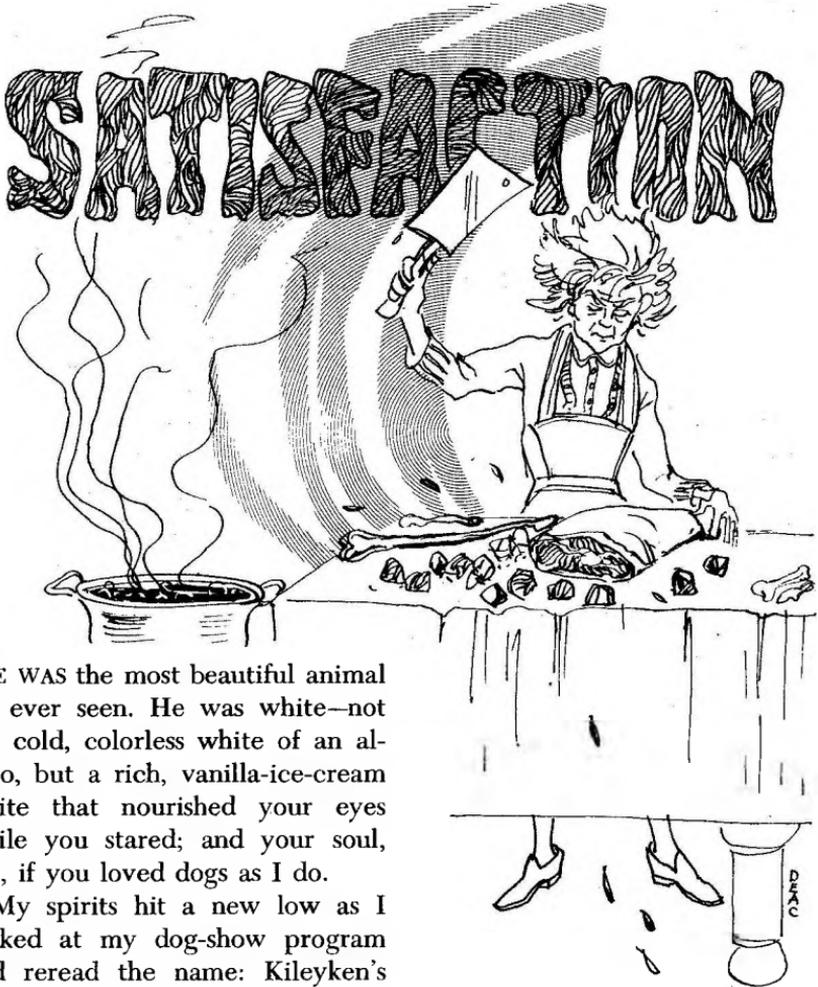
ship would get back to New York around the time his mother-in-law returned from Hawaii and started inquiries about her daughter. So if someone showed up with word of what had happened to the trunk, the police would be convinced that his wife's body was inside, or at least he hoped so. He chose you because you had a good reason for calling on Avelardi without delay. He can't understand why you didn't behave like the upright citizen he judged you to be."

The irony of the answer to that moved me to a moment of grim humor: by choosing to act as a true friend, I'd unwittingly done him a disservice. Then I felt a little sad that he hadn't rated me very high as a genuine friend.

"He asked me," the lawyer added, "to offer you his sincere apologies for so shamefully misusing your friendship, but it was a matter of expediency, and he's sure you'll understand. He also asked me to tell you something which seemed to amuse him. He said, 'Tell good old doc he makes a better doctor than an accessory after the fact.'"



*The name is the game, dear reader, and may you find 'satisfaction.'*



**H**E WAS the most beautiful animal I'd ever seen. He was white—not the cold, colorless white of an albino, but a rich, vanilla-ice-cream white that nourished your eyes while you stared; and your soul, too, if you loved dogs as I do.

My spirits hit a new low as I looked at my dog-show program and reread the name: Kileyken's Nemesis, Best of Breed, Best in

Show. I could never swing the deal now. With an across-the-board winner like Nemesis and all the publicity about it, Kiley Kennels was beyond my reach.

For three years, ever since I retired from the Air Force, I'd been



dropping by to see Mrs. Kiley at least once a month, mostly just to talk and to see the German shepherds, but also to renew my offer to buy the kennels from her. If I ever had a real, honest-to-goodness, technicolor dream, owning those kennels was it.

Mrs. Kiley was getting on—sixty-five or seventy, I'd guess. She was a little woman, not frail but short and sturdy. Her white hair fluffed out around her head like a tired halo, and her face itself was ordinary except maybe for an odd look around

her eyes. It was a sort of wary, waiting look that I couldn't figure out. I remember when I first started stopping by the kennels to look at the dogs, sometimes I'd feel those eyes following me while I wandered along the pens, and my scalp would begin to prickle; but after three or four visits and some conversation, the feeling disappeared and we got to be pretty good friends—at least as good friends as you can be with someone who never uses two words where one will do, and never smiles at you or anyone else. I actually began to like the old girl. There was a dedicated, no-help-needed air about her I admired.

It was hard to figure why she worked so hard. She ran the whole thing single-handedly as far as I could see. I had the impression she didn't need the money, and I couldn't see that she had any particular love for the animals, but she did seem to have a sort of grim determination to develop one special dog—a white German shepherd that would outclass anything in its field.

In three years of looking over each new litter, I'd been positive at least three times that she'd done it, but she wasn't satisfied. One had beige tipping on the hair around its ears, another had a fringe of brown on its tail, and the other had dark ridges above its eyes. It had to be

perfect for Mrs. Kiley and, looking at Nemesis now, I could see that she'd finally brought it off. He *was* perfect in every way—full-bodied, strong, bright-eyed and weighing in at a good eighty pounds. He made every other dog in the show *look* like a dog.

I didn't go by to congratulate Mrs. Kiley. Her gain was my loss, you might say, and I knew I couldn't afford to boost my offer any higher than I already had over the past year. Not that I'm such a poor loser, but I just thought it might be easier to be a good loser tomorrow.

That's why I was so surprised to get a telephone call from her, first thing the next morning. I'd slept late after an evening of moderate sorrow-drowning, and I was still half asleep when the phone rang. I fumbled past my untasted coffee and somehow or other got the receiver to my ear right side up.

"Mr. Dunham? This is Margaret Kiley. Are you still interested in buying the kennels?"

That brought me wide awake like a shot, and I assured her I most certainly was. Then I remembered I'd already reached my limit on an offer, and she could ask almost anything now and get it. It took a few minutes to get my predicament across to her, but it seemed that it wasn't any problem at all.

"I accept the offer you made last time I talked with you, Mr. Dunham. I appreciate your concern for the niceties but, I assure you, Nemesis has already given me the satisfaction for which I had hoped."

"But Mrs. Kiley," I sputtered, "at least you should keep him. My offer didn't cover a prize winner—just the kennels and the other dogs. He's a spectacular animal and you've worked a long time to produce him."

"Fifteen years, to be precise," she answered firmly. "But as I indicated, he has served his purpose. Do we have a deal?"

"You bet we do!" I said, before she could come to her senses, and we made an appointment to sign the papers that afternoon.

As soon as I had dressed and tossed down a swallow of my lukewarm coffee, I went straight to the bank and did a lot of bonds-savings-checking account shuffling to raise the ready cash for the deal. It's lonely being a middle-aged widower, but I could see that there was one advantage to it when financial matters came to a head. I didn't have to consult or convince anyone about the wisdom of the investment and the only signature anyone needed was mine. Too, I knew I'd be a lot less lonely when I had a yard full of those beautiful dogs for company. I'd been drifting from

one thing to another ever since I retired from the service, and I knew this would be something that would keep me happy for the rest of my life. People are all right, I guess, but I haven't known many I wouldn't swap for a good dog.

I was so afraid the old lady would change her mind, I got to the kennels twenty minutes early. I walked into the office section of the living quarters, found it deserted, and paced nervously for a few minutes while I considered all the things that could have gone wrong; someone had doubled my offer; all the dogs had come down with a mysterious, incurable disease and she was too distraught to see me; she had changed her mind and was ashamed to face me. When I found my imagination getting too fertile, I decided to walk around and look for her, or at least for a clue to the catastrophe.

I followed an odd sound that hit my ears as soon as I stepped outside the office door. *Chunk, chunk, chunk*, it went, as steady as a heart-beat, and I finally traced it down to a large shed near the exercise runs. I stuck my head in the door and saw Mrs. Kiley at a high wooden counter, rhythmically swinging a big cleaver. When my eyes had adjusted to the dimmer light, I could see that she was chopping meat into fist-size pieces. She finished as I

watched and, using the flat side of the cleaver, pushed the pile off into a vat that bubbled over a low burner at the side of the counter. As she turned, she caught sight of me and glanced quickly around her as if to see what else needed to be done. Then she waved me in as she planted the heavy cleaver in the wooden block with a vicious, practiced swing that shook me as well as the counter. Who would think an old woman could put that much weight behind a thing that size?

She moved over to the other end of the counter and started an efficient-looking grinding machine. Over its noise, she yelled, "You might as well start learning something about the operation. This is where I prepare the dogs' food. Mix it all myself."

She picked up a long, slender bone and started feeding it into the grinder. The scream of the machine made conversation impossible for the next few minutes, so I just watched her.

A funny sensation crept over me as I watched. The long bone she held moved in slowly and steadily, but it wasn't the bloody bone that really bothered me. It was the expression on her face. She looked almost *blissful*. She'd had an odd inflection when she talked about 'satisfaction' in our telephone conversation, but this was more than

satisfaction. This was *consummation!*

I kept my eyes on her in a sort of horrified fascination while she maneuvered the long bone and a couple of smaller ones through the machine. Then she abruptly flicked off the switch, and the sudden silence seemed more violent than the scream of the grinder. I must have jumped a foot. *I must be getting neurotic over this deal!*

If she noticed my uneasiness, which I was feeling pretty foolish about, she ignored it as she moved briskly around the shed, explaining the proportions of meat, bone meal, cereal and vitamins for her special mixture of dog food. She showed me the ledgers listing the ranches and dairy farms in the vicinity that supplied her with their culls from butchering. I could see that she ran a very economical business, with no wasted material or motion.

Maybe the prospect of getting out from under the pressure of business worries and feeding schedules had cheered her, because for the first time since I'd known her she seemed relaxed and almost jovial. We chatted like old friends while we walked the fifty yards or so back to the office, and I took advantage of her good mood to ask something I'd often wondered about.

"Mrs. Kiley, how did you ever get started with these dogs? Why

the obsession with a perfect white German shepherd?" I wished I hadn't used that word, but she didn't seem to mind.

"I didn't get started. My husband did."

I was quiet for a minute, acknowledging for the first time that there must have been a Mr. Kiley once, even if I'd never thought about it.

She went on slowly. "He wanted a championship white German shepherd all his life, and he finally bred one."

I waited for her to continue but she walked silently, her head down and her face again closed and set. Her expression didn't invite further questions, but I couldn't help it. "What happened to it—the dog?"

She gave me a long, expressionless stare as we reached the door to the office and she stopped with her hand on the latch, looking off across the yard toward the run where Nemesis stood watching us. Finally, she spoke: "It died the same night as my husband, fifteen years ago." She opened the door and walked in, and I knew the conversation was over.

I didn't have time for curiosity. The lawyer we had agreed on was waiting for us, and we went over the papers he had drawn up. There were a couple of things I didn't understand but he explained them to

me, so we concluded the sale, signed the papers, and I handed over a certified check in full payment.

I felt wonderful, better than I had for a good many years, and I hoped Mrs. Kiley was as happy to have it all settled as I was. It was hard to tell, but there was a satisfied expression on her face and that spooky, waiting look was gone from her eyes, so I decided she was.

She cheerfully agreed to stay a few days to show me the ropes. She was a good instructor and besides explaining all the details of the daily operation, registration procedures and feeding schedules, she somehow found time to clean the house, office and sheds like I'd scheduled a white-glove inspection. She'd stored a week's supply of dog food in the refrigerators, polished the trays, vats and grinder till they shone like mirrors, and scrubbed the counter till it was white. I knew I'd never be able to keep things up like that, so after she left I found a good, reliable housekeeper who would do the cleaning and food preparation while I managed everything else.

The first month I was so busy I hardly had a chance to realize that my dream had really come true, but finally I adapted to the routine and found time to enjoy it all. I got to know the dogs, their personalities

and peculiarities, and played midwife to a beautiful tawny bitch that upped my inventory by four pups. Best of all, I made friends with Nemesis. What a magnificent creature he is! I've gotten more satisfaction out of just *knowing* that dog than out of owning all the rest.

It was the nagging memory of that word 'satisfaction' that finally drove me to the public library. I kept thinking of Mrs. Kiley's use of the word, the expression on her face in the food shed, and her one mention of the other white dog.

So last night I took a run down to the library and asked for the bound copies of the town newspapers of fifteen years ago. I started with January and worked my way through the months. It was May before I found it. It was on the front page of the *Courier*, and there was a fuzzy picture showing a *Kiley Kennels* sign much like the one that's still standing, pens in the background and several police cars around a covered figure on the ground. The story was short and to the point:

#### KENNEL OWNER SLAIN

Samuel F. Kiley, owner of Kiley Kennels, was shot and killed last night as he apparently attempted to prevent the theft of his prize-winning dog, an unusual pure-white German shepherd.

According to police, Kiley

went outside shortly before midnight to investigate a disturbance among the dogs. He took with him a .38 caliber revolver which is assumed, pending ballistics tests, to be the murder weapon. It was found on the ground near his body and examination shows no fingerprints, leading police to believe the killer wore gloves.

The white dog was discovered dead in a pen from which the lock had been broken. A small scrap of hamburger in the pen was found to be heavily saturated with a barbiturate, and it is believed that the would-be thief had intended only to render the animal unconscious.

Mrs. Kiley told police that she had heard loud voices from the office earlier in the evening, and had seen a dark, late-model car drive off rapidly. Her husband told her that a young man had insisted on buying the dog and had become violently angry upon being refused. He did not men-

tion the man's name, but only that he had sworn to "get that white devil or one just like it, if it took him the rest of his life," according to Mrs. Kiley.

There was a little more about the lack of any solid clues in the case, but I didn't read it. I just sat there and thought for a long time.

I thought about Mrs. Kiley saying that Nemesis had "served his purpose," and I shuddered as I remembered the way she handled the cleaver, and the sound of those long, slender bones screaming through the grinder. But who'd ever believe the weird story that was taking shape in my mind? Talk about a lack of solid clues!

I slowly folded the newspaper, handed it in at the desk and walked outside. I sure don't have much sympathy for a guy who shoots an old man and feeds doped hamburger to a fine dog. Besides, like I said, I never knew many people I wouldn't swap for a good dog.

I got in my car and drove home to Nemesis. I'd never given his name an awful lot of thought, but you can bet old Mrs. Kiley did.



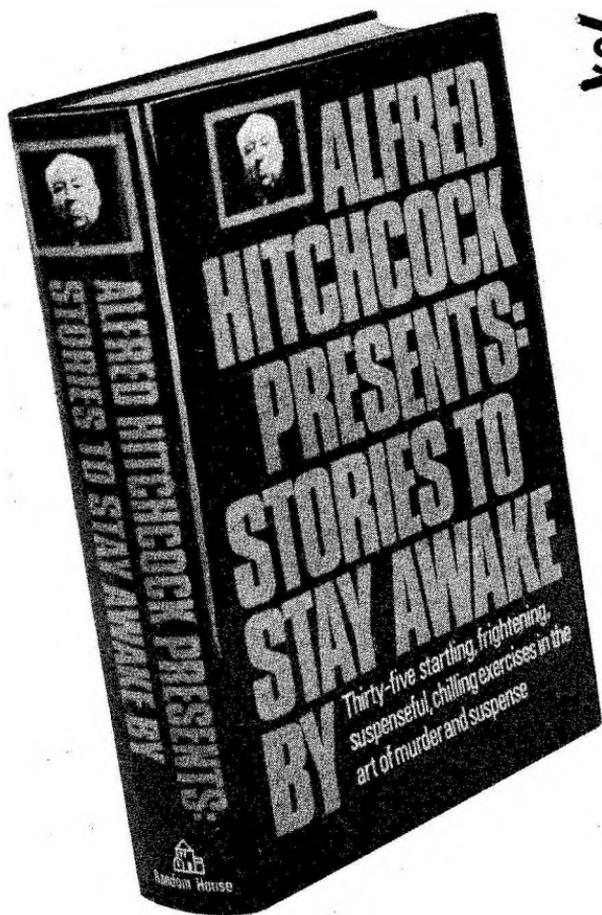
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*There is nothing quite so gratifying as having the last word.*



# WITHIN THE LAW

I HAVE an orderly mind. Loose ends bother me a lot, especially when I have a personal interest. Everybody should pay the piper—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, that sort of thing. Nobody believes in capital punishment more than I do. That's why I follow Jack Hall.

A little over a year ago Hall killed my wife. Nobody can prove it, not the best lawyers alive, because there just isn't any proof. Hall saw to that before he killed her. Adelaide was having an affair with him that was getting out of hand, that threatened to break up his marriage. Hall couldn't have that

happen for financial reasons, so he carefully arranged things and strangled Adelaide, and witnesses swore that he was a thousand miles away at the time.

I knew differently because I followed Adelaide that night and saw



*by John Lutz*

her meet Hall. He killed her, and I'll see that he pays. Oh, she was having an affair with him, but she was my wife, and he *did* kill her. A man ought to love his wife.

I'm walking behind Hall now in Denver. He travels all over the country on his job, and I follow him on my savings account. He'll go into that cocktail lounge, I know. He frequents places like that.

I go into the lounge too, and find a booth where I can watch him sitting at the bar. He knows I'm there. I'm always careful to let him see me. His handsome, beefy face is red as he catches sight of me for a moment in the bar mirror as he orders his drink. It's beginning to bother him more and more lately, me following him.

Hall will probably come over and try to talk again, try to bring things out in the open where he can deal with them, but I see to it that our conversations never take the pressure off him. I know what's bothering him, and he has real reason to fear.

He's standing over me now, his drink in his hand, paunchy but athletic-looking in his dark slacks and tailored gray sport coat. Quite a lady's man.

"When are you gonna give it up, Brewster?"

"I think you know by now, Jack, that I'll never quit." I always call

him by his first name. It annoys him.

He sits down across from me, uninvited. "But I don't get it! What do you think you're gonna accomplish by followin' me all over the country?"

I keep my voice calm. "You're going to pay for killing my wife."

"But I didn't kill your wife!" Hall looks at me with angry puzzlement, trying to convince himself that I'm just a harmless nut. "Besides," he says, "that's a closed issue as far as the police are concerned. I was a suspect and I was cleared."

"As far as the police are concerned, not I."

He gives a hollow laugh. "It's the police that count, buddy boy. I was cleared and there's not much you can do about it." He raises his glass and takes a big swallow. "Just between you and me, Adelaide was going to leave you anyway. Why waste your time eatin' your heart out over a dead broad that hated your guts?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Oh, yeah? Well, what you don't understand is that the whole thing is over. You can follow me till the cows come home and it won't change a thing. If you so much as even threaten to harm me I'll have you arrested, and if you did kill me you'd fry for it."

"I know, the letter." Hall had in-

formed me earlier that he'd left a letter with his lawyer to be opened in the event of his death. The letter explained how I'd been following him and named me as his probable killer. Besides, I had a good motive; it was no secret that I thought he killed Adelaide.

"You can't prove anything," Hall says. "You *know* you can't prove anything."

"Do I?" I sip my drink slowly. "I think you should get the electric chair, Jack. I think for killing Adelaide you should spend the long months on death row while your appeals all come to their predictable deadends, while you count your days, your meals, your minutes, your steps to the execution room. I think you should count your seconds while they fasten the metal cap to your shaved head."

"Knock it off!" Hall is sweating and his knuckles are white where he grips his glass.

I shrug. "As you observed, I can't prove anything."

His dark brows knit in anger as he stares hard at me. "Then why keep followin' me?"

"I just happen to go where you go."

He clenches his jaws, still staring at me, then stands and walks out. I wait a few seconds, then I get up and follow him.

Hall is right, of course. I can't

prove he murdered Adelaide, or I would have a long time ago. Still, I know a way to make him pay. Justice demands that a murderer pay for his crime.

I'm staying at the same hotel that Hall is. I always do it this way so I can keep a closer eye on him. Not that it's necessary anymore. He doesn't bother to try to get away from me. He knows that even if he does manage to lose me I'll just pick him up at his next stop. I know his business itinerary and I know all his clients. If worse came to worst, I suppose I could just wait by his home until he showed up and then start following him again. But it's never come to that.

As I follow Hall back to the hotel I think about the letter. I don't doubt for a moment that he wrote one and that it is in the possession of his lawyer. He thinks it protects him from harm, and in a way I guess it does. I smile as I walk behind him into the lobby. I wouldn't have the stomach to kill him anyway. That would be breaking the law.

We hit Saint Louis that month, and Indianapolis and Chicago—then on to Detroit. I know his route so well I could almost fly ahead and meet him there. But that would be defeating my purpose, so I stay close to him, almost always within sight, while I wait for him to

crack—and he's close to cracking. In Indianapolis he came over to me in the hotel bar and threatened to hit me, but I told the bartender to call the police. That calmed him down.

I stay very close to Hall now, and it doesn't surprise me when I overhear him ask on a lobby telephone for a reservation on the afternoon flight to Miami. Still, I think my heart skips a beat, and I'm not an emotional man. Miami is not on Hall's itinerary.

I call the airline he uses and book a seat on the same flight he's on. Usually I do that. I like to sit in front of him on the plane so he can see the back of my head. We both know he can't give me the slip on an airplane.

Hall rents a car at the Miami airport and drives to a big motel out on the edge of the city in a fairly secluded area; but this time I don't stay where he's staying. I check in at one of the biggest hotels I can find, with a private beach and recreation area. The place is thronging with people, and I take a room on the middle floor with a window overlooking a busy street. It's a small, well-furnished room, quiet but surrounded by activity. Perfect. After placing a phone call to Hall to irritate him and let him know where I'm staying, I settle down to wait.

Hall shows up that very night, as I thought he would. He can't afford to waste time. When I open the door he seems ready to force his way in, and it kind of surprises him when I smile and stand back to let him enter.

"To what do I owe the honor?" I ask.

Hall looks around him, as if checking the room. The blinds are closed. He draws a gun from a pocket of his uncharacteristic drab brown suit.

"I take it you're going to kill me," I say.



"That's right," Hall says, and he grins, but his small eyes are angry. "You asked for it. It's the only way I can get you off my back."

"But aren't you afraid you'll be caught?"

"That argument won't save you," Hall says, his grin widening. "I traveled here under a different name, and I'll return the same way tonight. Nobody'll even know I was in Miami. Even if they suspect, I bought me a nice alibi in Detroit. Right now I'm back there playin' poker in a hotel room."

"You were at the races when Adelaide was murdered, weren't you?"

"Sure," Hall says. "I even had the torn tickets to prove it—mailed to me special delivery from Louisville."

"Clever," I say with admiration.

"Too clever for you, buddy boy. This time you outsmarted yourself, flyin' here like a regular pigeon, so fast you couldn't even have had time to tell anyone where you were going or why. By the time they find your body I'll be back in Detroit. And the best part is, as far as the

police are concerned, I don't even have a motive to kill you."

"There's one thing," I say. "Suppose I lured you here to kill you?"

Despite himself, Hall's florid face suddenly goes pale. Then he regains some of his composure. "You won't harm a hair on my head, pal. Remember the letter?"

I swallow and nod.

"Into the bedroom!" His voice is higher now as he gets up his nerve for the actual business of killing me.

"You'll get the electric chair," I say to him as he jabs the gun barrel into the small of my back and pushes me into the bedroom. "You'll be counting those last seconds."

"You got it backwards, buddy boy." He picks up a pillow and folds it around the gun.

I don't even hear the shots as I feel the bullets rip into my chest and I fall backward onto the bed. I'll bet he wonders why I'm smiling when I die. I bet that will bother him.

He doesn't know yet about the recorder in my pocket. Or about the letter I left with *my* lawyer.



*This is what one could call a most timely double take.*



**S**HERIFF FRANK MILES already had two things worrying him the afternoon he learned about the escapee.

One of those things was that the election, in which his job was on the block, was only two weeks away, and the consensus around town was that he was going to run second. A strong second, but still second.

The other thing that was worrying him was Gloria.

It was Gloria he was talking to on

the phone just before Billy Ruud, his deputy, came in to tell him about the escapee.

"You did a lot of sweet talking when we first started seeing each other, Frank," Gloria was saying. "You had me convinced that you really cared."

"You know I cared," Miles said. He pictured her long red hair the way it looked spread out on a pillow. "I cared a lot."

"Cared? Or still care?" she

wanted to know. Her voice was bitter.

"Both," he told her. "Only—"

"Only what?"

"Skip it."

"No, I won't. Only what?"

"We've been through it before, Gloria," he said patiently. "There's a way you want to live and there's a way I want to live. Unfortunately, they're two different ways. Yours is a little too rich for me."

"That's a pretty weak excuse, Frank," she snapped.

"I don't think so. When it comes to money, I can't compete with your husband; it's as simple as that."

"It's not that you *can't* compete, Frank. It's that you *won't*."

"Have it your way," he said. He swore silently under his breath.

Before Gloria could continue, there was a quick knock on his office door.

"Hold on a minute," he said into the phone. He swiveled his chair around to face the door. "What is it, Billy?" he called.

The door opened just far enough for Billy Ruud to stick his head in. "Teletype from the highway patrol, Sheriff. Some guy busted out of Sanford and they think he might be heading our way."

Sanford was the state prison for the criminally insane. It was twenty miles into the next county.

"How long's he been out?" Miles asked.

"They don't know for sure," Billy said. "He was there for the morning count but missing at the noon count. They spent two hours searching for him inside before they notified the highway patrol."

"That was nice of them," Miles said. He did some quick calculating. Morning count at Sanford was at seven o'clock. Assuming that the escape was made within the next hour, by eight at the latest, that would give the escapee a four-hour start by the time the noon count was taken. Add two more hours while they searched the prison, that



by Clark Howard

gave him six hours. It was twenty past two now; the guy could have been out for six-and-a-half hours. Figuring three miles per hour through the woods and across the fields if he stayed on foot, he could be walking across the county line any time. "What was he in for?" he asked Billy.

"Murder," the deputy said quietly.

Miles nodded and Billy withdrew his head and closed the door.

Miles put the phone back to his ear. "I've got to go," he said. "Some guy's loose from Sanford and he's had enough time to get almost this far."

"I want you to call me back later," she said firmly. "We've got to get this settled between us."

"I don't know if I'll have time—"

"Then make time. If you don't call me, I'll call you down there."

Miles sighed wearily. She knew he couldn't permit her to call him at the office. The whole town would know about it before supper.

"All right, Gloria, I'll call you."

"Before six." Six was when her husband got home.

"Before six," he promised.

She hung up without saying good-bye.

Miles put his own receiver down. He could feel stomach acid bubbling inside him like a lava pit. Just last week, old Doc Scott had told

him he was on his way to an ulcer if he didn't settle down a little. That was funny, he thought. He was being picked to lose an election—and his job as sheriff—in two weeks; he had Gloria to contend with; and now an escaped murderer was believed to be heading for his jurisdiction. With all that, he was supposed to settle down a little.

He got up from the desk and went into the private bathroom that adjoined his office. From a package in the medicine cabinet he took some seltzer and dropped it into a tumbler of cold water. While it dissolved, he leaned against the clean, cold tile of the wall. He liked the private bathroom that went with his office. He had drawn it into the plans himself when the county built him a modern new jail three years ago, shortly after he had been elected to his second four-year term as sheriff. Now, from what Billy told him most people around town were saying, the private bathroom *and* the office would soon belong to someone else.

When the seltzer had fizzed to effervescent water, Miles drank it down and rinsed out the tumbler. He took his gun-belt from a coat rack and went on out to the public section of the sheriff's office. Agnes Hiller, his combination female deputy and office clerk, and Billy Ruud were at the teletype reading the

latest highway patrol bulletin.

"What's the rundown?" Miles asked.

Billy, who had been writing the information in his notebook, read it to him. "Guy's name is Jacob Dall. Caucasian. Age forty-nine. Fiveten, a hundred and sixty. Gray-black hair cut short, gray eyes, prominent mole on left side of his chin. Last seen wearing green twill prison pants and a white shirt."

Miles nodded. "What's his record?"

"Killed his wife eleven years ago when he came home from the office early one afternoon and caught her without any clothes on letting the guy next door out the back way. He tried to get the guy too, but they caught him first. Apparently his mind snapped either before, during, or after the killing, because three court-appointed psychiatrists all certified him insane. The court couldn't bring him to trial so it committed him under the Insane Criminal Act. He's been in Sanford for ten years and been a model prisoner."

"Until eight o'clock this morning," Miles said. He buckled on the gun-belt he was holding. "Let's get out on patrol," he told Billy Ruud. "You take the county line from Miller's Point east to the main highway. I'll cruise the west end to River Road and back up to town."

He turned to Agnes Hiller. "Ag, you get on the phone and notify all the farms outside the northern city limits. Use the private line so the public number can stay open. Before you do that, get hold of Clary and Elton and tell them I might need them as special deputies and to stand by. Call us on the radio if anything else comes over the teletype."

"Got it, Sheriff," Agnes Hiller said. She was a tall, big-boned woman who had once been a sergeant in the Wacs. Miles had complete confidence in her, as he did in Billy Ruud. It was a shame that they would also be without jobs if he lost the election.

As they walked out of the jail, Miles and Billy ran into the very man who was opposing Miles in the election. He was Able Cross, the town's chief of police. With him were his two city patrolmen, both of whom were related to him by marriage. A few people paused on the street to watch the confrontation between the two men.

"Afternoon, Frank," the chief said. "Did you get the bulletin on that escaped murderer?"

"Afternoon, Able. Yes, I got it."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going out and patrol the county, Able," Miles said, "as I presume you're going out to patrol the

city. That's about the gist of it."

"I reckon you're calling in extra men."

"No, I'm not."

"I think you should," Able Cross said, a little too loudly to suit Miles. "The people who live in the county deserve as much protection as the people who live in the city. *I'm* calling out extra men."

"You do that," Miles said evenly. "Put a couple more of your relatives on the city payroll. Before *we* spend any extra county money, we're going to find out first if the escapee is even *in* our jurisdiction." He jerked his head at his deputy. "Come on, Billy."

The two of them stepped past Cross and his men and went around to the side of the jail where their cruisers were parked. Before they got into their cars, Miles looked over at Billy and said, "How did he do it anyway?"

Billy frowned. "How did who do what?"

"Dall. How did he kill his wife?"

"Oh. He strangled her."

Miles nodded and proceeded on into the car. "See you later," he said. "Keep in contact on the radio; I'll do the same."

"Right."

The sheriff and his deputy drove off in opposite directions.

Miles drove north to the county

line road, then turned west. He rode the front seat more erect than usual; his eyes behind wraparound sunglasses were alert and searching. He drove slowly, scanning the fields and farmlands on both sides of the road for any sign of life or movement.

Miles felt good behind the wheel of the cruiser. He liked the big, powerful car. It felt good to step down on the accelerator and feed gas to an interceptor engine with special gears that could fire the vehicle from zero to ninety in twelve seconds. It was comfortable to know that on the roof was a brilliant 600-candlepower red spotlight, and under the hood a shrieking, ear-piercing siren, either of which could instantly increase the heartbeat of any careless Florida-bound tourist failing to observe the county's speed limits. It was also reassuring to be able to look above the sun visors where a special rack he had designed himself held a riot gun; and feel under the front seat where two spring clamps supported a short-barreled carbine.

Reaching a stretch of road that was cleared and flat on both sides and could be scrutinized with a single, sweeping glance, Miles relaxed and sat back from the wheel. The cruiser, like everything else, he thought, would probably soon belong to Able Cross. The election

was in two weeks, and if he lost he would have only two months left in office; two months to get things in order and turn them over to his successor; two months to try to decide what to do, after eight years as sheriff.

He sighed and thought of Gloria. If she had her way about it, he wouldn't even stay the two months. She wanted him to quit and run away with her before his term of office even expired—to go to Mobile or Atlanta or Charleston and become an insurance salesman or a real estate agent. He grunted softly. He could just see himself lugging a briefcase around all day—no authority, no respect, no nothing.

He came to River Road and turned south, back toward town. The land here, close to the river, was wooded, and he slowed down again and began moving his eyes alertly behind the sunglasses. He cruised for twenty minutes, observing nothing.

When he reached the city limits again, he remembered he had promised to call Gloria back. He made a U-turn, and headed down End Street, the last street inside city territory. Half a mile down, he turned into a one-lane drive that led away from the street and dead-ended fifty yards outside the city limits. At the end of the lane was the neat little three-room cottage

he rented from the county for next to nothing.

Miles pulled up close to the house and stopped directly next to his bedroom window. He unhooked the mike of his two-way radio and stretched its cord through the car window so that it would lay on the sill of his bedroom window. Leaving it, he walked around to the door, went inside to the bedroom, and raised the window. Stretching out on the bed, he lifted the receiver of his phone and dialed.

"Hello." Her voice was edgy.

"It's me," he said.

"Oh." She was silent for a moment. "Did you catch the escapee yet?" she asked finally.

"No. Not yet." He wondered about her voice. "You sound funny. Did I wake you up?"

"No. 'Course not. How in hell could I sleep with you acting the way you are?"

*Drinking*, Miles thought. Probably started as soon as she hung up from their earlier conversation. That was all he needed; for her to get stoned and shoot her mouth off to someone about him. That would really sew up the election for Able Cross.

"I've made up my mind about us, Frank," she said thickly but firmly.

"Oh? In what way?"

"We're leaving, Frank. We're not going to postpone it any longer.

We're leaving tomorrow morning, early."

"You'd better quit drinking in the afternoon, Gloria," he told her. "You can't hold your liquor that well."

"I can hold it well enough to know what I'm saying," she warned, "so you'd better listen. As soon as my dear, darling husband leaves the house in the morning, I am going to pack my suitcases, put them in my car, and come over to your house to get you. I should be there around ten o'clock. If you're not there, packed and waiting, I'm going to come uptown looking for you—"

"You're talking like a fool, Gloria—"

"I *was* a fool, Frank; a fool to let you keep putting off making any definite plans about us and our future! But not anymore. I'm through letting you treat me like some cheap slut!"

"You're being unreasonable," Miles said tightly. "We both went into this with no strings, no promises—"

"Well, I'm making you a promise now, lover," she said. "If I have to come looking for you tomorrow, I'll tell everybody on the town square *why*. Just think what *that* will do to your precious reputation."

Miles sat up and was about to swear at her when he heard a voice

outside. He glanced out and saw the red bulb light up on the car radio.

"Hold on a minute," he told Gloria. He dropped the receiver onto the bed and stepped over to the window to pick up the mike. He depressed the speaker button. "This is Miles. Go Ahead, Ag."

"Sheriff, Commissioner Haley is in your office. He wants to see you as quick as you can get back."

Miles sighed wearily. Haley was chairman of the County Commission. He and his two fellow commissioners approved the annual budget for the sheriff's office, and controlled, among other things, the sheriff's salary and expenses. They also controlled quite a few votes.

"Do you know what he wants, Ag?"

"No, but I know he was talking to Able Cross out in front of city hall before he came over here."

*That figures*, Miles thought. "Okay, tell him I'm on my way in. Anything new on Dall?"

"Negative," said Agnes Hiller.

"Okay. Ten-four." Miles put the mike back on the sill and picked up the phone again. "Still there?"

"Aren't I always?" Gloria said with feigned sweetness. "I suppose you have to hurry off somewhere, like always."

"Yes, I have to go—"

"Don't bother to explain; I've probably heard it before anyhow."

Just remember what I said and be ready to leave at ten tomorrow morning. 'Bye, lover.'

She hung up, leaving Miles with a dead phone in his hand for the second time that day. He muttered a curse and put the receiver back in its cradle. Once again he could feel the hot acid churning in his stomach. Old Doc Scott had probably called it right: he *was* getting an ulcer, sure as hell. Why, he wondered, had he ever allowed himself to get mixed up with Gloria in the first place? He smiled sardonically. Oh yeah, he remembered—that red hair. He had to see that red hair spread out on a pillow.

Miles left the bedroom and started for the kitchen where he kept the seltzer. As he was about to pass in front of his big kitchen window he happened to glance outside and saw a movement. Instinctively he froze short of the window and remained concealed. What cautioned him was the fact that the window faced west and there was nothing west of the house except a vacant field. No one ever went out there; there was no reason for anyone to go out there; it wasn't even a shortcut to anywhere.

Miles went back into his bedroom and got a pair of binoculars. Returning with them, he stood well back from the window and focused on the field. When he zeroed in on

his objective, the sheriff's hands tightened around the binoculars like a vise and his mouth went suddenly dry.

The movement in the field was a crouching man. He had gray-black hair, cut short, and was wearing a white shirt and green twill prison pants.

Miles watched the man as he approached the boundary of the yard. The patrol cruiser was parked on the east side of the house, out of sight. From all outward appearances, the house must look deserted, Miles realized, and it was certainly isolated enough to appeal to an escapee looking for a change of clothes and some cash.

Jacob Dall paused behind a tree when he got to the edge of the yard. *He's getting ready to make his move*, Miles thought. There was a side porch with a door opening into the house between the livingroom and kitchen. It was the obvious place for Dall to try. Miles put the binoculars down, stepped over to the door, and silently turned the inside knob to unlock it. Then he slipped a flexible sap out of his back pocket, flattened himself against the wall, and waited.

A moment later, Dall darted across the yard and onto the porch. He crept to the door and gripped the knob. When the door opened, he pushed it far enough to slip

quickly inside. He was just closing it behind him when Miles slammed the sap against the back of his head and knocked him unconscious.

Miles caught Dall before he hit the floor and dragged him into the kitchen where he laid him on the floor next to the sink. He handcuffed Dall's wrists together, then went out to the car and got a set of leg irons from the trunk. Back inside, he shackled one of Dall's ankles, wrapped the chain around the pipe under the sink several times, then shackled the other leg.

He examined the swelling where he had slugged the man. There was a considerable bump behind the right ear, but the skin wasn't broken and Dall appeared to be breathing easily, so Miles decided

he was all right. He thought about taping the man's mouth but quickly dismissed the idea. Even if Dall did wake up and start yelling, the house was too isolated for anyone to hear him.

Miles locked up the house again, got back into his cruiser, and headed for town.

When Miles walked into his office, he found Commissioner Haley pacing back and forth impatiently.

"What the devil took you so long, Frank?"

"I was clear out on River Road, Commissioner," Miles lied.

"Have you ordered up any special deputies yet?"

"Not yet," Miles said.

"Why not?" Haley wanted to



know. "The *city* has four extra men on duty right now."

"How many of them are related to Cross?" Miles asked blandly.

"How would I know!" Haley stormed. "Anyhow, that's not the point! What concerns me is that Cross has seven men covering the city, and there's only you and Billy taking care of the whole *county*. That doesn't look good, Frank. There's a maniac loose and people are scared."

"There's no definite indication that he's headed our way," Miles pointed out, "and even if he is, the county territory is reasonably secure. All the farm residents have been alerted and Billy and I have set up patrol routes—"

"I know all that, Frank," Haley said irritably, "but I'm still concerned about public opinion. There's an election in two weeks."

"How well I know."

"All right, then. When do you plan to get some men on the job?"

"As soon as I feel that it's necessary."

There was an urgent knock on the office door and Agnes Hiller rushed in. "Sheriff, there's been a killing," she said tensely. "The call just came in—"

"Who and where?" Miles asked, already starting to move.

"Old Doc Scott's wife—"

"Oh, no." Haley said, paling.

"—found strangled right in her own home!" Agnes continued.

"Get on the radio," Miles said, already moving through the outside office. "I'll tell you what to do on my way out there."

"Wait for me!" Haley said, hurrying after Miles. The sheriff was nearly to his car by the time Haley caught up with him.

Both men buckled their seat belts simultaneously. An instant later Miles was speeding toward the Scott residence, red light and siren going full cycle. He steered the cruiser with one hand and used the radio with the other.

"Ready, Ag? Okay. First, raise Billy; have him continue his patrol on a one-alert basis. Next: get hold of Clary and Elton; tell them I want roadblocks set up at State Highway and the county line, and where River Road intersects the bypass. Next: get back on the private line and call all the farms again; tell them to lock their houses and stay inside. You got all that?"

"Affirmative," Ag verified.

"Ten-four," Miles said, hooking the mike in place and taking a corner on two wheels at the same time.

Three minutes later, the cruiser screeched to a stop in front of old Doc Scott's two-story Colonial home. Two city police cars were already there. Chief Able Cross was just emerging from the house with

one of his men as Miles and Haley got out of the car. Miles recognized the local newspaper reporter waiting on the sidewalk.

"What are you doing here, Frank?" Cross said for the benefit of the reporter. "This is a city case."

"Have you caught Dall yet?" Miles asked.

"No, we—"

"Then it's anybody's case," Miles snapped. "This house is only a quarter of a mile from the city limits; the killer could easily be in county territory. Now, let's knock off the showboating and forget about politics for a while. Our job is to protect this community; you in the city, me in the county. So far you're not doing *your* job too well, but I intend to do *mine*." He glanced at Commissioner Haley and the reporter. They were taking it all in. "Now—let's get down to business! Were there any witnesses?"

"Why, uh, no . . . not that we know of." Cross answered subserviently.

"Who found the body?"

"Doc Scott's cook. She just came back from the market."

"How'd the killer get in?"

"Forced the kitchen screen door."

"Probably left the same way, then," Miles said. "And if he went across the back yard and kept going—"

"It would take him straight into county territory," Cross said. He was recovering some of his composure. "That would make him your baby, Frank."

Miles narrowed his eyes and smiled tightly for the benefit of his audience. "I'll let you know when my deputies and I pick him up, Able," he said flatly.

Before anyone could say anything further, Miles got quickly back into the cruiser and raced away, siren and red light going again.

Ten minutes later, with the siren and red light off, Miles arrived back at his house. He drove around to the rear and parked next to the back door. When he got inside, he found Jacob Dall still unconscious on the floor. Unshackling him, Miles dragged him out to the car and laid him face down on the back seat. He cuffed his hands behind him, then used the leg irons to hog-chain his hands to his ankles. When Dall was securely trussed up, Miles got back behind the wheel and pulled away from the house.

He headed out the way he had come into town earlier, toward River Road. After he had gone a couple of miles, he radioed the jail and was told by Ag Hiller that the two roadblocks he ordered were up. He told Ag he was on his way to

search the dirt roads that ran into the fields a mile or so behind old Doc Scott's house. Clearing the frequency, he called Billy Ruud in the other cruiser and told him the same thing. He checked Billy's position and was satisfied to learn that his deputy was a good four miles away.

When he finished on the radio, Miles turned east into the first back road he came to. He bounced and jogged over the hard ruts in the road, leaving a thick trail of dust behind him. Presently he came to another dirt road; he turned south, back in the general direction of town. One good thing about being born and raised in the same county, he thought absently, he knew every field road that existed. Half a mile farther on, he turned east again.

Miles drove for five minutes, then stopped and parked. He estimated he was about a mile and a quarter directly behind old Doc Scott's house. There were at least three-quarters of a mile of open fields on every side of him. It was the perfect place to capture Jacob Dall.

He got out of the cruiser and opened the trunk. He took out a pair of soiled gardening gloves and threw them on the front seat. From a plastic bag he removed a few pieces of folded currency, a woman's wristwatch, and a diamond wedding band. He put the articles in his shirt pocket and but-

toned the flap. The last thing he took out before closing the trunk lid was a .32 caliber chrome revolver.

Holding the revolver in his left hand, Miles laid the muzzle across his right forearm, lifted it a fraction of an inch, took a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger. The blast of the bullet tore off a strip of his shirt sleeve and seared a neat crease in the flesh beneath. Miles groaned and dropped the gun; he swore in pain; tears flooded his eyes. He blinked and watched his own blood rise to the surface of the wound. Quickly he went to the glove compartment and took out a first aid kit. He bit the wrapper from a gauze pad, blotted the seeping blood away, and poured iodine along the open track of flesh. It burned like fire and he groaned and cursed again. Finally he got another gauze pad over the wound and wrapped a piece of tape around his arm to hold it in place. He went back, picked up the .32, and stuck it under his belt.

Getting back in the car, he turned around and headed out of the field. On his way back to town, he radioed the jail again. "Ag, I've got our man," he said. "Call Billy and have him get the roadblocks down. Let all the farms know that the danger's over. Tell the city dispatcher to notify Chief Cross. Then get a cell ready—and see if you can

get me a doctor, somebody besides old Doc Scott; I've been shot slightly."

He ten-foured out before Ag could ask any questions. The story, he knew, would be all over town in fifteen minutes.

On the way back to town, Jacob Dall awoke. "Where . . . where am I?" he asked groggily.

"In a police car," Miles told him. "Just relax and the chains won't bother you."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Jail first. Then back to the hospital probably."

"Are you . . . going to hurt me?"

"No," Miles said quietly. "You're a sick man, Mr. Dall; nobody's going to hurt you." And nobody would either; there was no death penalty in their state. Even if there were, it wouldn't affect Jacob Dall; he'd been certified insane.

When they got to the jail, a crowd had already gathered. Miles parked directly in front of the entrance. He unlocked the leg irons and helped Dall out of the car. Commissioner Haley hurried down the jail steps to meet him and together they led the prisoner through the crowd and inside.

After Dall was locked up, Miles lay down in an adjoining cell while young Dr. White, old Doc Scott's assistant, cleaned and dressed his wound and gave him a tetanus

booster to forestall infection.

Miles handed Haley the chrome revolver. "Old Doc Scott's gun," he said. "Dall must have taken it from the house after the killing. He had this stuff, too—" He scooped the money and jewelry out of his shirt pocket. "I doubt if there'll be any of his prints in the house; he had a pair of Doc's gardening gloves on when I caught him; probably picked them up outside before he went in. They're on the seat of the car."

Someone had come in while Miles was talking. He looked back and saw that it was the reporter who had been at the Scott residence earlier.

"Why didn't you shoot him, Sheriff?" the reporter asked. "You had every right to."

"He's a sick man," Miles said. "He's not responsible. I didn't want to shoot him unless I had to. As it turned out, I didn't have to."

"He sure came close to getting you," the reporter remarked, looking at the sheriff's bandaged arm. "You took a big chance."

"That's what the job's all about," Miles said. "That's what the people elected me for—and that's what I'll go on doing until they elect somebody else."

"I don't think they'll be electing anyone else for a while," Commissioner Haley said. "You not only

kept the county safe, but you captured the city's killer for them. I'll see to it that you get the county commission's endorsement for reelection, and after this story gets out, you'll get the people's vote also."

"I'll second that," the reporter said.

"Nice of you both to say so," Miles said. "I hope you're right." He stood up, turning to Dr. White. "How's old Doc Scott?"

"Broken up," the young doctor said. "But it's the second time around for him, as you know, and he's seen a lot of dying over the years. He'll be all right."

"Sure," Miles said. He pursed his lips in thought for a moment, then said, "Are they over at Haskell's Funeral Home yet?"

Dr. White nodded affirmatively.

"I think I'll walk over for a minute," Miles told them.

They let him go without objecting. Miles left by the back door and walked down the alley. Haskell's was at the end of the block. He avoided a small crowd there by using the ambulance entrance. One of

the undertaker's assistants led him to a preparation room where old Doc Scott sat alone by the wall. On a portable table in the center of the room, under a sheet, lay the body of old Doc Scott's wife.

Miles walked over and lifted the sheet a few inches. Old doc's young wife was as beautiful in death as she had been in life. Her red hair was spread out over her shoulders the way Miles had always liked it. The bruises on her neck where Miles had strangled her were barely visible. Miles was glad he had done it quickly so that she hadn't suffered. Of course, he'd *had* to do it quickly; between the time he'd captured Dall and the time he got back to his office where Commissioner Haley was waiting for him, only a few minutes had elapsed. He hadn't even had time to say anything to her—not that she would have understood him, drunk as she was.

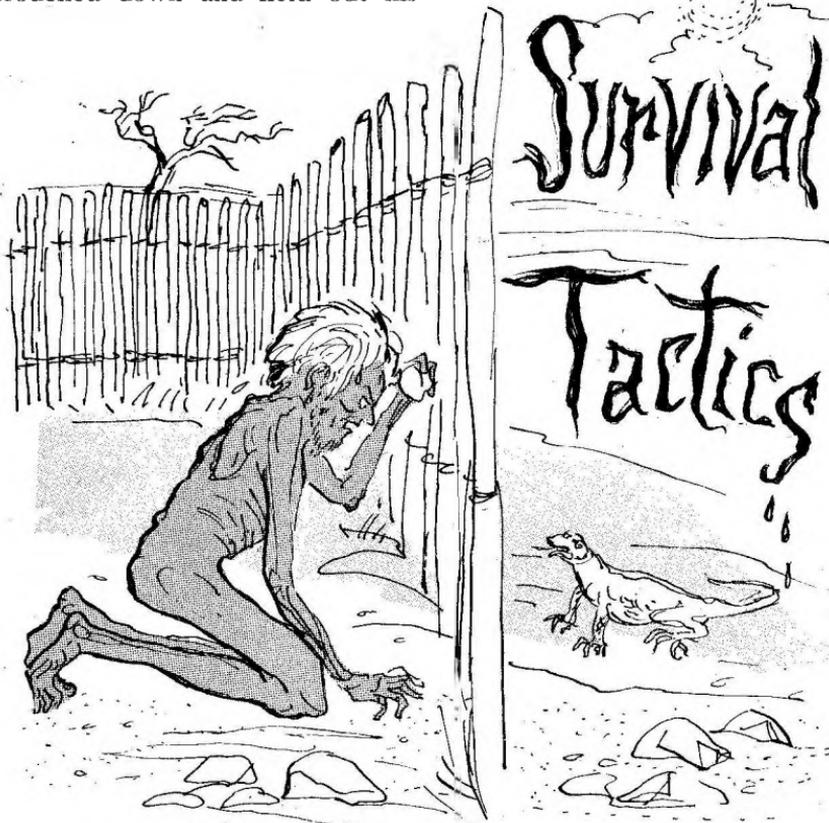
Miles sighed and lowered the sheet back over her face. Well, he thought, he didn't have to worry about Gloria anymore.

Or the election either, for that matter.



*The wants of one may take care of the problems of others—and most economically.*

**T**HE HUGE LIZARD stared up at Krenden with its round red eyes from beneath the wild tropical bush, its leathery tail twitching nervously. Krenden, salivating, crouched down and held out his



hand as if in welcome while he made what he hoped was a coaxing sound by pursing his lips and sucking in his breath.

The lizard took a ponderous step toward Krenden, and then another, which almost brought its nose into contact with the staves of the stockade that imprisoned Krenden in the center of the aboriginal tribe's equatorial village. Krenden raised the stone in his hand, reaching through the space between two staves, and brought it down.

The lizard thrashed about for a moment and then lay still. Krenden called out to the native guard outside the stockade, but the brown man, who was wearing only a bark loincloth and paint made from berry juice, ignored him. Krenden tried again, speaking this time in the native's own language.

by Leo P. Kelley



Wouldn't the man push the lizard just a little bit closer to the stockade? The thing had thrashed itself out of reach, couldn't he see? The native stared impassively at the sky. Krenden gritted his teeth. He tied

two twigs together with a piece of torn vine he found on the dirt floor of the stockade and, using the shaft he had made, at last managed to drag the carcass into his compound.

He bent down and seized the body of the lizard in both trembling hands. Then, performing what was now a familiar ritual, he slammed it against a rock, smashing its small skull. He carried the corpse to the fire he kept burning in the center of his prison despite the devastating heat of the sun. He skinned it expertly with the knife he took from the pile of sticks beside the fire and then spitted it. He added some withered palm tree branches to the fire and slowly turned the spit he had made. He cursed aloud as hot grease flew up to scald his skin in concert with the burning rays of the sun that had turned his naked body almost as brown as those of his captors.

Less than half an hour later, the roasted body of the lizard lay cooling in the only corner of the compound that was mercifully shaded. Krenden proceeded to devour it hungrily, bite by eager bite, spitting out the small bones which fell among the many others of various sizes already littering the ground at his feet, white witnesses to his necessary depredations.

It was then that the natives thrust the man into the stockade with him.

Krenden had not had anyone to share his stockade in more than a week and he felt a surge of genuine joy mixed with intense relief as he turned to confront his new companion. He went to where the dazed newcomer, also a white man, sat slumped in the dust, his head cradled in his arms.

"Hello. My name's Krenden. Yours?"

"Harley," muttered the man, struggling to his feet and ignoring Krenden's outstretched hand.

"What's that?" Krenden asked as the man mumbled something unintelligible.

"I'm getting out," Harley answered. "I'm getting out of here right now."

"Don't!" Krenden yelled, springing forward to seize Harley. As he struggled with the man, Krenden hastily explained that the natives, although they would not kill him themselves because killing was taboo in their primitive religion, would release the cheetahs they kept caged. The cheetahs, Krenden explained, were atheists, one might say. They would not hesitate, in their hunger, to kill.

"I'm sorry," Krenden apologized, releasing Harley. "But the cheetahs would have—"

"Thanks." Harley glanced in the direction Krenden was pointing and saw the rows of caged cats.

"Thanks," he repeated quietly.

"Those cheetahs are very much like this tribe's concept of justice," Krenden told his companion. He noted that Harley's fat face had turned pale with what he clearly recognized as undiluted fear.

"What?"

"Their concept of justice, like the behavior of the cheetahs, is uncomplicated, direct, precise and economical," Krenden said. "In most other known societies you'd be sure to find the customary trappings of judges, prosecutors, jurors and all the rest surrounding the workings of crime. But not here. This tribe is still living in the Stone Age. Arson, murder—all the crimes civilized people recognize, plus any other act they have designated a crime—merit the same simple sentence: death. You may not like or agree with their methods, but you have to admit they're effective. No wasted motion, no legalistic rigamarole."

Harley looked away. "I'm not interested in all that. I'm only interested in getting out of here," he stated in a flat nasal whine.

"In our situation," Krenden observed, undaunted, "there are two principal topics of conversation: one, escape; two, what brought us here. Forget the first for a moment if you can, and tell me why you're here."

Harley gave a brief, brittle laugh. "I was working as a safari guide for rich white hunters—some with guns, some with cameras—all with money. But the season was over—the rains, you know."

"I know," Krenden said, remembering the endless rains that had made him begin to feel like a fish.

"There was this guy I met in a bar. He said he'd been out here once. He said the natives had silver ornaments. He said they must have found a pretty rich vein out here, so I came out and took a look around. The guy was right. Only those monkeys caught me up in their tunnel about an hour ago."

"A thief," Krenden mused.

"What will happen to me?"

"Theft merits the death sentence, too—here."

"It's not fair!" Harley howled.

Krenden shrugged, running his eyes over his companion's thick torso and several chins. "Fairness," he said sadly, "has nothing to do with it. This is not civilization—at least not as we know it. It's a whole new ball game here, and they," he said, pointing to the natives moving about the small village, "make the rules for the players."

Harley grunted something and wiped glistening beads of sweat from his forehead.

"We have only ourselves to blame," Krenden continued. "We

should have minded our own business."

"But it's not fair, dammit! They got no right to all that silver. What do they do with it? Nothing, that's what. Nothing important, anyway."

"They fashion their idols from it. Their gods—and devils," Krenden explained.

"That's what I said. Nothing important."

"It's important to them."

"They've got more statues and altars—all of them silver—than you can count. What do they want with all that stuff?"

"I was an anthropologist," Krenden said dreamily, "a long time ago. I was part of a team studying the tribe's social structure, their language—that sort of thing. There were three of us—my wife, myself and a guide. We learned that these are a people who conserve every item of possible value. Their environment, as you know, is a very harsh one. The elements are their enemies. Twice, we determined, their entire village was wiped out by storms, so they have learned to conserve. They find a use for everything. Everything has a function in their scheme of things. Nothing is wasted."

"They're stingy, you mean."

A wan smile creased Krenden's face, momentarily disguising his impatience. "Stingy? Just a label. No,

they're not stingy. It's all a matter of conditioning. With their conditioning—experienced over countless generations—they became a people who conserved. Call them insecure, if you like, but not stingy. They've got whole—you could call them warehouses—stuffed full of canoes they've made, thatch for their roofs . . . You name it, they've stored it. It makes them feel safer just to know the stuff is there. For them, it's a simple matter of survival tactics."

"They're vicious little monkeys!" Harley roared, evoking no response whatsoever in the stone-faced guard outside the stockade. He stripped off his sleeveless shirt.

"How'd you get in here?" he asked Krenden.

Krenden shrugged. "I killed my wife."

"You *what*?"

"I killed my wife. The man I hired to guide us was, I finally discovered, guiding her in directions I didn't like. By killing her, I destroyed something—someone—valuable, in the eyes of the natives. I'd broken one of their major taboos—the edict against killing."

"But why should they care? It was none of their business."

"It happened here in their village. Their gods demanded punishment for my crime. So they put me in here, and here I've been ever

since—for the past five months."

"Didn't anybody come looking for you?"

Krenden shook his head. "My wife and I planned to spend at least eighteen months here living with the tribe. The private foundation that funded our expedition will have no reason to suspect that anything is wrong for a long time yet."

"You know something?" Harley moaned. "I'm scared."

Krenden gave him a pitying glance. "Everyone who comes here is." He placed one hand on Harley's shoulder, letting it slide down the man's arm which seemed almost boneless beneath its corpulence.

"There have been others?"

"Yes. Other natives poaching on the tribe's territory, escaped convicts from the penal colony down river. Yes, there have been others."

"Listen, Krenden. Maybe together, you and I could—"

Krenden shook his head and looked away. "No one escapes once he's put in here," he stated flatly. "We all stay here until we die sooner or later from the heat, the poisonous insects, the cheetahs—whatever."

Harley studied Krenden's gaunt frame, the lank hair, the strangely lurid and yet sad eyes. "That word they got painted on that piece of bark right outside," he began.

"What does it mean anyway?"

"*Bogindo*? It's one of their words."

"Yeah, but what does it mean? I don't know their language like I guess you do."

"Killer-of-his-kind," Krenden answered evenly.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to bring that up again."

Krenden waved Harley's apology aside. "The keynote of their culture, as I've said, is definitely economy. It even affects the structure of their language. One of their words usually means several things. Take *bogindo*, for example. It means killer-of-his-kind, as I said. But it also carries other shades of meaning. It also means murderer, slayer, butcherer and executioner."

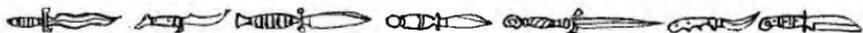
Krenden's eyes glowed oddly. "Executioner," he repeated softly,

as if savoring the word. Suddenly, he dropped to his knees and thrust one thin hand into the pile of sticks beside the fire. Moving like a dancer dreaming, he rose with the long knife in his hand and swiftly plunged it into Harley's heart. A soft, startled cry, a miniature protest, escaped from Harley's lips before he sank lifeless to the ground at Krenden's feet.

Outside the stockade, the guard continued to study the fleecy clouds in the sky.

Later, when it was over, Krenden banked the fire and removed the spit. He returned the knife to its hiding place in the pile of sticks.

He really had to hand it to them, he decided with bitter admiration. They'd even found a use for their *bogindo*—and a way to feed him without unnecessary expenditure.



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*Survival often depends on finding a weak spot in the armor.*



## NIGHT of the



**ALL AFTERNOON** the air had been humid and oddly still, with the temperature hovering in the nineties. Old-timers, wiping their brows and gazing at dark thunderheads gathering in the southwestern sky, knew they were in for trouble.

At dusk, as thunder cracked and rain pelted down in blinding sheets, the trouble came in the form of whirling, funnel-shaped clouds.

One tornado ripped through a mobile-home court, killing five people. Another flattened every structure in a whistle-stop on the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway, and a third blew a sedan off a county road, fatally injuring its occupant.

At least a dozen funnel clouds

had been sighted by 9:08 p.m., at which time a tall, dark-haired woman walked from the kitchen of a remote farmhouse into the parlor. She thought she'd heard a car in the front yard. Her imagination, probably. Nobody in his right mind would be out driving on a wild night like this.

She started toward a window, but never made it.

Someone kicked the front door open, springing the lock, and two men stumbled in. Both carried pistols.

The taller and older of the two swung the bore of his weapon toward the young woman's midsection and said, "Freeze, lady. Anyone else in this house?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head.

"Okay. You can sit down now. But be nice and quiet, and keep your hands at your sides."

Slowly, she eased into a chair.

The room's only light came from kerosine lamps. The power had gone out long ago. From the kitchen, music wafted faintly from a transistor radio.

The two intruders, bareheaded, with crew cuts, were dressed in soaking wet blue denim uniforms.

"Jerry, close that door," the older man ordered. "Then see if there's

profile and dark rings under eyes that burned with an abnormal intensity. His age could have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty.

Placing the pistol's muzzle to the woman's head, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Karen." Terrified, she worked hard at keeping her voice steady. Her intuition told her that any display of panic might trigger violence against her person. "Karen Smallwood."

"Who lives here with you?"

"I don't live here. My parents do, but they're away. I'm a teacher—I live in town. I came out to straighten up for them but got caught by the storm."

by James Michael Ullman

anyone else here. She might be lying."

Jerry, a thin, short youth of about twenty, hesitated a moment to stare at the young woman. Her features were plain but she was well-built, with a robust figure quite clearly defined under a sleeveless blouse and fashionably brief shorts. Then he slammed the front door, braced it with a table and took off to search the house.

The other man walked around behind the woman. He had broad shoulders, a flat belly, a hawklike

"We're lost. We were on County B, headed for Hanksville and the Interstate, when we hit a washout. We had to detour onto the cow-path that took us here. Where's it go?"

"Same place as County B—to Hanksville—only it takes a few minutes longer to get there."

"Any bridges in between?"

"No, there'll be no more washouts."

"Driving to this farm, we were going up a hill. What's on the other side? Another farm?"

"Not right away. Nobody lives within three miles of here."

"If you been listening to that radio, you must know who we are. Except for the tornadoes, we been the big story on every newscast."

"Yes," she said. "I know. I don't remember your name . . ."

"Garth," he said pleasantly. "Ben Garth."

"You and your friend broke out of prison yesterday. The police in half the country are looking for you."

She didn't bother adding what they both knew very well: that Garth had been serving a sentence for murder, Jerry for rape; that since breaking out, they had shot and killed a motorist whose car they had stolen, and then beaten a waitress to death in a roadside diner. The newscaster had termed it a "senseless killing spree."

Jerry came back. "There's nobody else," he reported, "but I found this."

He held a faded photograph of Karen, then a leggy teen-ager, and a middle-aged couple. The man in the picture wore a state police uniform.

"The cop your father?" Garth asked.

"Yes," she admitted. "But he isn't a trooper anymore. He was hurt chasing a speeder, so they pensioned him off."

"Where are your folks now?"

"A flea market in Canton, Texas. They won't be back until next week."

"A what?"

"Flea market," she repeated. "A place where anyone can go and sell anything. My folks barely make out on my father's pension. As a sideline, they sell antiques. Just look around . . ."

Garth scrutinized the home's interior more closely. She was right. The parlor and dining room looked more like an antique store than a farmhouse. Pictures in Victorian frames hung from the walls; shelves and cupboards were filled with china and glassware; and the floor areas were jammed with heavy old chairs and tables.

"You're pretty cool about all this," Garth said. "I admire women who don't lose their heads and start hollerin', like the one in the diner this mornin'—the one we had to shut up . . ."

He didn't admire her. He was probing, wondering how much she could take.

"There's no point in screaming," Karen said as casually as she could, "if nobody but you two would hear."

"Smart girl. Just in case the storm gets worse, you got a storm cellar in this place?"

"The door's in the kitchen floor."

Jerry went to the kitchen, lifted the door and swung a kerosine lantern down for a better look. "It's no fancy hotel," he called back, "but we could sweat it out if we had to."

"Any guns in this house?" Garth went on. "If your old man was a cop, he must have some guns."

"Two hunting rifles, a shotgun and two revolvers," she replied without hesitation. "They're locked in a case upstairs. My father has the key, but if you want them you can just break the glass."

"We'll take 'em when we leave."

"You were wise," Karen said, "ditching your car to find shelter. A car's the worst place to be if a twister hits."

She said that to get Garth's mind off-guns. She didn't want him thinking about guns because there was one she hadn't mentioned, an ancient, double-barreled shotgun hanging in plain sight on the wall over the mantel in the dining room.

Apparently, it was now nothing more than a decorative but useless antique; it hung so high that to get it, she'd have to climb up on a chair to lift it off its brackets.

While it was antique it was not useless, however. Despite its age it was loaded and in perfect working condition. That old shotgun, her father had said, would be his ace in the hole. He hoped he'd never need it, but as a former law officer living

far out in the country, and knowing some men held grudges against him, he wanted an emergency weapon.

At the moment, though, it seemed the shotgun would not do Karen much good. It was difficult to imagine the circumstances under which Garth would allow her to climb the chair, reach up and turn the weapon on her captors . . .

Garth took the pistol away from Karen's head and jammed it under his belt. "Okay," he drawled, "we ain't ate since mornin' and I never been fed by a lawman's daughter before. So you just haul into that kitchen and fix us somethin'—fast."

The men drank beer and watched her every move as she prepared a quick supper of frankfurters and canned beans. As they ate, they made her sit across the dining-room table from them—the shotgun on the wall behind them.

When they were through, Karen cleared the table and brought more beer. On the radio, the announcer reported the sighting of more funnel clouds.

"I don't suppose," Karen said, settling back in her chair, "either of you has ever seen a tornado."

"No, I ain't," Garth said. "And I don't hanker to."

Jerry asked, "Have you?"

"Yes."

"What's it like?"

She thought back to that terrify-

ing afternoon so many years ago. "It's a black, whirling piece of hell, that's what. They say the funnel's wind moves so fast it can drive a splinter of wood into your brain like a high-powered bullet. And pieces of glass—God help you if you're near a window. You'll be cut to ribbons."

Uneasily, Jerry glanced at the broad expanse of windows in the dining room. "Then it's dangerous just sitting here. We should be down in the cellar, like the radio said."

"It's a little dangerous," Karen conceded. "If a twister dipped down from the sky to exactly this spot, we'd be finished. But if it's already on the ground and moving toward you, you'll probably know it and have warning. Even if it's night and you can't see the twister, you can hear it."

"I read about that," Jerry told her. "They make a noise."

"Yes. Like a freight train. The time I heard that sound I was in open country. I looked up and there it was, bearing down on me. There was a ditch nearby and I had enough sense to climb into a culvert. Even so, it's a miracle I lived through it. You know what happens sometimes? The funnels pick people up and pull them so high into the sky that when they drop down, they're frozen solid. And

then at other times they simply—"

"That's enough." Garth frowned. Apparently the talk about tornadoes was making him edgy. "I don't wanna hear no more about it."

Again, he looked around the house. This time his perusal was slower and more thorough. His gaze even paused briefly at the ancient shotgun before moving on.

He asked, "Any money around here?"

"Only the few dollars in my purse. My father never leaves cash in the house when he's going out of town."

"Uh-huh." Garth turned to Jerry. "Get it. Then go through the rest of this place. See if there's more stashed away."

Rummaging through Karen's purse, Jerry came up with a few bills and coins. "Four dollars and thirty-five cents," he said in disgust. "That won't take us far . . ."

He shoved the money into his pocket and began ransacking the house, sweeping shelves clean and pulling out drawers and dumping their contents onto the floor. It was part search and part pure vandalism, random destruction for its own sake. Karen compressed her lips to keep from crying out as the boy smashed the collections of porcelain, glassware and other fragile artifacts her parents had spent so

much of their time assembling.

When Jerry was through on the ground floor he went upstairs. They could hear him tramping around, smashing more things.

Watching Karen while sipping from still another can of beer, Garth smiled humorlessly. Even the modest amount of alcohol in the beer seemed to be having a bad effect on his mood. Clearly she was dealing with a highly unstable psychopath likely to go berserk upon little or no provocation.

Jerry returned with only a few more coins for his efforts.

"I told you," Karen said patiently, "my father didn't keep money here."

"Yeah." Garth was looking at her in an odd way. "Too bad. If he had, we'd be more friendly-inclined. We need money to get out of the country."

"I'm sorry."

"Teacher, you just *think* you're sorry. But before we're through with you, you'll *really* be sorry."

He was tormenting her verbally before getting around to the real thing. She had to stall him as long as possible.

"Why would you want to hurt me?" She tried to sound friendly and reasonable. "I haven't made any trouble. I've done everything you asked."

"Maybe just because you're a

lawman's daughter. We got an abiding dislike for lawmen and anyone connected with 'em. Matter of fact, we don't much like teachers either. Do we, Jerry?"

The boy grinned at her vacuously. She'd get no help from that quarter.

"It wouldn't make sense anyhow," Garth went on, "leavin' you here alive. The police think we're a couple hundred miles north of here. But the first thing you'd do after we left would be to put 'em straight."

"You could lock me in the storm cellar. That'd give you plenty of time for a head start."

"Nope. Can't take chances. We'll lock you in the storm cellar, all right, but when we do you won't be in no condition to climb out. Not ever. That way, we *know* we'll have a head start. It might be a long time before anyone gets curious enough to bust in, to see why you ain't been around lately."

Despite the fear tearing at her insides, Karen managed a smile. "You're just trying to frighten me. You're playing games. Well, sure I'm scared. What girl wouldn't be? But you know you don't have to kill me, Garth. If you don't want to leave me, take me along. I won't try anything stupid. I'll . . ." She paused. "Just a minute. You hear that?"

Garth stood up. "Hear what?"  
"Shut up," Jerry broke in, his grin gone. "I think I hear it, too."

Then there was no doubt. They all heard it, far off but coming closer, a growing clatter and roar suggestive of an approaching freight train . . .

Karen rose. "I don't know about you," she announced, "but while there's still time, I'm going into that storm cellar!"

She took a step forward but Jerry lunged ahead, shoving her aside. Garth hesitated a moment and then, as the sound mounted in intensity, he plunged after Jerry.

As they scrambled for the door in the kitchen floor, Karen climbed up on the chair. She lifted the shotgun from its rack, stepped down, cocked the piece, aimed it while shoving the stock tight against her shoulder, and braced herself against the wall.

As Garth looked up and clawed for his pistol, she squeezed one trigger and then the other . . .

At dawn, her face expressionless, Karen watched from a parlor win-

dow as Garth's body was loaded into a hearse. The blasts had killed him almost instantly. Jerry had been seriously wounded but would live.

Standing beside Karen, a state police detective said, "I know how you feel. No matter how justified, it's terrible to kill someone. But you had no choice. If you hadn't stopped them, they'd almost surely have killed you and others."

"I know. Thinking about that is the only way I'll be able to live with this."

"Anyhow, either you were mighty lucky or they were mighty careless, allowing you to get your hands on the gun."

"Oh, that." She smiled faintly. "At the time, they were trying to get into the storm cellar. I'd told them how a tornado sounded like a fast freight train." Her gaze strayed beyond the yard to the other side of the hill and the main line of the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway. "So when the night freight came high-balling by a little before ten, like it always does, I made out like it was a twister."



Though the telephone savèns much time and effort, there are times when it undeniably becomes a barrier.



# Let Your Fingers do the Walking



"I'M SORRY," I said, "but I handle only messy divorce cases."

Miss Ariana Morgan was mildly puzzled. "I thought that private detectives took just about anything that came their way."

"In the old days, perhaps, but this is the age of specialization." I smiled tolerantly. "Now, why don't you simply go to the police and ask them to find your uncle? They have all kinds of personnel and facilities and webs of communication. I am just one very limited individual."

She had violet eyes. "My uncle

*A Novellette*  
by  
**Jack Ritchie**

would never forgive me if I made such a big thing out of this. Going to the police and all." And she smiled beautifully. "I have good reason to believe that he is somewhere here in this city."

Assuming that I took her case, which I had no intention of doing, that narrowed the area of search considerably.

"I must ask one obvious question," I said. "Why don't you consult the telephone or city directories?"

"I did, but he isn't listed. He must have changed his name."

"Why would he do that?"

"He never did really like it. He was always talking about changing it."

I didn't buy that at all. "What was his name before he disappeared?"

"Charles Harlan. He's my mother's brother."

"What makes you think he's here?"

"The last three years his Christmas cards to me and Mother have been postmarked from this city. No return address, just the postmark."

"How did this all start?"

"It was a family quarrel," she said. "Father and Uncle Charles just couldn't get along. Finally, three and a half years ago, there was a blowup and Uncle Charles left. We haven't heard from him since then,

except for the Christmas cards."

"Do you have one of them with you? Or at least the envelope?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm not really the sentimental type. I throw things like that away after a week or two."

"There's been no other communication with your uncle?"

"None. I think he sends the Christmas cards mainly to let us know he's all right and not to worry."

My phone rang. It was Mrs. Finley and she was agitated. "Do I have to stay in the motel alone with him *all night*?"

"Now, Mrs. Finley, it's perfectly safe. He's a graduate student of the highest moral caliber. He'll probably spend the night working on his Ph.D. Or, if you wish, he could bring along some cards?"

"Can't we just *say* that I spent the night with him and let it go at that?"

"My dear Mrs. Finley, we must go through the *form* of the thing to prevent possible perjury later."

She was silent for a few moments. "Won't the judge ask *specific* questions about what happened in the motel?"

"You have absolutely nothing to worry about. Our judges are wise and experienced men who do not probe where probing is superfluous. Everyone will be satisfied with the basic fact that you spent

the night with a man other than your husband. What actually did or did not happen is immaterial."

I hung up and spoke to Ariana Morgan. "The divorce laws in our state are rather strict. Adultery is one of the easier ways out."

She opened her purse and took out her checkbook. "I'll pay something in advance. Say five hundred dollars?"

I rubbed the back of my neck as I realized that I didn't really want to say good-bye to her. "I haven't said that I'd take the case."

"But you will, won't you?"

I sighed and took a blank sheet of paper from my desk drawer. I wrote *Ariana Morgan* on the top of it. "Your address, please?"

"That won't be necessary. I'll keep in touch with you daily." She opened the checkbook and stared at it thoughtfully, then she quickly closed it. "On second thought, perhaps you would prefer cash?"

"No need to go through that trouble. A check will do nicely."

"No," she said firmly. "I'm certain you *must* prefer cash. I'll bring the money in later this afternoon."

I glanced at my watch. "I'd like to ask you a few more questions, but would you please excuse me for a moment? I've got to deliver some papers to Mrs. Finley's lawyer before three o'clock. He has an office just down the corridor." I took a

folder out of a desk drawer. "I shouldn't be more than ten minutes."

I left the office, walked down the corridor, and turned a corner. I looked back to see if by some chance Ariana had decided to follow me.

She hadn't.

I went on to the door marked *Morris Willman, Confidential Investigations*. Our professional interests are somewhat parallel and I have subcontracted him a number of times.

I found him on the phone and waited until he was through.

"Morris," I said. "In a little while a girl with honest violet eyes will come out of my office. She says her name is Ariana Morgan, but I don't quite believe that."

"Why not?"

"She's coy about giving me her address. Also, just as she was about to write out a check, she suddenly changed her mind and insisted that she would get me cash instead. I think it was because she suddenly realized that her real name was printed on the personal check and she didn't want me to know what it is."

Morris is a thickset man with sandy hair. "I'm supposed to find out what her real name is?"

"Yes. I think she'll be going from my office direct to a bank to cash a

check for me. You know the rest."

Morris nodded. "And at the bank I fall into line behind her and look over her shoulder or something while she cashes her check?"

"Or something. But get her name."

He reached into his desk. "I'll put on my tailing disguise."

Morris' disguise consists of black shell-rimmed glasses and a briefcase. Women do not expect to be followed by spectacled men carrying briefcases.

He adjusted the windowpane glasses. "Why would she make her divorce difficult by giving you a phony name?"

I felt a bit uncomfortable. "This isn't a divorce case. I'm supposed to find a missing person."

He stared at me. "Oh, come now."

"It's a new challenge," I said firmly. "Besides, the pay is good."

I returned to my office and smiled at Ariana. "You'll have to tell me more about your uncle, his age and so forth. And naturally you have a picture of him?"

She reached into the purse again and brought out a snapshot. "Uncle Charley is about fifty."

I studied the photograph. It showed a smiling broad-shouldered man. Even in black and white, I thought I caught the hint of secret humor about the eyes. I looked up.

"You don't happen to have his Social Security number?"

She blinked. "His Social Security number?"

"Yes. If I had it I could check with the Social Security office and find out if his number is still active and if it is, where its contributions are coming from."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't know the number."

"What was your uncle's line of work?"

She smiled ever so slightly for a moment. "He was a salesman."

"For what firm?"

"I don't remember. He traveled most of the time and changed jobs fairly often."

"Did your uncle have any hobbies?"

"Hobbies?"

"Yes. I'm just trying to round out the picture. It helps to know what kind of a man I'm looking for."

She thought that over. "Well, he did go in pretty strong for archery. Got rather good at it. As a matter of fact, he had all kinds of cups and trophies. Was even runner-up in the state tournament several times."

"What state was that?"

Her eyes flickered. "I really don't remember. As I said, he traveled quite a lot and picked up the cups here and there." She consulted her watch. "I'd better get that cash be-

fore the bank closes. I shouldn't be long."

When she was gone, my phone rang. It was Mrs. Finley again. "You said he was a *student*? Isn't that kind of young? I mean things will be bad enough without people accusing me of robbing the cradle."

"He's about twenty-eight."

She was silent for a few moments. "That isn't too bad. I'm nearly that myself."

According to her husband, she was thirty-six.

"How did a graduate student ever get into this line of work?"

"Money," I said. "All graduate students need money, and they volunteer for the damndest things."

"Won't this ruin his reputation?"

"No one will ever really know who he is. We are simply following the requirements of divorce law by providing a stranger to spend the night with you."

She sighed. "Why couldn't Edgar be the one who spends the night with somebody? It would certainly be the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Perhaps, but the divorce was your idea. He consented to go along with it only if *you* bore the onus. Also, remember that this is the only way he'll let you have half of the community property without a long court battle—and in these long, expensive court battles, you know who's the only one who really bene-

fits from those, Mrs. Finley?"

She knew. "All right. I'll go through with it."

My phone rang ten minutes later and this time it was Morris Willman. "According to her checks, her name is Ariana *Collier*, one-one-five Riverland Road, St. Paul. That's quite a piece from here."

"Morris," I said, "she'll be coming back here. When she leaves again, I want you to follow her and find out where she's staying."

When Ariana reentered my office, she handed me five one-hundred-dollar bills.

I pocketed the money. "I forgot to ask why you wanted to see your uncle again."

"Why? Well . . . my father isn't angry with him anymore."

"But is Uncle Charles in a forgiving mood? After all, it takes two to make an argument. Suppose he still doesn't want to see your father?"

"Never mind about that. Just find Uncle Charles."

"And tell him all is forgiven?"

She hesitated. "No. I'd rather you didn't speak to him at all. Just let me know where he's staying."

"Why isn't your father here instead of you? After all, it was *his* argument."

"He's rather busy just now. We thought it would be best that I come here."

"By the way, what did you say



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that your father's name was?"

"Hector."

"Hector what?"

"Hector . . ." She caught herself in time. "Hector *Morgan*, of course."

I could have asked her more questions, but there were a few things I wanted to know first. I smiled. "I'll see what I can do with what you've given me. I'll see you tomorrow, of course?"

Morris phoned fifteen minutes after she left. "She has a suite at the Stanton Arms. Number three-two-four. It's about the best the hotel can provide."

When Morris hung up, I got the long-distance operator. "I'd like to speak to any one of the Colliers at one-one-five Riverland Road, St. Paul, Minnesota. I'm sorry, but I lost the number."

After a while the connection was made and a man answered, "The Collier residence."

Residence? And that would be Jeeves or Meadows? I thought I'd cross-check first. "Could I speak to Ariana, please?"

"I'm sorry, but she isn't in."

"Where could I reach her?"

"I believe she's out of town at present. Would you care to leave a message?"

"No," I said. "In that case, I'd like to speak to her father."

There was a pause. "I'm afraid

that's impossible, sir. Mr. Collier died some six years ago."

I thought I might as well go whole hog. "Is his brother Charles around there? I'm told I could reach him there."

The voice was cold. "We have not seen or heard from him in over three years."

"Oh," I said and hung up.

I reached for the white-page volume of our local phone directory. I found Archery Club, 2385 Windom Ave. and dialed its phone number.

A woman answered with a simple "Hello?"

"Archery Club?" I asked a bit dubiously.

"That would be my husband. He's president of the club, but he's still at work now. He won't be home until five-thirty."

"I wonder if I could talk to him sometime this evening? It concerns the Archery Club."

"Oh, sure," she said. "Drop in any time."

After supper, I drove to 2385 Windom Avenue. It was quite an agreeable neighborhood and I placed the residents in the doctor-lawyer-engineer class.

I rang the bell at 2385 Windom.

The door was opened almost immediately by a suntanned man in his early forties. He smiled hospitably and shook hands. "My name is Simpson. Albert Simpson."

I gave him a name I used on occasion. "James Rawlins. I'm a freelance writer. I'm doing an article on archery in this area and I thought the first thing I ought to do is see the president of our local Archery Club."

Simpson was quite pleased. "I'll be happy to do anything that will help."

His wife appeared. She was perhaps five years younger than her husband. Two early-teen-age girls peeked into the livingroom from the far doorway.

Simpson noticed them with obvious pride. "Yes, sir, there's nothing like archery to keep the family together." He gave the statement a moment's thought. "Though, in all fairness, I suppose the same could be said for skiing, camping, snowmobiling, touch football—"

His wife interrupted. "Would you care for something to drink, Mr. Rawlins? I made some strawberry-pineapple punch."

Simpson raised a hand. "Perhaps Mr. Rawlins would prefer something stronger? I believe we still have some apricot brandy."

"Strawberry-pineapple punch will be just fine," I said quickly.

Mrs. Simpson brought out the punch.

"Are you an archer?" Simpson asked me.

"Not really, though I have shot

off an arrow now and then. But I've always been interested in the subject."

Then I let him talk about archery for twenty minutes while I sipped punch. Finally I said, "You don't by any chance have lists of the winners of our regional tournaments?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "That's what the club's for. We organize and promote contests and otherwise encourage people. Why don't we all go down to my office in the basement? It's headquarters for the club."

His wife followed us. "Albert's been reelected president of the club for seven consecutive terms. He's really quite popular."

Albert blushed slightly.

Downstairs, the recreation room walls were liberally adorned with bows, arrows, quivers, and even targets. A long glass case against one wall was completely occupied with presentation cups, badges, ribbons and sashes.

"We hold our monthly meetings down here during the winter months," Simpson said. He led us on to a smaller room which was fitted with office furniture, including filing cabinets and metal shelves.

"Is this a full-time job?" I asked.

"In a way it is. Takes almost all of my spare time. But I'm really in the construction business." He went to one of the filing cabinets. "You

wanted a list of the state title winners?"

"Actually I'm more interested in regional winners."

It was my theory that a man might choose to disappear and perhaps change his name, but most likely he would not change his interests. If Uncle Charles were as good with the bow and arrow as Ariana claimed, it was a good bet that he would continue with his hobby, and that entailed entering contests.

I thought it more likely that I'd strike pay dirt by studying the regional winners than the state champions. Uncle Charley might have been a whiz in Minnesota, but competition in this state might be stiffer. His name, whatever it was now, was more likely to appear in the winners' columns of the regional tournaments than in the state meets.

Simpson brought over some folders and handed them to me. "Our state is divided into six districts and we're in the fifth. As you can see, we hold a number of tournaments, especially during the warm months, covering a variety of classes and flights."

"Albert is a purist," Mrs. Simpson said. "He doesn't use sights on his bow, and he's strictly a target-shooter. He doesn't go hunting and he won't even shoot at targets that

are silhouettes of real animals."

Albert nodded. "I don't particularly approve of flight shooting either. Just a question of strength of back and bow. It just *isn't* archery."

I nodded sympathetically. "Personally I've always detested clout shooting. It doesn't belong on the same field with the true bow and the stout shaft."

We blended as Little John and Robin Hood. "Myra," he said, "get the apricot brandy."

Her eyes clouded. "I don't remember exactly where I . . ."

They excused themselves and left together to find the brandy.

While they were gone, I went over the names of the regional winners in the Open and Senior divisions for the last three years. I made a list of all the names which appeared more than once. It seemed to me that if Uncle Charles was as good a bowman as his collection of trophies indicated, his present name was bound to be repeated. I copied six names that filled that condition.

It was also obvious that Uncle Charles couldn't have won any tournaments going back more than three years, since he wasn't here. I was able to cross four of the names off my list by going back six years and finding them repeated.

That left me with just two names of repeat winners in the last three years only: Hiram Brackish

and plain old Thomas G. Carson.

Ordinarily I could not conceive of anyone changing his name to Hiram Brackish; however, we live in the world of Engelbert Humperdinck and one can no longer be positive of anything.

Simpson and his wife returned with the apricot brandy.

"It was on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet," Simpson said. "I remember that I wanted to keep it out of the reach of innocent children."

Mrs. Simpson carried an egg cup which she used to measure brandy into our punch glasses.

I glanced at the sheets I held. "Hiram Brackish seems to be quite a winner."

Simpson agreed. "Young fellow of about twenty-five. Just graduated from law school."

That eliminated Hiram.

I sipped my brandy. "The name Thomas G. Carson seems to ring a bell. In his early fifties, isn't he? Slightly graying?"

"About fifty and graying," Simpson agreed. "Has a beard. Moved here some three years ago. Don't know exactly from where."

"He's a salesman, isn't he?"

"No," Simpson said. "A veterinarian."

Mrs. Simpson stepped in. "Not actually a veterinarian. He just works for one. The Danvers Cat

and Dog Hospital, I believe."

"Does he come to your meetings?"

"Never misses a one," Simpson said. "Very personable and a real archery buff. There's even talk about running him for vice-president next year."

Simpson went back to the filing cabinet and removed another folder. He leafed through what appeared to be a collection of newspaper clippings. "Here's a photo of Brackish when he won the Spring Event in the instinctive open." He frowned. "Doesn't seem to be any picture of Carson, though. Rather a shame. He's really the outstanding bowman in the club. I've been trying to get him to enter tournaments at the state level, but he always has some excuse."

"Albert had his picture in the paper five years ago," Mrs. Simpson said proudly.

Simpson cleared his throat. "Didn't have anything to do with archery, though."

"It was at the ground-breaking ceremonies for the new Whittenberger Supermarket," Mrs. Simpson said. "Albert's firm was doing the constructing."

Albert happened to have the clipping handy. It showed three men, one of them applying a foot to the shoulder of a spade. None of them was Albert.

"He's in the background," Mrs. Simpson said. "Just behind the ropes. Smiling."

"You take a good picture," I said.

Albert blushed and reached for the apricot brandy bottle. "Let's have another."

We spent the evening talking about archery. At nine I glanced at my watch. "I didn't realize it's this late. I've really got to go."

Mrs. Simpson smiled tentatively. "Aren't you going to take any pictures?"

I smiled apologetically. "I just write the stories. If things work out, I'll send a photographer over later. You understand, of course, that just because I write the story, there is no guarantee that it will be published?"

I left, feeling guilty somehow.

I drove on to the Harbor Motel and parked. At precisely ninety-three, Mrs. Finley appeared in her car with Eldon Tupper. They went to the motel office, as instructed, and registered as man and wife. I watched them walk to one of the units, Eldon carrying an armload of books and papers and Mrs. Finley nervously eyeing the parked cars. They disappeared into unit No. 11.

I duly made a note of the time and place and then drove to the nearest drugstore. I consulted the phone book there for the listing of Thomas G. Carson.

I drove to his address. It proved to be a new four-story apartment building. In the vestibule I checked the names on the mailboxes and found *Mr. & Mrs. Thomas G. Carson*.

*Mrs. Carson?*

I went up the stairs to the second floor and knocked on door number 203. After a few moments, a man with a neatly-trimmed beard opened the door.

Yes, this was Uncle Charles. He had grown the beard, of course, but there was no mistaking him: the careful humor behind the eyes, the impression of competence.

"Yes?" he asked.

But now that I had found Uncle Charles, I wasn't supposed to talk to him. I was to tell Ariana where she could find him, and that was all.

I dragged up the memory of one of the other names on the mailboxes downstairs. "Mr. Yancey?"

Uncle Charles shook his head. "I'm afraid you have the wrong apartment."

Behind him I heard a television set being turned down and then a woman's voice. "Who is it, Tom?"

"Someone looking for a man named Yancey."

The woman appeared. She was perhaps forty, but slim, and with her, too, one felt an aura of competent intelligence.

She came forward. "Yancey?"

Isn't there a Yancey down at the end of the corridor?"

Uncle Charles shrugged. "I don't know our neighbors that well, Marie."

I smiled. "I'd better go downstairs and check the mailbox numbers again."

Outside the building, I got into my car and began driving home.

Well, that was that. All I had to do now was phone Ariana and tell her where she could find her Uncle Charles. But I thought that could wait a while. There were still a few things bothering me and I wanted to take care of them in the morning.

At my apartment, I set the alarm for seven-thirty and then went to bed.

In the morning after breakfast, I drove back to the Harbor Motel and parked. Eleven minutes later, at precisely eight-thirty, Mrs. Finley and Eldon Tupper opened the door of unit No. 11 and exited. She waved to me as they drove away.

Back in town, I found a client waiting in my outer office. He had bushy red hair, a full mustache, and he blinked fairly often.

I smiled. "I'll be with you in five minutes. I have a little errand to do down the hall."

I went on to Morris Willman's office and found him drinking coffee. "Morris," I said, "I want you to find

out who and what Uncle Charles really is or was."

"Any helpful suggestions about how I accomplish this feat?"

"Phone the main library and get the Reference Room. Ask somebody there to get a copy of *Who's Who in America* and look up Hector Collier."

"Why *Hector Collier*?"

"Because quite often a man's biography will mention the maiden name of the woman he married. I imagine his wife insists upon it—and in this case, the maiden name would be Uncle Charles' last name. Right?"

"Right. But suppose he isn't in *Who's Who*?"

"If he had money, the odds are that he'll be there. For philanthropy, if nothing else. But if he isn't, there ought to be a *Who's Who* of the business world. By the way, you'll have to go back six years or more. That's how long Hector Collier's been deceased."

"That done, what next?"

"Get switched to the Periodical Room and ask for the name of a daily newspaper in the St. Paul-Minneapolis area. Then phone the paper and get the morgue. Tell the man in charge that you're a police reporter and that a man who's been arrested down here on suspicion of arson gives his name as Charles *whatever-you-found-out-in-Who's-*

Who. You wonder if they've got anything on him up there."

"Why don't I just tell them I'm a private detective?"

"I have the feeling you would meet with resistance. Newspapermen help newspapermen. Any questions?"

"Yes. Why don't you do all of this yourself?"

"Because I have a client waiting in my office and I don't want to keep him waiting half the morning."

Back in my office, I ushered the client to a chair.

He was a small man who seemed to look over his shoulder before he sat down. He cleared his throat. "Do you handle divorce cases?"

"In what way?"

He seemed uneasy. "It's my wife and I. We just don't get along. Incompatibility, you know. And, well, we decided on a divorce."

"Wise under the circumstances," I said. "Wise."

"And I *heard*, that at times, certain *arrangements* can be made with *some* private detectives to . . . well . . . you *know* that adultery is grounds for divorce and . . ."

I could see that we would deal freely with italics. I reached for a sheet of paper. "Your name, please?"

"Andrew Oliphant."

"Your address?"

"I'm staying at the Alton Hotel."

"Just what is it that you heard about *some* private detectives?"

He shifted in his chair. "Well, I *heard* that some private detectives will actually *arrange* for the husband to spend the *night* in a hotel room with some woman and then testify in court to that effect."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps it *would* be possible to arrange something like that."

He was relieved. "Good. I'll pay something in advance. Will one hundred dollars do?"

I carefully studied the red hair, the red mustache, and the blinking eyes. "No," I said finally, "I'd prefer two hundred."

His mouth dropped slightly. "Isn't that a bit *steep*? I mean for an *advance*?"

I smiled. "I prefer a *larger* advance than *most* private detectives. However you must remember that it is *only* an *advance* and comes out of the *final* fee. And my final fee is approximately the same as any *other* detective's final fee. We have our fair practice code, you know."

He mulled that over and sighed. "All right. Two hundred it is." He cleared his throat again. "This woman with whom I am supposed to spend the night? I wouldn't want to harm anyone's *reputation*. I mean, you would provide somebody who wouldn't *mind* the . . ."

ah . . . publicity of such a thing?"

"Of course," I said. "Which would you prefer? Blonde? Brunette? Redhead?"

"Well . . . I think *blonde* will be all right."

I got to my feet and went to the door. I locked it.

He was instantly alarmed. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't want anyone to disturb us." I went back to my desk. "I'd like to see your identification. A driver's license will do."

He balked. "I don't think that is necessary."

"In that case, I shall have to phone the police."

Color drained from his face. "The police? What for?"

I gave him a tight smile. "We private detectives have our own little *get-togethers* and our circulating mimeographs in which we exchange information and lore. So, Mr. Oliphant, or whoever you really are, I am certain that I have heard of you before." I leaned forward. "You pay your *one* hundred dollars *advance* for the *arrangement*. You spend the night with the girl . . . and I mean *spend* . . . and then you disappear. It was never your intention to get any such thing as a divorce. As a matter of fact, I don't believe that you are even married?"

He glanced back at the locked

door and then slowly hung his head. "No."

"Now let me see your wallet."

He meekly handed it over.

I flipped it open and read the name on the driver's license out loud. "Alistair Folling?"

He nodded.

I made a note of his address. "You may take off your wig and mustache now, and put on your glasses. You'll ruin your eyes without them."

When he had done as instructed, I stared at him. He seemed vaguely familiar. I re-read the name. Alistair Folling?

But of course! I was shocked. "You? Alistair Folling? The Book Editor of the *Daily Times*? Indulging in this *carnal* . . ."

His underlip thrust out with a trace of stubbornness. "I'm *only* human, you know. A man. And a man needs . . ." He frowned. "At least I *think* he does."

I shook my head sadly. "Why do you find it necessary to go through all this complicated folderol? Couldn't you just take twenty bucks and find the nearest—"

He broke in. "Because basically I'm a very *shy* man. I just *couldn't* simply *approach* anyone; and besides, I don't really *know* any . . ." He shrugged.

We fell into silence, each with his own thoughts.

"Mr. Folling," I said finally. "I am a humanitarian and I cannot stand to see a fellow human being suffer." I reached for the phone book and turned to the yellow pages. I found the number of Esmeralda's Massage and dialed.

When I hung up, it was all arranged. "Her name is Flora. She'll be in room three-one-eight of the Stafford Arms tonight at eight. Bring along a pint."

"I always do." He seemed considerably happier. "At first, I thought you might try to blackmail me."

I regarded him with new interest.

He paled and endeavored to take the foot out of his mouth.

I smiled aggressively. "Are you on friendly terms with the sportswriters on your newspaper?"

His lip curled faintly. "I have spoken to them on occasion."

"Then, as a *favor*, I want you to get one of them to go to the Albert Simpson home at two-three-eight-five Windom Avenue. Have him take along a photographer. I want him to write a *big* story on archery, the Archery Club, and *especially* the Simpsons. I want pictures of the *whole* family."

He was dubious. "Suppose they won't do it?"

"Sportswriters inevitably write books, don't they?"

"Inevitably."

"And when these books are writ-

ten, they expect a favorable review from their own newspaper?"

"Of course."

"Then inform the sports staff that if the Simpson story does not appear, you will henceforth assign any books coming from the sports department to a woman reviewer who can't stand Hemingway."

He nodded. "That ought to do it."

At ten o'clock, my phone rang. It was Mrs. Finley. "I saw you this morning, but not last night."

"I was there," I said. "Everything is properly witnessed. I suppose Eldon worked on his Ph.D.?"

"For a while. Then we played cards."

"The rest of the night?"

"Not exactly. Did you know that Eldon sold his *blood* to a blood bank in order to make ends meet when he was working for his Master's?"

"I know," I said. "They don't make them that way anymore."

"Such a scholar," Mrs. Finley said. "So kind and gentle. I'm meeting him later this afternoon."

Twenty minutes later Morris phoned. "We struck pay dirt. Uncle Charles is Charles Neilson, and he's wanted by the police."

"What for?"

"He slugged his parole officer."

"What did he get sent to jail for in the first place?"

"Jewel theft. Served almost four

years and then was paroled. Two weeks later he socked the parole officer and wisely disappeared."

"Why in the world would he hit his parole officer?"

"I don't know. According to the clipping read to me over the phone, the parole officer, somebody named Zander, said the attack was 'entirely unprovoked.'"

"This happened in Minnesota?"

"No. Oregon. That's where he served his time. The reason it got any play at all in the St. Paul newspapers is because St. Paul was Neilson's official residence and he also happened to be the brother-in-law of the prominent Hector Collier."

"What was Hector prominent for?"

"He owned a string of pea, corn, and string bean canneries throughout the Midwest. They're still in the family but being run for Mrs. Collier by a bank."

"Why the devil would Charles Neilson be stealing jewels?"

"For a living maybe. His sister was an airline stewardess before she married Hector. Have you got any leads on Neilson yet?"

I hesitated. "No. Nothing at all yet."

When he hung up, I drummed my fingers on the desk. So Uncle Charles was wanted by the police? Then why did he go around winning archery tournaments and risk

exposure and then a prison cell?

After a little thinking I worked it out: Just how much was he really risking by entering regional tournaments? Not much. After all, he wasn't exactly on the F.B.I.'s most-wanted list. Outside of Oregon and Minnesota, probably no one knew about him or his troubles. Raising the beard and putting distance between him and those two states made him about as safe as a man can be. He could indulge in his hobby with near impunity, as long as he kept it low-key.

Ariana showed up at two-thirty in the afternoon.

"You lied to me," I said immediately.

Her honest violet eyes veiled. "In what possible way?"

"You did not mention that your Uncle Charles is a jewel thief and former convict and that at this moment he is wanted by the police."

She stared at me for a while and then gave up. "How did you find that out?"

"I have agents," I said. "Informers; connections; people who owe me favors. You also neglected to mention that your father has been dead six years and therefore could not possibly have had that quarrel with Uncle Charles three years ago."

She acknowledged the discrepancy and volunteered further

information. "Actually, Uncle Charles wasn't just a *jewel* thief. He preferred cash. But hardly anybody keeps cash in his safe anymore, so Uncle Charles had to settle for whatever he could find."

"Why did he have to steal? Couldn't his brother-in-law have gotten him a decent job?"

"Uncle Charles is an independent kind of man. Besides, he'd been a thief all his life, though none of us knew it until he got caught." She sighed. "Mother and I were so positive he would go straight after leaving prison, because of the letters he sent us while he was there. He'd never served time before and the experience made quite an impression on him. But then he had to go and hit that parole officer."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Uncle Charles never communicated with us after he disappeared, except for the Christmas cards. I guess he didn't want to get us into trouble by corresponding with him and the cards were his way of telling us that he was all right and not to worry."

"Now you want to find him? Why?"

"Because of my mother. She intends to marry Randall Clay and I think she shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because I believe he's just a fortune hunter. He doesn't *really* care

for her at all. It's not possible."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because he made his . . . *play* . . . for me first. Clay is at least twenty-five years older than I am and I really don't know why he did it unless he's just terribly self-confident. Anyway, when he found out that I regarded him as at least one generation removed, he simply switched his attentions to my mother."

"That made you jealous?"

She regarded me coldly. "No."

"What does Uncle Charles have to do with all of this?"

"I've *tried* to convince mother that Clay is just after her money, but she simply won't listen. I thought that if I could get Uncle Charles to talk to her, it might turn the trick. They were always very close."

"Why didn't you tell me all of this in the first place?"

"I thought it was really none of your business. I mean, it's family and you were a complete stranger. I just wanted you to find Uncle Charles. Have you any idea yet where he might be?"

I looked out of the window. "I have a few leads, but it will take a few days to track them down." I turned back to her. "Did it ever occur to you to hire a private detective to check up on Randall Clay?"

"As a matter of fact, I *did*. The

Belmont Detective Agency in St. Paul. Mr. Belmont did a 'run', as he called it, on Randall Clay."

"What did he find?"

"Nothing. At least nothing *bad*. He found that Clay was exactly what he said he was: from a prominent New Orleans family, had an adequate income from stocks, and like that."

"But you still don't trust him?"

"No. It's just *instinct*."

I reached for my desk pen. "Do you know his address and telephone number?"

"All I know is that he's at the Oakland Hotel in St. Paul."

She watched me write that down. "How did you ever get into this business?"

"From my mother."

"Oh?"

"Actually my father founded the agency, but he died when I was quite young. The lease on his office still had four months to go at the time, so mother said, 'Oh, what the hell,' and she began answering the phone. One thing led to another until she decided to get a license. She's on vacation in California right now." I put the pen back in its stand. "It just occurred to me that being alone in a strange city can get boring. How about dinner tonight and a show? I happen to have two tickets to *Son of the Student Prince*."

After a moment she nodded. "All right. Actually I am very seldom bored, but I do get hungry and I've heard of the play."

"I'll pick you up in the lobby of your hotel at seven. Stanton Arms, isn't it?"

She paused at the door. "How did you know that?"

"Agents," I said again. "Informers; connections; people who owe me favors."

When she was gone, I dialed Manfred Haggerty. He promised to search his soul and the city for a pair of tickets to *Son of the Student Prince*, and they would cost me only thirty-four dollars.

When I hung up, I sat in my chair for a while, thinking, and then I reached for the phone again. I got the long-distance operator and had her connect me with the Better Business Bureau in St. Paul.

A man answered. "Better Business Bureau."

"I'm thinking of employing the Belmont Detective Agency on a plant security matter, but first I thought it wouldn't harm to check with you about its reliability."

He agreed. "Just a moment. I'll have someone look in our files and see if there's anything."

A minute later he was back on the phone. "Hm," he said thoughtfully.

I waited.

"We have had three identical complaints against the Belmont Detective Agency in the last four years."

"What were they about?"

"The complainants maintained that Mr. Belmont, who is the Belmont Detective Agency, approached them and informed them that he had been hired to investigate them. He then offered to give them a 'clean bill of health,' as he put it, if they would hand him two hundred dollars."

"What was done about it?"

"Each time Mr. Belmont categorically denied making the offers, and since there was no proof of the offers other than the word of the complainants, we just put the items in our files and that is where they rest."

"Did Belmont tell them why they were being investigated?"

"Yes. In two of the cases, husbands wanted their wives followed to see what they were up to. In the other case, it was just the reverse."

I thanked him and hung up.

According to our accepted principles of justice, a man is innocent until proven guilty. However, I preferred to make an exception in this case.

I judged Belmont guilty and even multiplied his offenses by five, under the assumption that the complainants represented only a frac-

tion of those approached by Belmont. The great majority had either refused to pay and did not bother to go to the Better Business Bureau, or had simply paid for their 'clean bill of health.'

I further reasoned that when Ariana had gone to Belmont for a check on Randall Clay, Belmont had merely approached Clay with an offer to transmit a favorable report, and Clay had accepted.

It was hypothesis, of course, but confident hypothesis.

I reached for the phone and got the long-distance operator. "I'd like to make a call to a Mr. Randall Clay at the Oakland Hotel in St. Paul. I'm sorry, but I can't find his number at the moment."

After a while, a man answered. "Hello?"

"Are you Randall Clay?"

"Yes."

"I am a former employee of the Belmont Detective Agency," I said.

There was caution in his voice. "Yes?"

"I have acquired some interesting information concerning your past."

His voice was cold. "My past? I've already made suitable arrangements with Mr. Belmont on that matter."

I laughed significantly. "But you haven't made any arrangements with *me*, and, as I said, I am a *for-*

mer employee of the Belmont Detective Agency."

"Just what is this 'information' which you claim to possess?"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Clay. You don't expect me to repeat it over the phone? Suffice it to say that if I relay it to the proper people, it could change the rest of your life considerably. *Very* considerably."

"What the devil do you want? Money?"

"Perhaps. But mostly I want to meet you. You have time to catch the evening train or take a plane and be here by morning. At exactly twelve noon I want you standing on the northeast corner of Sixth and Vermont. You will remain standing there until I approach you, which will be within the hour."

"Of all the ridiculous . . ." He paused. "Where are you calling from?"

I gave him the city, but not the number.

"Why do we need to meet in such a public place?"

"I am a cautious man, Mr. Clay."

I suddenly realized that I hadn't the faintest idea of what Randall Clay looked like. "You will wear a white carnation in your lapel," I said, "and carry a cane."

"I don't have a cane."

"Then get one. It doesn't have to be expensive. An ordinary rattan will do." I hung up.

Well, that was that. Either he'd show up tomorrow or he wouldn't.

I picked Ariana up at seven. We had dinner and then took in the play. During the Rathskeller scene in the third act, the audience was invited to take off its clothes. Seventeen women and one scrawny young man did.

When I took Ariana back to her hotel, we said good night at the elevators.

At eleven-thirty the next morning, I was in the coffee shop of my office building watching the northeast corner of Sixth and Vermont.

At five to twelve, a tall man, graying at the temples, appeared at the corner. He wore a white carnation in his lapel and he carried a cane.

He waited.

At five after twelve, I went to the public phone booth. I looked up the number and dialed Police Headquarters. I asked to be switched to someone on the Bomb Squad.

A voice identified itself as Sergeant Moody.

"Do you have a pencil and paper?" I asked.

"I always have a pencil and paper."

"Then take down this name. Randall Clay."

"So?"

"So he is now standing on the

northeast corner of Sixth and Vermont. He has a carnation in his lapel and he is carrying a rattan walking stick."

"What am I supposed to do about that?"

"He can tell you a great deal about the bombings at the university last month. A *great* deal."

"Who is this calling?" he demanded.

"Let us say that I am a concerned citizen." I hung up.

I found my hands slightly damp and wiped them with a handkerchief. I suppose I could have said that Clay was wanted for theft or rape, but bombing seems to be the In thing nowadays and I thought that it would get the immediate and undivided attention of the police. They would probably hold him long enough for a thorough investigation into his past.

I went back to the coffee shop and waited.

Six minutes later an unmarked car containing two men pulled up at the northeast corner of Sixth and Vermont. They stepped out and approached Clay. They showed him their wallets.

Clay's lips moved in protest, but one of the men put his hand on Clay's elbow and led him to the car. It pulled away.

I went back up to my office and started worrying about Uncle

Charles, but results totaled zero.

Finally I sighed and picked up the phone. I talked to the long-distance operator. "I'd like to place a call to a Mr. Zander of the Oregon State Parole Board. I believe it's located in the capitol or administration building in Salem. I've misplaced the number."

"Is that the official designation?" she asked. "Oregon State Parole Board?"

"Yes," I said, and then I acted uncertain. "At least I *think* it is. I've got Zander's letter here somewhere but I just can't put my finger on it at the moment. Secretary's on vacation, you know. Anyway, it's the Oregon State Parole Board or something close to that, and I'm pretty sure it's in Salem. Or possibly Portland?"

After about five minutes of negotiations between long-distance operators, I was connected with a Mr. Hendricks who held a responsible position in matters relating to parole.

"Do you have a parole officer named Zander?" I asked.

"Oh?" he said. "You a *friend* of his?"

From the tone of his voice, I immediately gathered that it might not exactly be upward to be a friend of Zander's.

"By *no* means," I said. "I'm with Delta Collections. Could I speak to

Mr. Zander for a moment now?"

"Delta Collections? Well, well. And you want to speak to him?"

"If I could."

He seemed to chuckle. "I guess you could, all right. On visiting day. He's an inmate in the state prison."

I was properly shocked. "A parole officer in jail? How could that happen?"

"He was put away on half a dozen charges, including blackmail of the parolees in his charge, juggling of department funds, moral turpitude, and what have you."

"Blackmailing parolees?"

"That's right. By threatening to report that they violated their paroles unless they paid up."

I became obviously outraged. "Someone should have slugged him."

"Someone did."

"Really?"

"An ex-con named Neilson. I guess Zander tried to blackmail the wrong man. Neilson blackened one of Zander's eyes and knocked out three teeth."

"I suppose that put poor Neilson back in jail?"

"No. He just plain disappeared. Probably figured that it was his word against that of a parole officer and he didn't stand a chance. Haven't seen hide nor hair of him since."

"When you do find Neilson, he

goes back to a jail cell at once?"

"For slugging Zander? Hell, no. At the time, maybe, but not with what we know about Zander now."

"So there's nothing outstanding against Neilson?"

"Nothing. Unless maybe we charge him with theft."

"Theft?"

He chuckled again. "For stealing a state employee. Marie Brennan was her name. She was the chief veterinarian at the state prison farm where Neilson served most of his time. They got pretty well acquainted while he was there and I heard they were planning to get married. The day after Neilson disappeared, she resigned her job and disappeared. I have the hunch that if we ever find Neilson, we'll also find her."

I had that hunch myself. "Well, I guess Delta Collections can kiss off Zander?"

"I guess so," Hendricks said.

I hung up.

So Uncle Charles didn't have to hide, but he didn't know it yet. I could see where the jailing of a parole officer in Oregon wasn't too likely to make the papers here or in Minnesota.

Now he could shave off that beard if he wanted to and enter state archery tournaments and get his picture in the newspapers.

I resisted the temptation to

phone him and tell him the good news. I would tell Ariana first and let her pass it on to Neilson. Besides, it gave me an excuse for seeing her again tonight.

When I got to my apartment after five-thirty that afternoon, my daily newspaper lay before the door as usual.

I picked it up and stared at the front-page picture of Randall Clay.

The explaining columns were liberally sprinkled with 'allegeds', but they did convey the information that Randall Clay had been married at least five times previously, each time under another name, and it also appeared that all of those wives had mysteriously disappeared after withdrawing their savings from their banks.

Clay's fingerprints had been picked up in the residences of his

previous wives and had been on national file. His photograph had also been identified by a number of grieving in-laws.

My phone rang.

I quickly unlocked my apartment door and picked up the receiver.

It was Ariana and she was quite excited. "Did you see this evening's paper?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I did."

"What in the world made Clay come down here?"

I wanted to tell her about Clay, and about Uncle Charles, and I wanted to ask her if she thought a private detective who specialized in messy divorce cases could make a living in St. Paul. But there are some things you just cannot handle properly by phone.

"I'll be over in ten minutes," I said, and hung up.



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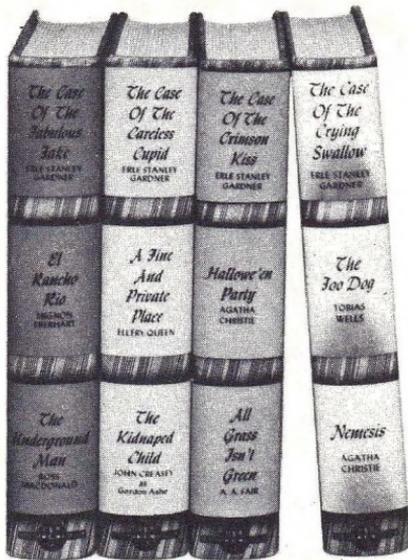
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