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Charlie Chan

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Exciting Novel

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We know you will be as excited about this new landmark of magazine thrills as we are.

Good reading to you!

Leo Maraulies

Publisher

Charlie Chan

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1973
VOL, 1, NO. 1

NEW CHARLIE CHAN SHORT NOVEL

WALK SOFTLY, STRANGLER

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Only one of the fabulous jewels had a duplicate or was it a cheap imitation? For Charlie Chan, the answer to that riddle held the answer to a much bigger one—who had murdered Madame Wu? Before Chan could find out, he found himself trapped on a lonely Hollywood hillside drive—with death lurking around the next corner-death in full day light!

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Publisher

CYLVIA KLEINMAN
Editorial Director

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WALK SOFTLY, STRANGLE

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

She was lovely, she was famous, and very dead when Chan found her. A jeweled fly led the Honolulu detective into the web of deceit and violence that surrounded the mysterious House of Wu and its surprised guests. . ,,

MEI T'ANG WU'S face was as impassive as a mask of pale gold. Only the slight narrowing of her eyelids and a tautness at the corners of her lotus blossom lips revealed the fury that lurked behind it. Even her low pitched, faintly husky voice was under rigid control.

"Ah-Nah," she said to the younger, slighter, less beautiful woman confronting her, "how did this find its way to the carpet?"

"This" was a tiny insect of intricately wrought gold with diamond eyes and wings of transparent amber set in thread-like gold frames. It lay in the palm of her outstretched left hand, barely covering the span between the heart and life lines upon that velvetlike surface.

There was tension in the

A NEW COMPLETE SUSPENSE NOVEL

STARRING

CHARUE CHAN

younger woman's voice as she replied, "It was not there when I vacuumed the room this morning."

"Obviously. If it had been, the vacuum would have picked it up. I should not have found it . . . or found *this."*

She opened the palm of her right hand and unfolded the fine linen handkerchief upon it. Within its folds lay what looked like a ginseng root, marvelously ugly and intricate to the final whisker, its surface dotted twice, once with what looked to be a replica of the golden fly in her left hand, the other a gauzy dragonfly of like expensive elements.

Ah-Nah's dismay became confusion. She said, "I don't understand."

The aging screen star thrust both hands toward Ah-Nah, said, "Take a closer look."

Ah-Nah did so, a scowl on her pretty Sino-American face revealing nearsightedness as well as concentration. After a long, silent moment, she straightened up, her eyes wide, and said, "This is a copy. Very good, too."

"But not good enough," said the former film star. "What was jade is alabaster—soapstone. What was gold, what were diamonds, are—who knows?"

"But who—" Ah-Nah began, then stopped in utter dismay.

"Never mind for now, Ah-Nah. Let us examine the contents of the other jars."

The room in which the two women stood was as fantastic as the dragon patterns of solid gold thread woven into the richly embroidered antique mandarin robe that sheathed Mei T'ang's slim, still elegant body from throat to heels. She was more than seventy years old—how much more was a carefully kept secret—and looked not a day older than thirty-eight. She moved with the sinuous ease and grace of a well conditioned young woman of twenty-eight.

Surrounding them, atop richly lacquered ebony cabinets, stood a long row of old-fashioned apothecaries' jars each two feet high and half as much in diameter, looking oddly out of place against the costly Chinese cloud tapestries that covered most of the walls, leaving room only for two large casement windows to the north plus the two doors.

At the bottom of each jar lay a different form of plant or animal life, enduring endlessly without preservative since each was, or had been, a masterpiece of the jeweler's art, each exotic vegetable or root adorned with some form of insect life reproduced in mineral and metal on the base of perfectly

selected and carved jade. Here were small carp with ruby eyes, scales lustrous with the rich red hue of Shansi gold, dried frogs of clouded green jade, glittering coiled snakes of jet and silver with more golden flies on their outstretched tongues.

The collection, as both women knew, was insured for more than a million dollars and this was a mere token estimate of its actual cash value in the present day collectors' market-it was, at any rate, beyond value if only because it was unique and therefore irreplaceable, unmatchable. Or it had been before it was debased by substitution.

Now all of the originals were gone . . . enough to represent a theft far surpassing the value of any of the celebrated Brinks' armored truck robberies of years gone by. Ah-Nah made notes as her mistress took inventory of each of the hundred or more objects that reposed in the bottoms of the large jars.

Only once, toward the end of the chore, did Ah-Nah speak. Then it was to say, "Your company—the guests will be arriving soon."

With a quick, impatient angry gesture—the first visible evidence of the rage that burned within her—Mei T'ang said, "Keep them in the conservatory. Give me the list—we have done enough. Now I must talk to the thief."

When the woman had silently departed, her mistress stood briefly in thought. Then, with a deep breath that lifted the small, still firm breasts beneath the brocaded mandarin jacket, she glided to the ebony table that stood in room center, lifted the telephone handset from its top and began to dial a number.

Behind her, the second dark door opened silently and her dialing was interrupted by a gently mocking voice that said, "There is no need to call, loved one. I am here. I must confess to welcoming this confrontation, now that it has come. I never dreamed it would take you so long to find me out."

Before Mei T'ang could reply, the silken steel-hard fingers were around her throat

and her breathing was abruptly cut off. Nor did she breathe again in this world.

II

DR. ERIC Svorenssen, D.D.S., lifted his foot from the pedal, thus halting the deadly drone of the dental drill, and stood back, beaming proudly at the patient in the chair. Beneath the pale straw thatch of his thinning hair, his face resembled an inverted russet pear set atop the larger inverted pear of his body, an erstwhile athlete quite happily gone to seed via enjoyment of the good things of middle life.

He said, "That should do it for now, Charlie. We'll have the abutment inlay ready when you come back Thursday. It wasn't so bad, was it?"

Chan said, "Mouth feel like boxing glove but unable to hit back at tormentor."

Dr. Svorenssen flicked the tip of his bulbous nose with a thumbnail, said, "Come on Charlie. You speak better English than I do. Save the Confucius Say bit for your admiring public."

He turned away.

Chan said, rubbing his jaw with thumb and forefinger and feeling as if there were nothing there, "Not speak good English with face full of Novocain. Tongue fill mouth to point of detonation."

Removing his white jacket, for this was his final appointment of the afternoon, Dr. Svorenssen said, "If I hadn't used Novocain, you'd feel a lot worse."

"Perhaps—but cure sometimes worse than sickness."

The need for new bridgework was part of the reason for the presence in Los Angeles of the veteran Inspector of the Honolulu Detective Bureau. The other part being the first American showing of some spectacular samples of pre-Confucian Chinese art unearthed by the busy archeologists of Mao Tse-tung's Peoples' Government.

Chan had found, over a period of more than two decades, that Eric Svorenssen, while not possessed of the most delicate of dental touches, did work that lasted. If his technique was "shoot 'em full of Novocain and then blast," it worked. Once a Svorenssen bridge was in, it stayed in. He was knowledgeable, thorough, and remarkably more skillful than his battering ram methods suggested.

Donning a resplendent sports jacket in a vivid Saxony gun club check while his pretty little Swedish assistant helped Chan into his light pongee coat.

Dr. Svorenssen. said, "Let me give you a lift to the hotel, Charlie."

"Too much trouble," said Chan. "Out of your way."

Eric Svorenssen lived in one of the pale pink towers of Park La Brea, less than four blocks from his office in the Desmond Tower, overlooking that stretch of Wilshire Boulevard called the "Miracle Mile" for reasons unknown save to the developers who hung the title upon it. Chan had taken a small suite at the Hollywood Roosevelt, a good two miles to the north-northeast.

"I'm going your way," said Svorenssen, opening the door that led to the foyer of his office and bidding a cheerful farewell to his receptionist. Neither believing nor disbelieving, Chan saw no reason for further protest. He told himself he would do more than the same for his friend whenever he chose to visit the Islands.

They drove north in the dentist's black Mercedes through the used-Car-lot wastelands of La Brea Avenue. Not until they were halted for a red light at Willoughby did either of them speak again.

Then Doctor Svorenssen said, "You remember Mei T'ang Wu, Charlie?" • . ,

"Hearts of Palm favorite film for many years. Much in love

with her," said Chan. "Is she dead?"

"She's very much alive," said Svorenssen. "I've been taking care of her teeth for almost thirty years. She's still the most beautiful Oriental woman I have ever seen."

"Chinese flower slow to fade," said. Chan, a reminiscent glow lending warmth to his

usually inscrutable dark eyes. "Very good news, my friend. With the years, my list of personal idols reads like the casualty list of the Fort Pillow Massacre."

"And *that's* the truth," said Svorenssen sadly, negotiating a lane change to avoid a stalled moving van. Certain his friend had not brought up the former film star's name idly, Chan waited for the explanation. It came as they passed Santa Monica Boulevard.

"Mei T'ang is entertaining this afternoon," Svorenssen said. "I'm taking you there now—if you don't mind, Charlie."

"Have I a choice?" Chan countered cryptically.

"None," said his friend. "She called earlier to ask me to bring you. Mei T'ang have problem—damn you, you've got me talking your pidgin!"

Chan masked a smile of amusement, said, "Wise man watch self near poison oak or catch same." A pause, then, "Eric, you know I'm not in Hollywood for business, apart from the damnable business of my bridgework."

"I hope you'll see her," said Svorenssen. "Otherwise, I'll take you to the hotel. But she sounded distressed when she called—and angry."

"Every intention of accepting. Chance to meet idol of youth not to be neglected."

"Who said that?" Svorenssen asked, "Confucius or Lao T'se?"

"Charlie Chan," said the detective with a trace of smugness. Then, "Does she still live in fabulous House of Wu?"

"You'll see for yourself in about two minutes," said Svorenssen as he drove past Hollywood Boulevard to take the right turn at Franklin.

Like any normal American-bred youth of his era, Charlie Chan had been a devotee of the late silent and early talking films and had devoured his fill of the ecstatic fan magazines that flourished between the two World Wars. He had feasted his eyes on picture layouts of Rudolph Valentino's *Falcon's Lair,* on Harold Lloyd's terraced palace, on Nazimova's Garden of Allah—and on exotic Mei T'ang Wu's *House of Wu,* in many ways the most remarkable of all Hollywood aeries of the great days of the so-called film capital.

Built in 1932 a mere two blocks northwest of Grauman's Chinese Theater, it was neither solely a private residence, a hotel nor an apartment house but, in the purported words of its sleekly glamorous creator, "combines the best features of all, functionally and artistically."

Since Mei T'ang was of Chinese ancestry like himself, albeit California rather than Hawaiian born, the young Charlie Chan had been one of her most loyal and devoted fans.

He had seen her in at least a score of her filmed epics, from the early, and silent, *Kowloon Nights* to her final appearance as *Mother Goddan* in a technicolor revival of John Colton's *Shanghai Gesture.* Yet, despite his avid interest and his reading of hundreds of publicity stories that purported to tell "the truth" about her private life, Mei T'ang remained a cipher, an enigma—which, with the passage of time and the growth of sophistication, Charlie Chan had come to accept as an integral part of her carefully contrived public image.

Inscrutable and Oriental. . .of the real Mei T'ang, Chan had long ago reluctantly accepted the sad fact that he knew nothing at all. And now, after so many years, so much bemused speculation, he was to meet her in the flesh.

Chan suppressed a surge of immature curiosity about the mystery. In view of the fact that he was so soon to meet his long-time idol and that she had asked to see *him,* he decided against questioning Dr. Svorenssen about her, preferring not to cloud his own first impressions with those of anyone else.

Fortunately, as they turned south from Franklin, a car pulled out from a parking place near the corner—for otherwise the block was jammed all the way to Hollywood Boulevard at the foot of the gentle slope. Behind them as they emerged, rose the steeper slope of the Hollywood Hills. Facing them, directly across Sycamore Drive, was the fabled House of Wu.

Its lower surfaces masked by twin palisades of small cypresses, its upper three stories rose square and plain and somewhat weathered and disappointing to the detective. It was faced with brick of a burnt orange hue, with black shutters and portico. Only the pagoda-like upcurve of the entrance top suggested the Orient in any way.

Nor did its appearance improve upon closer approach. The bricks were stained with years of usage and the black surface of the portico revealed chips and scars that showed the natural light colored wood beneath the lacquer.

Ill

WHILE THEY waited, after Dr. Svorenssen pushed the bell for admittance, another couple

joined them at the double front door. They were man and woman, both past middle age and waging a losing battle against the encroachments of time. Despite a deep suntan and an obviously dyed black mustache, the man's face, like his protruding belly, had run to flab, as had the lady's countenance beneath over-heavy make-up and a bright henna frame of thinning curls, although her stomach was rigidly corseted to give her body the overall appearance of a short, thick salami.

"Going to Mei T'ang's?" the lady asked. At Dr. Svorenssen's assent, she began to spout an involved reminiscence of having first met the actress at Malibu Beach in a mixup of cabanas, a discourse mercifully cut short by the buzz of the admittance signal.

In a city whose interior surfaces are devoted to the promulgation of a merciless maximum of light, the inside of the House of Wu was, to Charlie Chan, pleasantly somber and shabby. It looked lived in and enjoyed. Nor was any plaster visible save on the ceiling. The walls were covered with deep orange floral paper, the interior woodwork, like that of the exterior, was black.

Halfway down the passage that ran the east-west length of the building, staircase and elevator faced one another. The plump, hennaed lady pushed the lift button in a flurry of jeweled bracelets and wrapped her lynx stole around her with a regality that failed to come off.

When the elevator failed to respond instantly, she muttered something about "these old buildings." Her escort smiled apologetically beneath his bravely dyed mustache.

After a few moments, the lady said, "I'm going to walk it. Come on, Harold, it's good for your figure."

With an eloquent glance at Charlie Chan and Eric Svorenssen, Harold followed her up the carpeted staircase in silence. The dentist watched their progress until they were well out of sight and murmured, "It doesn't require a detective to spot a henpecked husband."

"Not husband," said Chan.

The dentist blinked his surprise, said. "How can you be sure?"

"No ring in nose," said Chan.

"Oh, *brother!*" moaned Dr. Svorenssen. "Charlie, sometimes you're harder to take than the Chinese water torture."

Following a series of creaks and sighs, the elevator door slowly opened in front of them and they got in. Svorenssen

punched the top button and, with another series of dolorous protests, the lift began an unsteady ascent that reminded Chan of the hideous time when, despite eloquent protest, he had been coerced into riding the back of a mule to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and then back up to its top.

There was, to a passenger in this elevator, a somewhat similar sense of being trapped on the brink of imminent disaster.

At the second floor, amid another series of sounds of deep emotional disturbance, it halted jarringly and settled at a slight tilt. The door opened and a man and woman got in—not the two who had defected to the staircase.

The woman who entered wore the rags of a once-handsome face like a gallant scarecrow, made no attempt to hide the scars of time beyond such diversion of viewer interest as was afforded by an elegant rep-silk pants suit of dark blue decorated vividly with poker hands.

She lighted up at sight of Dr. Svorenssen, seized both his hands and cried, "Doc, you old Torquemada—and how are *your* eyeteeth?"

"Happily long gone and unmourned," replied the dentist, kissing the colorful apparition on one tan leathery cheek.

MADAM WU

"Let a fellow in, will you?" said another voice, a voice rich, deep and slightly querulous. It belonged to a tall, languid; superbly elegant man whose features bore the familiar landmarks of long film stardom. It was, Chan recognized, Gilman Roberts, whose success as a player of scores of suave villainous roles on both the small and large screens was matched only by his emergence as a leading American cultural champion; as antique buyer for a major department store chain and a cookbook author.

The creaking elevator protested even more loudly at this addition to its load, but joviality rode the rest of the way to the roof with Chan and

Dr. Svorenssen. Yet there was something in the caged atmosphere that caused the detective inspector's psychological neck hairs to tingle a minor alarm.

It had entered the ancient lift with the newcomers—an overnote of heartiness in Gilman Roberts' drawling accents, a withdrawal by the ravaged lady in poker hand silk. Before the lift passed the third floor on its way to the top of the House of Wu, Chan was quite certain that these two detested one another.

He thought, *Love turned to hate is deepest of all hatreds . . .*

Briefly, out of long habit, he speculated as to which of them, man or woman, had originally done what to the other and which had paid the heaviest penalty, might still be paying it. Then he dismissed the thoughts as none of his business and therefore unworthy of his time.

As the decades moved past him with increasing rapidity, Chan found himself getting more and more wary of wasting what his mind, if not his body, told him was an ever-decreasing margin of life.

He dismissed that thought as being miserly and even less worthy than the one that had prompted it. As in many other observations on the mystery of living, Chan's three principal mentors—Confucius, Lao T'se and Li Tai Po, were agreed that the hoarding of anything is the most useless of human instincts, since by its very nature it prevents the miser from enjoying what he saves.

Still, there was a current between tall man and ravaged lady, he thought, as they at last left the Toonerville lift. ..

. . . to emerge in a glassed roof garden of an infinite variety of Chinese blooms, shrubs and dwarf trees, set in hydroponic beds of purest quartz pebbles whose liquid nutrients made the atmosphere as richly humid as the flowers made it rich in scent. On the graveled walks of the conservatory and in a rectangular center area, groups of men and women conversed, smoked and sipped drinks of various hues.

Opposite the elevator door, which had creaked shut behind them, was a bar of ebony with gleaming silver - fittings, being served by a young Asian in a close fitting, bright red, high collared jacket.

What used to be called a Sun Yat Sen jacket, Chan thought ruefully, before it became revived as a Mao—inevitably he was reminded of the old French aphorism to the effect that, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Somewhere in the middle distance,

he could hear the shrillness of the fat henna-head's voice reminding her husband that their doctor had warned him never to take more than two cocktails.

Hell hath no fury like a wife unchecked, he thought, deciding the paraphrase had some merit.

A young Chinese-American woman, her face bland and pleasant within its border of closely bound black hair, her slender body graceful within its sheath of black watered silk, approached them and greeted Dr. Svorenssen warmly before turning to Chan.

She bowed, said, "Inspector Chan, I am Ah-Nah, Madame Wu's companion. She wishes to see you before she receives her other guests. I'm so glad you could come."

She spoke softly, swiftly, both as if she did not wish to be overheard and as if she wished to waste a minimum of time on the rituals of formality. Chan looked down at her, liked what he saw, then turned to his friend.

"Go ahead, Charlie," said Svorenssen. "If Mei T'ang wants to see you first, she will. Meanwhile, I'll try to keep the bar from falling over."

As the former film star's companion preceded him along a path that led to a Chinese blue wall pierced by an ornate closed door of red lacquer and gold, Chan saw that, for all her grace, she moved with the tautness of tension. Thus far, he concluded, Mei T'ang's little party had not proved to be exactly a relaxed and relaxing occasion.

Having opened the ornate door and ushered Chan inside Ah-Nah left him there. The room he found himself in was long, low-ceilinged and twilight dim. Off-white walls were hung with priceless tapestries and lined, here and there, with almost equally rare low cabinets, brightly carved and painted on an ivory lacquer base.

His hostess sat on a sort of throne chair on a small dais at the far end of the room, her hands planted firmly around the ends of the knobs. She wore a richly brocaded mandarin robe whose wealth of gold threading seemed to flicker with light even in the half-dark room. As Chan drew slowly close to her, she made no sign of greeting. Shadowed by some angle of the dim indirect lighting, her face was inscrutable.

As he came closer, it seemed to Chan that Mei T'ang was still a very beautiful woman—until he got close enough to see that she was a very dead one.

IV

CHAN STOOD perfectly still, staring at the body of his hostess. His first thought, there in the dim light, was that she must have been dead long enough for rigor mortis to have set in. In the soft warmth of the room's temperature, however, this would require a matter of hours since her demise. But it seemed unlikely that, with a party to prepare for, the former screen star would have placed herself on her lacquered throne so early, or that her absence would not have been noticed and her body discovered long before the guests began arriving.

He took two steps forward and peered more closely at the corpse. From the discoloration of her face, he had no doubt that she had been strangled. Also, this close but quick examination revealed that she had not been dead as long as Chan first thought. Extending a tentative forefinger, he touched the exquisite fabric of the mandarin coat that covered her once famous body from throat to heels. "

Although the surface of the silk itself was sleek and soft, he could feel the stiff sizing beneath. And the embroidery, intricately laced with real gold thread, was firm and heavy. It was the robe, rather than rigor mortis, that was holding her body upright and in place.

First message from the corpse, he thought. Mei T'ang Wu had been quite freshly killed. It occurred to him that she would not be able to enjoy the inevitable notoriety that must follow so sensational a demise—not at least on any earthly plane.

Stepping backward, he regarded the body as a whole, for the first time noted the pair of black gloves that lay in its lap. Whose—the murderer's gloves or those of the victim? Discovery would have to await the arrival of the police.

Chan glanced around the room, saw the small ivory plastic telephone resting on one of the priceless cabinets that lined the lower walls. He crossed to it, paused for a moment to clear his thoughts before picking up the handset. Then he punched Central Police Headquarters and asked to speak to Captain Pat Jarvis. It took less than two minutes to get Jarvis on the line, two minutes during which the room's silence grew increasingly oppressive.

"Who is it?" barked the captain's voice.

"Charlie Chan at your service."

"For Christ's *sake!"* said Jarvis. "I thought you were

tending your ladybugs in Hawaii. Are you in town on holiday or working?"

Chan explained precisely where he was and what he was doing. Jarvis said, *"Jesus!"* Then, "Stand by, I'd better take this one myself. Mei T'ang Wu? My God, I must have seen a dozen of her pictures. Can you play watchdog till I get there?"

"Can watch body but not guests," said Chan.

"Do just that, Charlie. Stand by."

Chan hung up. His feelings at this moment were curiously mixed. In his long and illustrious career as a police detective, he had been forced to deal repeatedly with every variety of those human failings that are labeled crimes by the law he served. Save on the rare occasions when it could be justified, he considered murder one of the three most evil types of felony.

The snuffing out of another human life to him was unforgivable unless the slayer was forced to kill in self defense. The other two categories he found most loathesome were kidnapping and blackmail because of the continuing unhappiness they inevitably caused not only their victims but those most closely associated with slayer and slain.

All in all, however, murder was the worst . . .

To Chan, there was nothing romantic about murder. It was dirty and all too often meant interminable toil before a murderer was brought to justice. Not infrequently, Chan had wondered, after dealing with a most atrocious killing, if the very filth whose cleansing was his job had not rubbed off on his own psyche. He who digs in dirt seldom keeps clean fingernails.

Though Chan tried to force himself to feel disgust a faint thrill of excitement tugged at his nerve ends, made taut the muscles of his stomach. Here were a body, dead, strangled, and a killer at large. It was with difficulty that Chan reminded himself he was not a Los Angeles detective but a mere vacationer from Honolulu, that his proper role in this affair must be that of discoverer of the crime and thus only a witness for the prosecution.

The tautness in his nerve ends persisted, causing him to shrug and sigh and, from long habit, to look carefully about the exotic room in which he stood face to face with the corpse of Mei T'ang Wu. From long experience, he knew that, if corpses had messages to give the experienced investigator, so, more often than not, did the

immediate environment in which they were found.

Moving softly, silently and with deceptive swiftness, Chan took a look around. He left the gloves on the dead woman's lap alone. It was not his job in any way to touch the body. The reading of whatever further messages it might convey was up to the trained scientists of the coroner's office and the police scientific crime analysts.

He examined the soft, priceless carpet that filled the room almost from wall to wall and on which the late film star's throne rested. As he moved, something bright was reflected in the dim light, something that winked up at him out of the deep pile of the carpet slightly to the left of the throne. He moved toward it, bent down, drawn by another sparkling highlight, picked it up.

It was a golden house fly with diamond eyes and tiny wings of transparent white jade framed in golden wire that retraced each tiny segment of the insect's flight appendages. A magnificent work of the jeweller's art, one that, even there in the carefully arranged artificial twilight, bore the unmistakable stamp of having been manufactured in the land of his ancestors.

He was still peering at it, entranced, when his concentration was shattered by a knock at the door.

Chan moved to answer it but, as he did so, the knock sounded again—from behind him. It had come from the far side of a less conspicuous portal, set in the wall opposite the elaborate entrance through which he had come—a door Chan had taken for that of a closet.

He took it for granted that it was the police that were knocking—and again was wrong. Even his brief vacation, he decided, had made him careless as he was all but engulfed by an invasion of a half-dozen men and women in starched and spotless white uniforms, pushing before them a pair of portable steel tables on wheels, tables laden with an assortment of covered steel food containers, cutlery, plates and paper napkins.

An immense black man rendered over seven feet tall by an enormous chef's hat said, "Jason Hollywood Catering—do we set up in here?"

For once, the veteran detective inspector was nonplussed. Taking his silence for assent, the chef said, "Lay it out, team," and the room became as busy as the celebrated Walt Disney version of Santa's workshop under the unseeing eyes of the corpse, while the

redolence of fine cooking filled the death chamber.

To Chan's relief, at that moment the burly shoulders, of Captain Patrick Jerome Jarvis blocked the doorway through which the caterers had just erupted, backed by a pair of uniformed policemen. He, too, looked in speechless dismay at the unwanted activity, then spotted Charlie Chan and came over to him., j * • -

"For Chrissakes," he said, "who ordered the food?"

"Not unworthy self," said Chan. "Comestibles precede coppers by gnat's,eyelash."

Captain Jarvis's sunbronzed countenance contracted in a wince. He said, "If *that* came from Confucius, I'll eat my Borsalino, feather and all."

"Difficult to prove origin of wise saying," said Chan. Then, lapsing into excellent English, he gave Jarvis a rundown on what he knew in two concise paragraphs, concluding with, "Suggest you move caterers out of room."

"I'd better send them back where they came from," Jarvis said, and did- so. Not until this was done was any sort of procedural order attained.

Watching, Chan was interested to discover that the door through which they had made their surprise entrance led to a windowless central foyer on

ERIC SVORENSSEN

which fronted a large freight elevator with quilt-hung walls to prevent furniture damage. He noted that another door, across from the throne room entrance, stood ajar and entered it to discover himself in the late film star's study-laboratory with its curious jars of various Chinese medicinal roots and the dried bodies of what had been lizards, frogs and fish.

His nostrils dilated as he smelled the fading after-aroma of some personal scent. Perfume it was not, the odor was too light for a perfume's heavy base. It could have been that of a lady's cologne or of a man's after-shave lotion—he could not be sure. Nor could he identify the brand, which he might have

done had he entered the room a few minutes earlier.

All he was sure of was that he would recognize it if he encountered it again. It had a lilac base, whether real or manufactured he could not be certain, though the odds were heavily in favor of the synthetic article. He only hoped a number of the guests in the conservatory were not wearing it.

Peering into the nearest of the old-fashioned apothecaries' jars, Chan discovered that the twisted orchid, root it contained had a pair of spots upon its otherwise intact surface. Closer examination revealed them to be lifesized insects, apparently crafted of jewels and precious minerals and metals.

He opened his left hand, which still contained the handsome, elegant and beautifully crafted artificial housefly he had picked up beside the throne chair of Mei T'ang Wu. He studied it, looked again at the insects on the exotic root in the jar, then carried it to a casement window through which the late afternoon sunlight streamed at a flat angle from over the shoulder of Laurel Canyon.

Until then, Chan's senses had been in a state of general alert. Now they moved into narrower focus and intensified.

One by one, he examined the elements of Chinese pharmaceutics in the jars, moving from one to another, studying each in turn, until the eleventh he examined held his interest. He had already determined that no two of the jeweled insects were alike—just as no two of the objects on which they rested were similar.

What held Chan's attention was a curiously carved ginseng root, gnarled and twisted like a deformed parsnip. On its curved surfaces reposed a pair of flies, one of which, from his relatively distant point of vision, seemed the twin of the jeweled insect he had picked up from the carpet in the other room. He looked from the gem in his hand to that in the jar, frowning.

Strange, Chan thought, *no other two alike . .*

V

IT WAS A puzzle whose solution would have to wait opportunity for closer examination. At the moment, with no standing, official or otherwise, in the investigation, Chan had no desire to disturb anything in the rooftop apartment where murder had so recently been committed.

He should have turned the insect over to Pat Jarvis. But

the two lapses in his thinking—that of taking for granted first that the door in the death room led to a closet rather than to the freight elevator foyer, second that the caterers were the police, had led to this third lapse.

Chan itched to get a closer look at the strange contents of the jars since he had never seen anything like them, had never heard of such strange examples of what appeared to be the ancient craft of Chinese jewel-making lifted to its highest plane—beautiful baubles for a Han emperor or a Mongol prince grown sufficiently effete by residence in China to have developed a taste for *objets d'art* of such refinement and such delicary.

This strange room, like the reception room where Mei T'ang's body presumably still sat on its throne chair in death, had another door. This one, Chan determined to open before another invasion caught him off guard.

Chan moved cautiously—but not cautiously enough. As he peered through the partly opened portal, a large dark cloth was flung over his head, effectively blanketing both his vision and his breath. A pair of invisible arms pinioned him briefly, then he was flung back into the laboratory-study onto his rump in a most undignified fashion.

When Chan got the cloth, a large lavender bath towel, from his head, he was sitting on the carpet, facing the door through which he had just peered. It was again closed, enigmatic, mocking. The crumpled towel which he had been holding in his hand he dropped beside him.

It did not surprise him to discover that the priceless insect jewel had vanished.

He * *

Chan took a number of deep breaths before rising to his feet with unexpected grace for a man of stocky figure. He was reminding himself with every ounce of wisdom he and his ancestors had amalgamated that he must not allow anger to cause him to lose further control of self.

For Chan was bone-angry. This last humiliation, coming on top of his previous lapses, had heaped injury on top of insult. Nor did the fact that the injury was limited to his pride make it any the less painful.

And this, too, rankled the usual serenity of his soul.

As his deductive faculties became operative once again, he realized all too clearly that he must have been observed, at least while he was in this

strange room. Otherwise, how could he have been ambushed so neatly—and how would his observer have known he held the jeweled insect in his hand?

The questions answered themselves—but they failed to indicate who had observed him, or how.

He opened the door again, this time without untoward incident, and discovered himself to be in a bathroom equipped with lavender face and hand towels, washcloths and toilet tissue. In contrast to the other rooms he had visited in the House of Wu, there was nothing Oriental about either the plumbing or the bathroom decor. Folding the towel that had blinded him neatly, Chan replaced it on the rack alongside the shower-tub.

Then he examined the door to the laboratory he had just left. It opened and closed without sound. This, at any rate, accounted for the fact of his being observed, if not the identity of whoever had spied on him. Only the memory of the faint scent remained . . . unidentifiable in the melange of perfume trails that assailed his nostrils in what was evidently the powder room for the reception.

The other door to the bathroom was abruptly opened, bringing with it a ground swell of conversation from the conservatory. The raddled but still attractive lady in the blue pants suit with the bright poker hands looked at him with sardonically uplifted left eyebrow.

"Really, Mr. Chan!" she said. "It never occurred to me, in all the years I have followed your career, that you did your sleuthing in a ladies' lounge."

Chan mustered the shattered remnants of his poise to reply, "Strange house offer strange trails. Excuse, please."

He slid past her near-famine-thin figure to return to the conservatory, where the guests were milling about in apparent confusion. He noted the two uniformed policemen guarding the main elevator entrance, wondering what steps his friend Captain Jarvis had taken to hold possible witnesses for questioning. It occurred to him that a long evening lay ahead for most of them—long and hungry since the caterers had been so summarily sent back where they came from.

Appetizers were reduced to a few greasy crumbs on the serving platters, but the drinks continued to flow without interruption. Chan suppressed a smile, realizing that Captain Jarvis was evidently proceeding on the old *in vino Veritas* assumption. "In wine is truth."

He hoped it worked. In his own considerable experience of crime allied with alcohol, Chan had long since reached the conclusion that the combination all too often resulted in *in vino vast confusion.*

Dr. Svorenssen spotted him and came over, to thrust a drink in his hand and say, "Charlie, will you please tell me what in hell is going on?"

Chan sipped his drink carefully, said, "Charlie Chan like three monkeys—see no evil, * hear no evil—above all speak no evil. Besides, Charlie Chan not know."

"Come *off* it, Charlie," said Svorenssen. "Ah-Nah took you to see Mei T'ang. You've been gone almost an hour. And the police have been holding us here for the past forty minutes."

The elderly couple who had taken the stairs up instead of the elevator approached and the hennaed wife said, "Why can't we leave? This is a violation of our civil rights. I won't stand for it. Harold, *speak* to somebody!"

Her voice was shrill and cut through the sound in the glass-roofed conservatory like a laser beam. As if in answer to it, a young plainclothes officer moved front and center before the portable bar and announced that all who wished to depart could do so as soon as they had left their names, addresses and telephone numbers with the officers at the door.

The hennaed henpecker gave a triumphant toss of her head and trumpeted. "You see, Harold—all it takes is a little gumption!"

"Watch your language, Rosina darling," drawled the elegant Gilman Roberts, who had just joined the group. "You're dating yourself. *Gumption!* Really. . ." He looked after the departing couple in wonderment before turning to Chan.

"We really *would* like to know what has happened," the actor said. "I suppose somebody stole one of Mei T'ang's precious pretties—although this—" with a sweeping gesture that indicated the policemen at the portals "—does seem a classic case of over-reaction, even for a lady as volatile as Mei T'ang/'

Chan regarded the tall, elegant actor impassively. It was evident from his question, however indirectly delivered, that word of the murder of their hostess had not yet been announced to the assembled guests. The Honolulu chief of detectives therefore held his own silence. He felt he had no right to interfere with the procedure established by Pat Jarvis, even though, personally,

he would have liked to watch and weigh reactions to its announcement.

At that moment, the shrill voice of the hennaed henpecker again cut through the moist, perfumed air of the conservatory, as she cried, "If you don't let us out *right now*, I'll see to it that Harold has your badge."

"Ah, gumption!" sighed Gilman Roberts. "What violence is committed in thy name,"

Dr. Svorenssen, whose attention had been temporarily diverted by the overloud exit of the elderly couple, returned his attention to Chan and repeated his demand to know what was going on. Chan blandly ignored him and said to the tall actor, "Would like identity of loud lady just leaving."

"Believe it or not," replied Roberts, "the little man she bosses around is a veteran Hollywood producer. The name is Heinemann—Harold Heinemann. That of his louder, though not necessarily better, half is Rosina. Would you believe she was once a star in *Our Gang* comedies?"

Chan said, "Husband boss people around all day. Wife boss husband around all night—right?"

"That's about it," said the actor. "As a matter of fact, Harold has been signed to produce the picture this party is all about."

Chan looked accusingly at Dr. Svorenssen, said, "You not tell Charlie movie involved."

"So solly, Cholly," said Svorenssen. "Not lemember evelything."

"Oh, shut up, Eric," said Roberts. "Not funny." Then, to Chan, "It's one of those hit-or-miss deals everything in pictures seems to be nowadays. We make a feature film. If it goes, we use it to pilot a TV series. If they don't spot the series opposite a show with a high Nielson rating, it runs a few seasons and we all get rich and go to Switzerland and lie around on our numbered bank accounts. If it doesn't go, we pick ourselves up and look for another vehicle."

"And Mei T'ang will star?" Chan asked.

"She will *co-star—"* Roberts stressed the word hard "—with me. You see, in this sort of movie, in a ..

Whatever else the actor was about to say was interrupted by the abrupt opening of the lacquered doors to the throne room followed by the emergence of the ravaged lady in the poker-hand pants suit. Closing them abruptly behind her, she paused in silence until she had the attention of all in the conservatory save for a few

drunks otherwise occupied in potted palm alcoves.

"Kids," she said in her husky, penetrating, somewhat graveled voice, "you can all go home now. Our hostess has been murdered!"

The room hushed.

VI

ERIC SVORENSSEN pointed the forefinger of his highball holding hand at Chan and said, "You *knew!* Why didn't you tell us?"

Gil Roberts said, "Probably, Doc, because he had orders not to."

Despite the languidness of his stance and the drawl of his voice, the actor spoke with authority. Svorensse'ft deflated and said, "Is that so,'Charlie?"

Chan sipped his drink and said nothing. Gil Roberts, muttering an excuse, took off after the lady in the pokerhands pant suit, who was heading for the passenger elevator.

Chan said, "Who's the lady in the pants suit?"

Svorenssen said, "That's Claudia Haynes. She has an overbite due to an uncorrected faulty occlusion when she was a child."

Shaking his head, Chan said, "Doc, I asked who she was, not for her dental chart."

"Sorry, Charlie, but I'm all

ROSINA HEINEMANN

shook up. Is Mei T'ang really dead?"

Chan nodded, repeated his question about the woman who had made the announcement, who was slipping into the elevator with Gil Roberts securely latched to her elbow.

Eric Svorenssen, his face drained of color, said, "Now she'll never get the eyetooth root-canal work done. Charlie, you wouldn't believe—"

"Who is she, Doc?" Chan committed the rare rudeness of an interruption. .

"Oh. . ." Svorenssen snapped out of it, said, "Claudia? She's an agent, what they call a package dealer. She's the one who put the deal together." He put down his near-empty glass on a small table, said, "Charlie^

excuse me. I think I'm going to be sick."

Looking after the dentist until he disappeared in the lavender bathroom at a trot, the Hawaiian detective inspector turned his attention to the reactions of the others in the conservatory. For the moment, it was still a tableau, with most of those present still frozen into immobility by shock at Claudia Haynes's abrupt announcement. A sort of non-conversation piece, he thought, wishing he knew who they all were.

Even as he watched, the tableau broke, up. Voices rose on every side, voices expressing disbelief for the most part as the message took its time to sink in. Then the noise level rose higher and the guests, like Caesar's Gaul, divided themselves into three parts.

One group headed for the elevator to give names and addresses to the police guard stationed there. Another headed back to the bar, while a third milled aimlessly about.

Strange scene, strange happening, Chan thought, wondering who, if any among them, might have information that could lead to the identity of the person unknown by whom the crime had been committed. He heard one woman, denied the use of a telephone by the police, say, "But if I don't get this to Sheila first, I'm off her payroll."

Sheila, Chan surmised correctly, was almost certainly a screen gossip columnist. He was reminded again of the inevitable notoriety that must follow the dramatic murder of such a famed, exotic public personality as Mei T'ang Wu had been.

It was a crime that demanded a quick solution for many reasons, not the least of them police prestige. He began to map out proper procedure and again was forced to remind himself of his entire lack of any status, official or private, since his possible client was the victim.

A voice at his elbow said, "Inspector. Chan?"

It brought him out of his brief reverie. A tall, reedy young man in a grey suit and blue sports shirt stood beside him, added, "Sir, Captain Jarvis wants to see you."

As the dectective ushered him through the bright lacquered door, Mei T'ang's companion, Ah-Nah, was ushered out. She said nothing to Chan as they passed, but her luminous dark eyes looked up eloquently into his with what he took to be a silent appeal for help.

The twilight of Mei T'ang's reception room had been banished and the lights were on

bright and full. The body had already been removed and, despite the fact there were a half dozen persons present, the long chamber felt strangely empty. Even Pat Jarvis seemed to feel the eerie personality vacuum created by the departure of the former star's corpse. In death, her presence still dominated her suroundings as it had in life.

Jarvis said, "This one looks like a ring-tailed doozy." Then, to a pair of technicians busy by the now empty throne chair, "Don't forget to dust the gloves for latents." And, back to Chan, "Anything you've got, Charlie."

Chan gave it to him from the beginning in Dr. Svoressen's office. When lie W . to the episode of the lavender bath towel and the theft of the jeweled fly, Jarvis slapped the flat of a hand hard against the priceless antique chest on which he was resting his rump.

"Son of a *bitch!"* he said. "Right under our *noses!* How do you like *that* for nerve?"

"Not much," said Chan. He lapsed into his pidgin to add, "Humble self much embarrassed."

"You're embarrassed!" said the captain of detectives. "How the hell do you think I feel? I don't suppose you have any idea who did it?"

Chan shook his head, told him about the perfume, concluded, "Not much of a clue, I fear. Sorry."

"Not your fault, Charlie," said Jarvis, shaking his head like a mastiff emerging from the Santa Monica surf. Then, "And those God damned caterers .. . You know, Charlie, if I can find who called them for delivery at that precise moment, I believe we'd have this case wrapped up."

"Problem with call?"

"You can say *that* again! We don't even know it came from this building. Just a voice, apparently female, demanding immediate service. For a job like this, the Jason service has a stand-by system so they won't clutter up a party they're hired for until they're needed."

Chan said, "Would give much to know what Mei T'ang wished to see humble self about."

"You and me both!" Captain Jarvis paused, scowled at the tapestry on the opposite wall. Then he said, "Charlie, I don't know how to ask this of you!"

Chan said, "Best way—ask. Then Charlie tell yes or no."

"I wish you'd stop the doubletalk," said the police captain. "How the hell can / ask a favor of you? You may be out of your jurisdiction, but you

still outrank me, and I want your help."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just stay with it. You have an inside track to begin with because Mei T'ang asked to see you. *You* found the body, *found the jeweled fly,* you called me. Do what comes naturally, learn what you can. Frankly, we're stumped."

"Case early," said Chan. "Time needed for key." Then, "I'd like to know more about those jade and gold objects the fly came from."

"I haven't had time to examine them thoroughly," said Jarvis, standing upright, "Let's take a look at them right now."

They left the scene of the murder, crossed the service elevator foyer to the laboratory. On the way, Chan remarked, "The black gloves-did they yield anything?"

"Don't expect much from them, Charlie, even after the lab boys have tested them. They're on sale in every department store in Los Angeles—and in at least half the small clothing shops."

"Men's or women's?" Chan asked.

"Women's—but that doesn't necessarily mean a thing—as you very well know." They reached the laboratory and Captain Jarvis looked at the weird jewels in the big glass jars. He said, "Jesus, what in the hell are they?"

Chan gave him his theory. When they reached the ginseng root, he pointed out the two flies, revealed the one whose duplicate he had found by the throne.

Jarvis squinted at it, said, "It could have fallen from one of the other weirdoes."

"I think not—no other two are alike." He pointed at the bizarre object in the jar before them, said, "I'd like to examine this one more closely, please."

"Go ahead, Charlie, though I'm damned if I see how it ties in with the murder."

Chan unscrewed the light metal ttdrfbf the jar without difficulty, plunged a hand in and withdrew the jeweled ginseng root. The moment his fingers caressed the sleek surface, he knew that it was not jade he was holding. It felt colder, greasier, totally different in texture. With each second of manual contact, the resemblance to jade grew increasingly superficial.

He turned his attention to the two jeweled flies and here no tactile test was needed. Viewed closely, they were obviously inferior imitations of the brilliantly crafted insect he had picked up from the carpet

by the dead film star's throne. Neither the gold nor the diamonds were genuine and the wired-in wing surfaces were mica rather than thin slices of white jade.

Chan explained what he had discovered, concluded, "Perhaps suggest something to agile police brain."

"Hell, yes," said Jarvis. "Suggest substitution to agile police brain. I wonder how many of them are phoneys."

"Leave to expert hands," said Chan, "but suggest many if not all. Meanwhile, wonder if dead lady have keen eyesight."

"Okay, Charlie—and thanks. So far, this case has more questions than answers."

"Ask right questions—get right answers," said Chan.

"Confucius?"

"No, Socrates," was the reply.

VII

IN THE conservatory, Charlie Chan found Svorenssen waiting for him almost alone in the recently filled room. The dentist, looking unhappily sober, was staring with gloom at the pale dregs of the highball in his right hand.

Chan said, "No need to wait, Doc. We're right near my hotel."

"I have a message for you," said Svorenssen. "Ah-Nah—Mei T'ang's companion—wants to talk to you."

"So. . .?" said Chan, remembering clearly the look of appeal she had sent his way when they passed in the doorway.

"She had to go out—something about the funeral arrangements. I took the liberty of telling her where you are staying."

"That's okay, Doc. I want to talk to her."

"Also, we're invited to a sort of wake at Claudia's apartment downstairs. I told you I'd ask you, so now I've done it and you can refuse."

"On contrary—I accept," Chan told him.

Recalling his precarious ride up in the elevator, Chan elected to walk the stairs down to the second floor. There were perhaps a baker's dozen of guests in the shank lean agent's apartment, which covered one third of one side of the passage that divided lengthwise the lower floors of the building. While this made Claudia Haynes's residence considerably smaller than that of Mei T'ang, with the conservatory aside, it was still a large old-fashioned apartment.

Claudia had furnished it comfortably with a hodgepodge of antiques and newer

pieces that somehow managed to achieve a precarious harmony—light cane-back French Provincial chairs cheek by jowl with dark, heavy carved Spanish tables. A pair of curved elephant tusks, their tips almost reaching the ceiling, rose like parentheses on either side of the wide doorway between living and dining rooms.

Chan spotted a genuine Fernand Leger among the paintings and photographic blowups of film personalities and movie stills that were spotted casually along the walls.

Claudia greeted them at the door, glass in hand, gave Eric Svorenssen an embrace and then said to the detective, "Well, Charlie Chan, who dun it?"

Chan replied, "Identity of murderer await police announcement. Till then, no can say."

He had long since run out of replies to a question so often asked that it bored him—but that he was too polite to ignore. He was ushered into a study to the right of the living room and ensconced on a worn brown leather sofa, where Gil Roberts placed a drink in his fist.

The actor said, "Claudia's cellar runs entirely to vodka and Fresca, so I took the liberty of bringing yours for you."

"Many thanks," said Chan. He sipped the drink, found it palatable, then said to the towering deputy host, "Tell me, what is a package dealer, Hollywood style, please."

Roberts dropped gracefully to a hassock close to the sofa, hugged a well tailored knee, said, "That could be a long order, Mr. Chan, but Fll try to be brief. A package dealer, Hollywood style, is usually an agent who puts his—in Claudia's case, her—clients together on a project which is then peddled to a studio or an independent distributor as a whole."

"In case of the vehicle for Mei T'ang and yourself?"

"Claudia had Mei T'ang and myself as clients—also a half dozen other actors. She owned the screen play, which is the only thing she paid for, had Larry Kettering to direct and tied in Harold Heinemann as producer. She had the Ace-Keystone people ready to supply studio facilities and two major distributors begging for options on the finished product. It was a ripe vehicle."

"Name of vehicle?" Chan asked.

The actor shrugged. "Who knows what it would have been called by the time it came out? The working title was *Lady of Jade."*

"Most fitting," said the detective. "Who put up the

money to bring back such an old star?"

Claudia Haynes swung into the foreground, taking over from Gil Roberts. She said, "Mei T'ang was putting up the big nut. Ever since Bette Davis made her comeback in *Baby Jane* and Crawford in *Sweet Charlotte,* she's been bugging me to put her back together again in a suitable vehicle."

The antagonism between actor and agent etched in acid Gil Roberts' tone as he said, "That's not entirely true, Clau-Clau, darling—you did at least half the bugging yourself. How long *is* it since you swung a big package deal?"

Venom crackled silently in the air like static electricity. Claudia snapped, "E&ok who's talking! How long hlS'it been since you've been even a semi-regular in a TV series?"

Roberts beamed at her happily, jiggled the ice in his glass as he looked down at Claudia from his great height and murmured sweetty, "It has long been my fond belief that it's up to a competent agent to get client parts."

For a moment,[1], Chan thought Claudia was going to fling her glass in Gil Roberts' handsome face. She took a deep breath, then said, "It's up to the client to make good. . ."

It was weak and she knew it,

GIL ROBERTS

for she turned to Chan and said, "Sorry, Charlie. We must sound like a flock of jackals squabbling over a dead tiger." Then, to Roberts, "By the way, where; were *you* when Mei T'ang was strangled?"

Roberts' smile widened. He lifted his glass and said, "As far as I know, I was with you, sweetie. I told Captain Jarvis as much upstairs. What did *you* tell him?"

"None of your damned business, you overstuffed Westphalian smoked butt," said Claudia, on which" tone the scene ended as its two chief players drifted apart.

Chan cogitated over what he had just seen and heard, sipping his highball sparingly. Had Claudia's final retort been a trifle too vehement? He wondered, thought *mebbeso, mebbeso* and was grateful neither Dr. Svorenssen nor Pat Jarvis was present to hear him utter the pidgin aloud.

He wondered if Claudia's final lashout had not covered a very real relief at Robert's admission that he had covered her for the time of the murder by providing her with an alibi. Until then, Chan had only mildly considered the movements of possible suspects at the time of the murder, leaving such research to Captain Jarvis and his interrogators.

Now, he could not help wondering. After all, he had been closer to the crime, both in space and in time, than had any other officer of the law, official or otherwise. Point by point, he went over what had happened that afternoon, from the moment he and Dr. Svorenssen approached the orange-brick apartment house the murdered film star had built.

His dentist friend returned with a freshly filled glass and said, "Charlie, there's a call for you." He indicated a telephone on a low refectory table across the room, a phone hitherto masked from the detective by a clump of people busily arguing whether a celebrated current male screen star were a non-actor or the genuine article.

Chan said, "Excuse me, please." He picked up the handset, said, "Hello—Chan here."

"This is Ah-Nah, Madame Wu's " companion. Doctor Svorenssen says you are at the Hollywood Roosevelt."

"That's right," said Chan. He was about to give the number of his suite when a feminine voice remembered from upstairs cut in on another extension.

"Will you get the hell off this God damn line?" it said angrily. "I've got to get through to Sheila."

"One moment, please," said Chan. Then, to Ah-Nah, "Are you still there, Miss?"

"Yes."

"Nine-sixteen," said Chan.

"Are you going to get off this copulating line or do I call operator and *cut* you off?" said the intruding voice angrily.

"It's already past eleven," said Ah-Nah, sounding confused. "I'll meet you in the hotel at midnight."

"IH tear out the line if you don't get off," said the lady who wanted to talk to Sheila.

"What's your room number?" Ah-Nah asked.

"Nine-sixteen!" Chan could

not be sure whether he got through or not because the intruder chose that moment to kill the call.

He returned to Doctor Svorenssen, said, "If Ah-Nah calls back after I leave, tell her I'm at the hotel."

"Right on!" said the dentist, who had recovered his interrupted cocktail-hour glow.

, Chan wandered through the apartment, taking in the scene. He spotted three other telephones, one of them in use by a horse-faced female in a splashy flowered print that reminded him of that long-ago era when chintz furniture covers were well in style. Standing behind her, he was debating a suitable reprisal against this one-track lady whose determination had probably ruined his call from Ah-Nah.

But as soon as the thoughts of reprisal rose, Chan dismissed them with some sense of shame as not merely unworthy of his ancestors but unworthy of himself.

Chan lingered another half hour, awaiting a call-back from Ah-Nah, then decided it would be wise to stroll the two blocks to his hotel.

Entering the lobby from the Hollywood Boulevard side, he looked around for the young woman, failed to see her. It occurred to him that he had better go upstairs, in case she had heard him correctly despite their garbled conversation, to see if she were waiting in the corridor outside his room. By his wrist watch, it was exactly six minutes past twelve when he entered the elevator.

Entering his room, Chan called the desk and left a message to have Ah-Nah call him when she arrived and asked for him. Then, feeling suddenly fatigued and let down after the events of the past seven hours, he took off his shoes and socks and jacket and loosened his shirt. Stretching out on the sofa, he turned on a tolerable late-show movie and settled down to wait.

When he awakened, it was past five in the morning and his head felt stuffed with cotton. Fearing lest he might have slum bered thro ugh Ah-Nah 'scall, Chan called the desk and was informed nobody had asked for him. Weighing the unpredictability of young women in general and Ah-Nah in particular, he got out of his clothes, donned unbleached raw silk pajamas and went to bed.

VIII

CHAN WAS sitting on the edge of the bed, pondering the events of the evening before, when Pat Jarvis called him from

the Hollywood Police Station on Wilcox Avenue, just below Sunset.

Following a brief exchange of greetings, the captain said, "Charlie, I had the department Oriental expert up at Mei T'ang's place early this morning. He rates those weird stone vegetables at less than a grand."

Chan scratched his chest beneath his pajamas, glanced at his wristwatch on the bedside table, said, "Still early, Pat. So it's just junk then."

"Worth the metal and alabaster, plus some curiosity value as murder relics," said Jarvis.

Chan said, "The fly I found by the body was not junk. Again I suggest a substitution. Otherwise, why the attack on me and theft of the jeweled fly?"

"Charlie, I know, I know-but I've got to go along with the estimate."

"Then how do you account for the real one?"

"I don't," said Jarvis. "But we've got a murderer to find—and fast—before this case is blown up out of all proportion."

"Ah," said Chan. "I remember the botch of the early-Twenties murder of William Desmond Taylor. You don't want to repeat that one, right?"

"Damned right," said Jarvis.

"What can I do to help?"

"Right now, just keep digging. We need all the A-one help we can get. And you're just the man who can help me now!"

Chan said, quickly before Jarvis could hang up. "The girl called me at Claudia Haynes's last night—the companion. She made an appointment to see me here at the hotel, but didn't keep it. I've been worried."

"Forget that one, too," said Captain Jarvis. "We had her back here till past two o'clock, then drove her home."

"Much relieved," said Chan. He hung up.

However, he was far from relieved by Jarvis's call. As he showered, then shaved with the electric razor his oldest grandchild had given him for Christmas, he compared the case in its present condition to a plate full of soft noodles-loose ends in every direction.

There was one such end that he could investigate—the matter of the jeweled animals, insects and vegetables in the apothecaries' jars that the police expert had summarily pronounced to be junk. However, *he* had seen, held and briefly possessed the exquisitely crafted jeweled fly whose near-worthless replica adorned the carved ginseng root.

Chan knew it was not junk.

He ordered a Continental breakfast sent up. The hour was barely past nine—too early to call the party he had in mind. Following the light meal, he arranged with the hotel desk for the rental of a Chevrolet. Only then did he call Hei Wei Chinn, one of the authorities on antique Chinese artifacts he had flown to Los Angeles to see in connection with a viewing of the archaeological exhibit from the People's Republic.

"I await your visit with impatience," said Hei Wei Chinn. He and Chan had been friends since the bygone time when the Oriental art dealer operated a small shop in Honolulu. "When can I expect you?"

"Directly—if my visit at this time will not cause you inconvenience."

"Oh, come on over, Charlie," said the dealer. "Hell, I'm dying to see you after so many years."

Hei Wei Chinn, like his modest shop on South Robertson Boulevard, just below Pico, looked well used. His lean frame was flattered by a finely tailored suit of Hongkong silk, his shoes were obviously bench made, his tie an *objet d'art* of vivid and wondrous resplendence.

Taking Chan back to his office, he produced, via a brisk Chinese girl assistant, a rare gunpowder tea in cups so thin as to be almost transparent, and there they chatted of former times and present problems.

When the conversation had been steered to the latter subject, Chan told his old friend about the murder.

"I heard about it on the TV news this morning," said Hei Wei Chinn. "A tragedy. I had no idea you were involved, however, Charlie."

"Yes and no," said Chan. "But there is one point, perhaps a trivial one, on which perhaps you can enlighten me out of your great wisdom."

He went on to describe the murdered star's strange collection and the jeweled insect he had found4-and lost. He also gave the report of the police expert, concluding with, "Chinn, did you ever hear of such a collection of curios in your study of Chinese works of art? For the fly I picked up was definitely a work of art."

"How did it feel?" Hei Wei Chinn asked.

Chan understood the question perfectly. Without hesitation, he replied, "It felt old—perhaps centuries old—which the gensing root I handled did not."

Both men knew well the value of the sense of touch in estimating the age of such

objects, both were sensitive to the invisible 'patina of antiquity in the texture of all objects. While hardly as unerring in such estimates as his expert friend, more than once the veteran detective inspector had been able to assign an object to its proper century deep in the past.

Chinn looked thoughtful and fell silent for a pause of at least thirty seconds. Then he said, "It is just possible—maybe. . ."

He picked up the phone and asked the girl to get him a number in Beverly Hills. After long preliminaries, the conversation . was conducted in a North China dialect of which the Honolulu-born detective grasped only a few words. When Chinn hung up, he regarded his visitor with thebl&ace of a complacent smile ifpon his lips.

He said, "That was the deputy mission chief of the cultural mission from the People's Republic now in Los Angeles."

"Yes?" said Chan following a three-beat pause.

"I asked him if he had ever heard of such a collection of jewels. He denied it. Then I told him you still had the jeweled fly and that I had examined it and pronounced it a genuine antique masterpiece."

"Go on," said Chan after another pause. "What was his reply?" He looked at the dealer.

"He made me hold while he consulted somebody else. I detected a faint tone of excitement in his voice. When he came back, I asked him if he wished to examine it. He said, 'No need. It is imitation.' How do you like that?"

"I think Honorable Hei Wei Chinn should be detective instead of humble self," said Chan.

"In the importing of cultural antiques, the dealer grows used to criminals," said Chinn. "Forgers, smugglers, thieves, fences, even murderers—all in a day's work. What do you make of it?"

"Just what you do, my friend," said Chan.

The deputy mission chief had first denied knowing of a collection like that in Mei T'ang's apothecary jars. Then he had insisted that Chan's phantom fly was a fake. The implications were obvious—someone, almost certainly whoever had stolen the originals and replaced them with cheap facsimiles—had already made or was making a deal with the Communist mission. Their experts must at least have examined the goods and found every insect in place.

Chan said, "If you learn anything further about the collection, I hope you will let me know. I suspect a close

connection between the thief and the murderer of Mei T'ang."

"Don't worry—I'll dig till it hurts," promised the dealer. "Who knows? Perhaps this fabulous collection of priceless articles may pass through my hands."

"Keep eye on dollar—old age tranquil," said Chan.

*'Oh, cut it out, Charlie," said his friend. *"I'm* not that old yet. And there's more than a possible buck involved here. My curiosity is aroused."

"Don't let it sleep until it has led you to the truth," said Chan.

Shortly afterward, the visit was concluded and Chan drove the small rental Chevrolet slowly back toward the House of Wu. He remained curious about Ah-Nah, the dead lady's companion, wishing enlightenment as to why she had sought the midnight appointment and why she had not sought him out later in the hotel, when the police were through questioning her.

There was also the matter of discovering the craftsmen who had made the bogus jewels. It was quite possible that the girl, if she were in any way implicated in the ' robbery, might have some information on the subject. Nor did he rule out the possibility of Ah-Nah being the actual thief herself, though he. doubted that the girl, alone, would have the resources to arrange secret sale to the Chinese Peoples' Republic.

CLAUDIA HAYNES

There were a pair of L.A.P.D. cars parked outside the apartment house, each with a single uniformed officer idling at the wheel, presumably to watch those who entered and left the building as well as to monitor possible calls from Headquarters. Chan found a space halfway down Sycamore Drive and walked back.

Alone in the downstairs hallway, he paused, recalling in detail what had occurred on his first entry less than twenty-four hours earlier. He had entered

with Doc Svorenssen, found the Heinemanns waiting for the rickety elevator to make its precarious way from the top floor. The oddly matched producer and his strident hennaed wife had tired of waiting and taken the stairs—at any rate, Mrs. Heinemann had and her husband had tagged dutifully along.

The car arrived, Chan and Svorenssen had ridden upward—to be halted at the second floor by Claudia Haynes and Gil Roberts, who had accompanied them the rest of the precarious way to the murdered woman's rooftop conservatory. Chan remembered vividly the unmistakable aura of bristling hostility between actor and agent, hostility barely held under wraps due to the presence of the other two in the car.

This time, Chan's solitary ride to the penthouse apartment was uninterrupted by anything save the protests of the senile machinery of the elevator—protests that again made him wish he had taken the stairs. He was met at the top by a uniformed policeman and policewoman, the latter looking trim and remarkable smart in her blues.

Ah-Nah, he learned, had departed at six-fifteen that morning. Yes, she had been alone. Yes, there had been a telephone call. It had come from a public phone booth near Hollywood and Vine. Yes, she had been driven away in a waiting car. No, she had not been followed. There had been only one police car on duty downstairs and there were no orders for either detainment or pursuit of the young woman. So they had let her go.

Chan knew better than to register vocally the frustration that he felt. It was, all too often, the story of his own life— his professional life at any rate. No matter how efficient the bureaucratic organization, there were inevitably unplanned-for contingencies, usually at some key point in the course of an investigation. It was too bad one arose so early.

He desired to examine again the collection of bogus jeweled objects in the dead woman's "laboratory", was informed that, after dusting for fingerprints, they had already been conveyed to the far better equipped facilities .of the department's top Oriental expert.

Had there been any subsequent word on the young woman's whereabouts? There had been none. *Strike out on two fronts,* Chan thought unhappily.

He decided to take the stairs down and not the elevator.

IX

AT THE second floor, Charlie Chan paused. The door to ('laudia Haynes' apartment was ajar and, through it, he could hear voices in angry argument- one masculine, one feminine— the voices of Gil Roberts and the agent. He waited where he was, seeking to make out words, but both parties were talking simultaneously and all he could pickfcup, apart from obscenities, was the anger underlying the words.

As Chan moved along the worn carpet along the hallway between the staircases, the tall actor stormed out, his habitual languor destroyed by his very evident rage. He swung back toward the door and said, "Without me, there'll be no package, you doublecrossing whore, and you know it. I'm in whether you like it or not."

He swung back, saw Chan standing there, said without a trace of embarrassment, "Maybe you can talk some sense into the washed-up old bag!"

Roberts' long legs devoured the down staircase three steps at a time. Chan had no trouble imagining that he could see steam arising from the actor's invisible footprints on the well worn carpet. He turned back. Claudia Haynes, looking ravaged-chic in cream-collared Cossack blouse and light blue pants, stood in the doorway, squinting at him through the smoke from a cigarette in a long ivory holder.

She said, "You wish to see me, Inspector? Come right on in. This appears to be visiting day."

There was no residue of anger in her manner as she led him crisply inside, sat him down in a leather chair opposite her script- and phone-laden desk and offered Chan a drink, which he refused. One of the three phones rang and she picked up the right one unerringly, delivered what sounded like a knowledgeable assessment of some young actress for a specific part.

While she chatted, Chan wondered if Gil Roberts shed his fury as easily as she appeared to. When she hung up, apologized, put her phones on the answer service, he asked her.

"Oh," she said, "Gil will sulk for a couple of hours—until something else turns up to occupy the monorail that passes for his mind. As for me, I blow my top at least a dozen times a day—it's expected of me in this business. If I *really* let myself get worked up, I'd have been buried years ago." A pause, then, *"Now!* What was it you wanted to see me about?"

By this time, the veteran detective inspector had his questions ready. He said, "I was wondering what effect the murder of your star will have on the package deal that was mentioned last night?"

She turned over her bony free hand atop the desk in another incisive gesture, said, "Catastrophic—unless I can turn it to our advantage."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I'm not proposing to—I'm *doing* it," she said and he noted a rigid, near-bulldog set to her jawline. "I had no wish to see Mei T'ang killed—she was my best client and one of my best friends in bygone years, and she was helping finance her proposed comeback. giBut what's done is done and life must go on. So do income taxes."

"Alas, true!" Chan punctuated her pause.

"Let's call a spade a spade, shall we, Inspector? There is going to be a tremendous burst of scandal over the killing. Every old lover in Mei T'ang's life—and there were a number of them, I can assure you—will be hauled out of the media morgues, dusted off and dragged into the spotlight. Her old pictures will be pulled out of film storage warehouses and reshown at specialty theaters and on television late shows. Until her murderer is caught, Mei T'ang will once again be big news . . . and when her murderer is brought to trial, she'll be even bigger news.

"Now my job, as I see it, is to put this film together and get it booked and shot before the second wave comes. If we do that, we ride the crest right up onto the Moneysville shoreline. I've been at it, hot and heavy, since six this morning, calling New York, then calling Chicago and so on, working right across the country with the time zones. And it's going to work. If you had come in half an hour earlier, I couldn't have taken time to see you."

"I understand," said Chan, wondering at this woman's chilled-steel opportunism, "and I congratulate you." Then, "I see you work alone. You have no secretary?"

"Not in years, except for special rush jobs—and then I hire a Kelly Girl. With all the automatic aides industry has supplied in recent years, I'm saved the bother of breaking in a new girl and losing her to a studio or to some stud with king-sized equipment every six months. If the correspondence is too much for me, I tape it and ship it out to a professional typists' bureau less than six blocks away on Sunset.

"Believe me, it's easier—and

cheaper in the long run. And there are no personality rubs." Claudia discarded her cigarette and placed her folded hands on the desk, added, *"Now!* Anything else?"

"One further "question occurs—how are you going to make the film with the star dead?"

"That," she said with a lip-curl of triumph, "is my secret. Sorry, but it has nothing to do with the crime or who committed it, Inspector."

"One more thing—was Mr. Gil Roberts one of Mei T'ang's many lovers?"

Claudia opened her hands with a what-else gesture, said, "Oh, Gil had his turn in the royal sack." There was a *who-didn't?* tone in her voice.

Chan said, "I'd like to talk to him. Could you give me his address?"

"Of course." She scribbled with a bright green ballpoint on a sheet of initialed notepaper, added as she thrust it across the desk at him, "If you're thinking of seeing him now, I wouldn't. He lives way up in Laurel Canyon and he won't be home till after five. He has a whole slew of appointments."

"Thank you, Miss Haynes." He was dismissed, so he rose and left. Returning to the hotel, he found a half dozen messages from Eric Svorenssen, asking him to call the dentist's office the instant he came in.

Chan called the number Claudia had given him, was informed by the answering service Gil Roberts used that he would not be taking calls until late that afternoon. He then called Svorenssen, and was invited to enjoy luncheon at a Chinese restaurant the dentist had found on Pico Boulevard, close to Doheny Drive.

Regretfully, Chan declined, for he knew his friend's unerring instinct for ferreting out superfine restaurants in unlikely neighborhoods. But he knew, also, that the afternoon would be consumed with the doubtless irresistible food, and there was something he wished to do before five o'clock—namely, tb pay a visit to Gil Roberts' hilltop aerie whether the actor was at home or not.

So he contented himself with eating lunch alone in the hotel grill, where the cooking, while of good quality, was lacking in the subtle and exotic flavors that represented his ancestral homeland to the Honolulu born Sino-American. While he ate, he considered the possibilities of the tall actor being the murderer of his former mistress—always granting the truth of Claudia's statement that he had been one of Mei T'ang's lovers.

Chan knew something of Roberts' career, first as a performer of suave villains in the A-movies of two decades ago, later as a star in the superior classic horror films that had emerged from the declining Hollywood studios during the Sixties. Recently, as the fad waned, Roberts' public appearances had been confined to television guest shots and panel shows, on which he had served as at best a semi-regular.

Just how the murder of Mei T'ang would affect Roberts' career, Chan had no idea. He had not brought up the subject with Claudia, having no desire to indicate to that astute female intellect the direction his thoughts were taking. Nor had she given any indication of considering Roberts as a suspect.

Chan doubted that she would have revealed such suspicions, if they existed—not, at least, if she felt revelation might in any way impair the precious package deal she was so energetically attempting to paste back together. He had long since learned that the female, under certain conditions, is far more ruthless than the male.

Roberts could have killed Mei T'ang. Certainly, he had the strength. Had he had the opportunity? Familiar with the House of Wu as he was, he undoubtedly knew and almost certainly had used, the service elevator. The question of motive remained. If he were the treasure thief, if he had been caught and accused by his former mistress, it would do. Even if he were not the thief, if Mei T'ang had decided to dismiss him from her comeback film, the motive for murder might be sufficient.

In any event, Chan felt a desire to talk to the actor on his home ground, at least to look over the ground for himself. His lunch completed and signed for, the detective recovered his Chewy from the parking garage in the hotel basement and set out for the address Claudia had given him.

To Chan, unaccustomed to the lane-narrow vagaries of driving through the corkscrew maze of the Hollywood Hills, the trip was reminiscent of both the elevator in the House of Wu and his too-well-remembered ride down and up the Grand Canyon gorge on muleback. He lost his way twice as the rented car slowly scaled the heights, and when he finally found the proper street, he was little better off.

It was barely wide enough for a single car, rose at an alarmingly steep angle to curve out of view from below around

a gorse-grown shoulder cut out to resemble the abutment of a miniature gorge. Had it not been for the mailbox at the foot of the driveway, bearing the name *Roberts,* Chan might not have found it at all.

Nor, when he reached the turnaroi^d at driveway's end was he much better off. The canted roof of a house was barely visible over the brow of the hilltop, beyond which the San Gabriel Mountains, on the far side of the San Fernando Valley, were wreathed in smog of a mustard-gas yellow. To his left, with doors yawning emptily, was a frame two-car garage, filled with the sort of automotive debris that inevitably accumulates in such accommodations.

Chan got out, discovered a steep path that led over the apparent edge of the world between garage and house roof. Negotiating it gingerly, he found himself standing on a small entry in front of a chalet-type residence. The front door was locked and his ringing of the doorbell went unanswered.

Thanks to the building's cantilevered construction, sticking right out of the hillside's north face, there was not even opportunity to walk around it and see what he could see. Nor was there any apparent means

of entry, barring the crashing of the door, which was iron-braced and seemed of solid construction.

So it was back up the steep path to reclaim his car and drive back down the twisting hillside road. He paused to look at the open garage, which held nothing more interesting than an old life saver bearing the legend *Lucille II* and a pair of surfboards marked *His* and *Hers.*

Feeling somewhat foolish at having thus wasted his time and missed an excellent lunch with his dentist friend, Chan rolled the rented car down the hill. So

sharp was the turn that he did not see the other car blocking his path just around the bend until he was barely able to brake in time to avoid a collision. Thus preoccupied, he was unable to avoid, or even to see in time, the assailant who moved swiftly upon him from the side, grabbed him by the throat with a cruelly knowledgeable stranglehold and pulled him out of the car.

Chan's head struck the top of the front window with a blazing bump, causing him to black out.

X

WHEN CHAN recovered his senses, he was lying comfortably on a daybed covered with a bright Navajo blanket next to a picture window that offered, beyond a narrow porch, a breath-taking panorama of the smog-wreathed San Fernando Valley. His head throbbed from the bump on his forehead and his throat felt as it had not felt since the memorable occasion in his youth when he had worn a stiff old-fashioned evening collar three sizes too small to a formal police banquet in Honolulu.

Turning his head painfully away from the window, he saw the elegant form of Gil Roberts regarding him from a near-by lounge chair. The actor was wearing slacks and a pale blue turtleneck pullover and a sardonic expression. A cigarette smoldered in his long fingered left hand.

Seeing that Chan's eyes were open, the actor said, "We were expecting visitors, but we had no idea it would be you, Inspector. Are you all right?"

"Apart from an abominable headache and a sore neck, I believe I'll survive."

"Annie!" called Roberts. "Will you bring our visitor two aspirins and the good brandy."

The girl appeared, looking clean scrubbed and very much like a Los Angeles high school undergraduate of Chinese ancestry—pretty, healthy, young. As Roberts poured a generous portion of fine, virtually unobtainable old London Dock brandy into a broad beamed Old Fashioned glass, he said, "Best cure for a sore throat in the world."

Chan accepted the medication gratefully, chasing the aspirins with the liquid velvet of the strong liquor. Only then did he ask one of the questions that had been troubling him since regaining consciousness.

He said, "Thankful for rescue. You see attacker?"

"There were two of them," said the actor. "I was on the garage roof. Unfortunately

Annie had orders not to answer the door or it wouldn't have happened. When I yelled at them and jumped from the roof, the man holding you dropped you and ran to his car. The other was driving and backed away fast."

Chan said, "Did you recognize either of them?"

"The only one I saw was your attackeft I didn't see his face. The other stayed in the car."

"The driver could have been a woman?"

Roberts shrugged, sipped the brandy he had poured for himself, said, "It could have been. Even from my observation post, the view around the driveway curve was blocked beyond a certain point. You can check it out for yourself."

"No need," said Chan, who had mentally photographed the immediate exterior of the Roberts aerie. "You were expecting visitors?"

"A number of people were looking for Annie," said the actor. "I wanted her here where I knew she'd be relatively safe."

"Safe from whom, and what?" said Chan, regarding the girl thoughtfully.

"From whoever killed her mother yesterday," said Roberts quietly.

Chan nodded. His head still hurt but his mind and his senses were functioning. Although there were great surface differences between this scrubbed looking Sino-American schoolgirl type and the exotic companion of the slain film star, he had almost instantly recognized that the same girl was playing both roles.

He said, "I wondered about the Ah-Nah, since it means virtually no name at all in Chinese." Then, to the girl directly, "You wished to see me last night. I have worried about you."

She said, "The police asked so many questions. It got so late I feared I would wake you, Inspector."

"Why did you wish to see me?"

"I was confused. I felt I needed wise advice."

"I feel complimented," said Chan with a nod that briefly brought back his headache. *Must not nod,* he thought, *till head is better.* Then, "You are confused no longer?" he asked her.

"I feel much more sure about things," the girl said simply, looking at the actor with a glow of soft adoration.

Chan said, "Sometimes a young woman needs a father even more than she needs a mother."

Roberts opened his hands, said, "So you guessed. Oh, well,

I was going to tell you anyway since you're here."

Chan said, "Certain unmistakable bone structure similarities. Also, an ambiance of affection, not of lust." Then, again to the girl, "How long have you known?"

"Only since I called her early this morning and told her some long concealed truths," said the actor. "Annie's position was—well, peculiar. At the time her mother and I were lovers, we were both big stars—and in those days the Breen office rode hard herd on Hollywood where scandal was concerned. Remember what happened to Ingrid Bergman?"

Chan nodded. Then he said, "You are Mei T'ang's heir—heiress?"

"Her only one," said Roberts, "apart from a few small bequests."

"How long were you with her as companion?" Chan inquired.

"Only the last four years. Mother kept me in boarding schools and camp until I was eighteen."

Chan said, "Why are you in danger—rather, what reason do you have to believe you are in danger?"

The girl said, "The same reason mother was in danger, and *she* was killed."

Chan said. "The stolen treasure in the apothecary jars?"

The girl nodded. "It was very, very valuable. My mother was offered the chance to collect them only because she had a friend very high in the Nationalist government who was forced to flee to America in 1949. They were part of a very old, entirely unique Imperial palace treasure. Her friend needed money, mother needed a tangible investment."

Roberts said, "Poor Annie thought I was the thief. She also suspected me of murdering her mother."

The girl said, "The last thing she did was show me a jeweled fly she had found in the lab. Then we checked on the collection and found the originals were all stolen. Then she told me it was time she confronted the thief. She sent me to take care of the guests and to send you in to see her when you arrived."

Chan nodded, said, "Why did you suspect your father?"

The girl said, "I didn't know he was my father then. I knew he and mother were not friendly and that he had access to the treasure and knew what it was. I knew his career was not going well."

"How did you convince her you were not the thief?" said Chan to the actor.

"The thefts must have been going on for some time," said Roberts, refilling his tumbler with brandy. "My bank account had been dwindling steadily save for occasional deposits when I was paid for a TV job or picked up a residual check for reruns of old movies. There would have been some indication of unexplained periods of prosperity had I been the thief. I'm simply not a man who can hide the fact he has money. I enjoy spending it too much."

"That is true," said Annie. "Remember, I have known him a long time now. And I heard mother talk about him."

Chan hid a smile at the girl's proud naivete. AYet he believed Gil Roberts. This man was not one to conduct a prolonged felony. To the girl, he said, "Why did it take your mother so long to discover the thefts?"

The girl said, "She seldom examined them. Her eyesight was very bad. She refused to get glasses until very recently."

"Ah . . ." said the detective. "And how did your father convince you he was not the murderer?"

"He reminded me that he saw me on the ground floor when the murder must have been committed. Just after mother dismissed me, I had to help one of the guests get parked outside."

"I was on my way in to pick up Claudia," said the actor. "We said hello in passing. It will hold."

"Perhaps," said Chan. "I hope so." His head was clearing under the double impact of the brandy and the aspirins. It would hurt for a day or so—but he had endured worse. As for his throat, the discomfort was entirely external, thanks to his fortuitous rescue. Chan did not feel proud of himself at that moment. Twice he had been surprised by an unexpected assailant. Twice he had been easily taken.

The first time, he had lost the jeweled fly. The second time, he had lost consciousness, might well have lost his life. He pondered the purpose of his unseen assailant. He questioned Roberts further about the man he had seen, but the actor could not or would not give further details.

He said, "In the first place, Inspector, I was too busy trying to save your life to pay attention to details. In the second place, the view to the south is all screwed up."

Chan let it go. He said, to both of them, "Did anyone else see you greet one another at the time of the murder, when you met downstairs?"

They looked at one another thoughtfully. After a moment,

the girl said, "There were Mr. and Mrs. Hillburn, I think. Remember?"

"Lloyd and Jeannie!" said the actor, looking relieved. "Of course—they said hello as they went in."

"There were others around," the girl added. "But I don't remember them for sure. Do you, Gil?" she asked, looking at her father.

Roberts shrugged wearily, said, "It was a large party."

Chan filed the names in his memory. Pat Jarvis could check it out more easily than he could. Personally, Chan felt quite certain the alibi would stand up. The question remained—whether it was a true one or had been arranged after the event. That, Jarvis could check out, too. There was another question he considered asking his benefactors, but he decided to hold it until the father-daughter story was found to hold water—or not.

Instead, he asked the girl about the jeweled fly. How, he said, had it happened to fall off?

Annie said promptly, "I have considered that. I believe the diameter of the neck of the jar and the shape of the jade ginseng root, plus .perhaps the thief's hurry, caused it to be knocked loose."

Smart girl, Chan thought. He said, "How firmly was it fastened to the root?"

"Like all the insects on the genuine jewels, it was not glued or nailed. There were tiny prongs on the tips of the legs that fitted into matching holes and slots in the jade." She paused, looking at Roberts.

Chan nodded. This was entirely in keeping with the period and craftsmanship of the creation of the unique treasure. The superb artisans who did the actual carving would have scorned rivets or staples as unlike nature.

To Roberts, he said, "Miss Haynes—you are old friends?"

The actor nodded, made a wry grimace, said, "Old—si". Friends—not exactly. Claudia was my agent when I got started in Hollywood, as she is now. She was Mei T'ang's agent, too. That's how we met."

Roberts paused, sighed, added, "Claudia and I were an item until I fell in love with your mother, Annie. I probably would have married Claudia if she'd let me. But Claudia was all business and felt it might hurt my career—and her commission cut of same."

"And after you fell in love with Mei T'ang?" Chan asked.

"The relationship was not so good. In fact, it might be said to have curdled. Claudia is a very possessive woman."

"Yet she remained your agent?"

"Not by choice," said the actor. "She had me lashed to an iron-bound contract. As I just said, she's a very possessive woman."

"Perhaps you can clarify one thing that puzzles me," said Chan.

"If I can," the actor replied.

"Just how is Miss Haynes proposing to put her package deal together now that her Bette Davis-Joan Crawford is gone?"

From the look the girl and;, the actor exchanged, Chan • sensed that he had touched a vital spot. There was a long, uncomfortable silence before Roberts replied.

Then he said, "Claudia wants to exploit the publicity over the murder to put Annie in her mother's role."

Chan blinked. Again he was surprised, not this time by a criminal action but by the utter cold-bloodedness of the agent's proposal. He said, "Isn't Annie a little young?"

The actor said, "That's the core of the idea—to have Annie playing her own mother playing a part old enough to be her grandmother. Claudia considers it a masterstroke. Remember, she thinks almost entirely in terms of exploitation."

"You think it might work?"

AH-NAH

."It *could,"* said Roberts. i'But it would hardly be a '"sound basis for launching Annie on a screen career. Such stunts seldom are."

Chan turned to the girl. "How do you feel about it?"

She hesitated, said, "I don't really know. Everything is happening so fast."

"Can she act?" Chan asked the actor.

Roberts said, "Well enough. She's had training and has enough inherited talent. Given good direction . . ."

He let it hang. Nor did he, the detective noticed, cite which parent she might have inherited her talent from. Chan suppressed a smile at such tacit if typical actor-egotism, said, "How about the director, and the others involved? How do they feel?"

Roberts said, "It's too sOon to tell. Kettering, the director,

will probably go along, if I know him—and I do."

"And the producer—Mr. Heinemann?"

"So far, an unknown quantity," Roberts told him. "But he's an unemployed producer, so he'll probably fall in line by the time Claudia puts pressure on him;"

"How about you?" Chan asked Roberts.

"How do I feel about acting with my daughter?" Roberts replied. "How would any actor feel? I'm delighted."

"Then the relationship would be acknowledged?"

"Certainly. One thing about Claudia—she keeps abreast of the times. The poor thing has to, otherwise she's practically breastless. Oops—sorry! That was in bad taste. But she feels that things sexual in Hollywood have come a long way since poor Ingrid's time of troubles. Therefore . . ."

Roberts might have run on forever, had not Chan politely asked permission to use the phone. He called Jarvis, told him where he was and of the attack on his person. Jarvis swore mightily and promised to arrange a police guard of the driveway. Otherwise, he had little to reveal of the progress of the case save that the routine investigation was progressing.

Chan had heard this too often not to know its hidden meaning—that nothing was progressing satisfactorily. He hung up, called the hotel, was informed Hei Wei Chinn had left three messages requesting the detective inspector to call him back.

XI

CHARLIE CHAN decided to make that one from the hotel and took his leave with appropriate expressions of thanks. As he worked his way down the twisting hill roads, this time without interference, it occurred to him that his most recent experience had been most curious on several counts, including the lack of description of his attacker and the spate of apparently honest information that threatened to leave him in greater confusion than ever. Damn it, he thought, he liked both father and daughter. If, indeed, they *were* father and daughter. But he felt quite certain important elements of the truth had been skilfully evaded or disguised.

In short, he didn't wholly believe either of them—nor had he the means of sifting truth from falsehood until he could move from a firmer foundation of fact.

Hei Wei Chinn picked him up at the hotel at seven in his

cream colored Continental, Through a smog free twilight, he headed west toward Santa Monica. The evening was pleasantly warm, as Southern California evenings are supposed to be and so seldom are, and the parking lot of the restaurant was washed by a cool breeze from the ocean.

The restaurant was ornate, a concrete and tile pagoda, 'and the food was more ornate still. The meal the antique dealer had ordered in advance consisted of a mere nine courses and came close to Chan's flavor-memories of true Mandarin cuisine.

The two chief dishes among a welter of delicate lesser platters were a whole haddock baked to flaky firmness and drenched in a sauce of soy base enriched with diced fruits, both fresh and candied, in zestful combination. And a pair of small Pekin ducks, one cooked in rich sauces with a stuffing of fresh green pine needles, the other roasted slowly with only a small cup of rare brandy inside so that the fumes of the liquor would permeate the bird from its core outward.

Not until the last of the preserved fruits that concluded the magnificent repast was consumed did Chan's host refer to the purpose of their trip—beyond that of the dinner they had just concluded. Leaning back against his side of the booth, he looked at his Bulova wristwatch and said, "We have an appointment with Hiu Sai at ten."

"Business—or pleasure?" said the detective inspector.

"My pleasure—your business," said Hei Wei Chinn. "Hiu Sai is a very special custom craftsman. I believe he can be of help to us in the matter of the imitations. When I reminded him of certain highly suspect *objets d'art* that have been sold as originals in the last few years, he consented to see us."

Chan said, "My friend, if you are taking me to the man who made the substitute treasures of Mei T'ang, it is eighteen minutes to ten right now."

"Hiu Sai lives close at hand," said Hei Wei, signalling for the check.

As they got back into the car, he said, "You shouldn't have hurried us. Good food lies more easily on a restful stomach. Besides, I hate to be early."

"Sometimes wise man ape early bird to good advantage-get worm," said Chan, his face perfectly straight.

"Shut *up,* Charlie," said Hei Wei, putting the cream colored car into drive.

Hiu Sai's modest abode on a

shadowy street close to the borderline between Santa Monica and Venice was dark, lit only by an isolated street lamp of low wattage halfway down the block, which shed only enough light to identify the name and number on the battered aluminum mailbox in front.

"That's funny," said Hei Wei as he pulled smoothly to a stop. "He promised to be here."

Chan got out of the car in silence. His eyes followed the twin tracks of concrete that led to the garage door at the left of the two story frame house. The door had been raised and the garage yawned an empty rectangle of darkness.

"I don't like this, Charlie," said Hei Wei, standing at his elbow.

Chan studied the front of the house. It certainly seemed empty. He lifted his eyes toward the second story, seeking an open window. All were closed and though the night was warm, there was smoke issuing from a stout brick chimney at the right end of the roof.

He sighed, said, "I have the feeling I'm about to risk a judicial investigation for the violation of Hiu Sai's rights of property."

Motioning Hei Wei to remain where he was, Charlie Chan climbed the three steps to the small front porch carefully, stepping atop the riser to avoid creaks. Gently, he tried the door, found it locked. He peered in the two front windows but, though the blinds were not drawn, could see nothing since the interior lights were out.

Leaving the porch, Chan walked around the house to the back door, which opened readily when he turned the knob. He stepped inside, closed his eyes and counted slowly to twenty, to permit them to adjust to the greater darkness. When he opened them, he could discern dimly that he stood in a kitchen. The smell of something burning was noticeable, but the heat was not in the stove, which was unlit.

The lights went on suddenly. Hei Wei had entered behind him, found the switch, turned it on. Ignorning his friend, Chan continued to sniff silently. There was an acrid odor to the unseen fire that suggested to him only one thing—film recently incinerated.

He said, "Where is the other stove?"

Hei Wei looked at his friend in perplexity, then said, *"Oh!* There's an annealling oven in the workshop in the basement."

It proved, for Chan, an interesting room. He was

intrigued not merely by the fact that it was an entirely modern electronic workship in the anachronistic old frame house-but by the several natures of the articles its owner was in the process of reproducing.

Here were a leather seated wooden chair of mediaeval times, a wide variety of urns in various stages and hues of lustre, old armor (or new armpr made old), terra cotta likenesses of Etruscan warrior heads with their wild looking headgear and eyes even longer and wider and more staring than those of the early Egyptian Dynasties.

More immediately interesting to Chan was an apparent object on which the vanished simulator appeared to be currently in work. Held in a vise on a workbench was a block of what looked like amber in which a pair of mating dragon-flies were eternally caught in the act. Atop the bench was a metallic lamp containing a milk white tube that filled its rectangular face.

Hei Wei said from beside him, "So *that's* how he does it! Sometimes Hiu Sai's workmanship is crude but his measurements are always correct."

"What is it, Chinn?" the detective asked.

Hei Wei did not answer in words. Instead, he pushed a metal button below the white tube, which instantly came to life as a three-dimensional color reproduction of what purported to be the original of the amorous insects. He stepped back, continuing to look at it admiringly.

"Son of a bitch!" he said. "Look at that! He can make facsimiles without having the object itself for study."

In a corner, they found a filing cabinet partially filled with labeled containers that held other tri-di film capsules. One conspicuous gap in the file was, to Chan, like a cavity in an otherwise perfect set of teeth. He hardly needed information as to what was or had been burned in the annealling oven at the far end of the room to make an educated guess. It was obviously film.

Chan said, "Did you frighten Hiu Sai, Chinn?"

The dealer shrugged, said, "I got the impression over the phone that I annoyed rather than frightened him. He's very secretive about his work, you see."

"I see," said Chan, "and I can see why." He indicated the oven, added, "Is there any chance of saving anything burning in there?"

Chinn snorted. "At two thousand degrees, Fahrenheit? You must be joking."

A small sound from the

doorway brought both men up short.

XII

"WHAT THE hell do you think you're doing here?" said a soft Southern voice. "You're under arrest."

A pair of uniformed policemen stood there, Smith & Wesson Magnums very much at the ready. Chan raised his hands with a sigh, saw Hei Wei do likewise.

To the arresting officers, Chan said, "If you will have somebody call Captain Jarvis of the Hollywood Station and tell him you have arrested Charlie Chan .. ."

He got no further. The patrolman who had checked their search snorted his disbelief, said, "And I'm Dick Tracy. You'd better come with us."

It took" time. Jarvis had retired for the night and not until close to twelve did anyone identify Chan to the satisfaction of the Santa Monica precinct. A neighbor of the missing Hiu Sai had seen the break-in and phoned an alarm.

"Next time," said the lieutenant on night duty, "let us know in advance. We'll be glad to cooperate, Inspector."

"In Kingdom of Heaven," said Chan, "cooperation, not competition, law of land."

Back in the antique dealer's big car, Hei Wei said, "Why the fortune cookie motto, Charlie?"

"People expect it of me," said Chan. "Cannot leave laughing, leave smiling." He gave Hei Wei a broad smile.

"Pardon me while I retch," said Hei Wei, turning east on Broadway. "Where to now, Charlie?"

"Home—to hotel. And thanks for a fine dinner and a most instructive evening."

"You caU that instructive?" said Hei Wei. "All but getting arrested? What good did it do?"

"It showed us the efficiency of the Santa Monica Police," said Chan. "It also showed us that someone called Hiu Sai to warn him of our impending arrival."

"Now who would do a thing like that?" said Hei Wei. "You give me the creeps."

"Possibly a man named Hei Wei Chinn," said Chan.

"Me—who was tapping my phone?"

"Remember, you called and made the appointment," said Chan. "It is just possible Hiu Sai decided to call his employer on the Mei T'ang treasure substitution and ask for advice."

"Son of a bitch!" said Hei Wei, pounding the wheel with the base of a hand. Then,

contrite moments later, "Who did Hiu Sai call?"

"That," said Chan, "is the sixty-five thousand dollar question."

"Don't you mean sixty-four thousand dollar question?" Hei Wei asked.

"Because of its importance, I decided to up the ante," said Charlie Chan.

"I buy you the best Chinese dinner in Los Angeles," lamented Hei Wei, "and you turn me into a straight man!"

"Cholly so solly," said Chan.

Both men began to laugh . . .

But Chan was not laughing when he reached the Hollywood Roosevelt. His face was as serious as his thoughts when he stepped to a lobby phone and gave the operator Claudia Haynes' number. During the seemingly wasted time of their arrest, his mind had been in overdrive. He had been reweighing the crucial minutes during the Mei T'ang party when the murder must have been committed.

He was quite certain that he and Svorenssen had arrived after the crime—but not by much. He once again used his disciplined near-total recall to run over everything he had seen, heard and smelled before and during that critical period.

Claudia's contralto growl came through, said, "Who is it?"

HAROLD HEINEMANN

"Inspector Chan," he replied. "Sorry to wake you."

"You didn't," said the agent. "Who in hell can sleep with Mei T'ang's murderer still loose?"

Wearing a pink quilted house coat, she received Chan. A loaded highball was in one hand, a loaded cigarette holder in the other. She offered him a drink, which he refused, led him to the living room and turned down the sound on the color television, which was running a James Bond type spy spoof.

Flinging her undernourished limbs on the leather sofa, she said, "At your service."

Claudia Haynes, Chan judged, was not drunk but had reached an uninhibited plateau of semi-intoxication. He said, "You remember yesterday

afternoon when you and Gil Roberts got in our elevator?"

"I'm not bloody likely to forget!" she replied. A visible shudder shook her thin shoulders.

"How long were you with Roberts before you got into the elevator, Miss Haynes?"

"Not long," she said. "In recent years, I see as little of Gil as possible, apart from professional considerations." Then, with a shrug, "A buck's a buck, as you well know, and while Gil's value as a property is not what it was, ten percent of his earnings is more than I can afford to give up."

Ignoring the extraneous matter, Chan said, "Do you remember which direction he came from?"

"Not bloody likely! He rang my doorbell just as I was about to leave and go upstairs to Mei **T**'ang's party."

"And you had been at home until then?"

The agent revealed her exasperation, said, "While I am fully aware of the importance of repeated questioning in an investigation of this nature, I was not aware that there was no legal proviso against boring the interogatee to death.

"I've been through it with you, I've been through it with the police. Yes, I was at home. No, I have no witnesses to prove it, unless a check of my phone calls will serve that purpose. All I can tell you is what I already have."

"Thank you, Miss Haynes."

"Make that *Ms,* Inspector. I'm tired of sounding like the Virgin Queen."

"As you wish," replied Chan, thinking that here, indeed, was a fine specimen of a Woman's Lib leader born, perhaps, a decade or two too early. At the moment, Claudia was showing her age via the bags under her eyes and the heavy lines etched around her mouth.

"One thing more," he said, "if you can."

"If I can," she replied.

"I would like the address and phone number of the Heinemanns. I have yet to bore them with my questions."

"Touche," said the agent, rising from the couch with just a hint of a list to starboard.

While she went to her office to write down the information, Chan took the liberty of calling Gil Roberts, and was rewarded with the irritating buzz of a busy signal.

He hung up as Claudia returned bearing a piece of notepaper as well as a newly refilled highball. He said, "May I continue to use the phone, Ms Haynes? Local calls only."

"You may call Timbuctu if

you wish," she replied, handing him the paper with the Heinemann information. "My phone bills, as an agent, are astronomical anyway."

Chan dialed the Hollywood Detective Bureau, . identified himself, inquired if there was still a patrolman on watch at the hilltop residence of Gil Roberts. Frowning, he hung up, dialed operator and asked for a cut-in on the busy Roberts line—to be informed that it was off the hook.

For a long moment, Chan stood lost in thought while Claudia regarded him curiously. Then he dialed the number of the producer and his wife that Claudia had just given him. Rosina Heinemann's ear-piercing shrill uttered a loud *Hello* in his left ear.

"Inspector Chan," he told her. "I apologize for such a late call but it is most important."

"It's okay," she said. "Harold and I haven't been able to sleep since Mei T'ang was killed. What's on your mind, Inspector?"

He glanced at Claudia, saw that she was watching him and listening, narrow eyed. He said, "I'd like to pay you a visit, please."

"When?"

"Right now, if I may. Believe me, Mrs. Heinemann, but it is most important."

"Well, I don't know," said the producer's wife. "It's awfully late."

"Please forgive my insistence," said Chan. "It's urgent."

She gave in, saying, "Well, since Harold and I are still awake, I guess it's okay. But you'd better hurry. We just took a pill."

"I'll be there directly, and thanks," he said. "Just stay awake till I get there."

He hung up, turned to Claudia, said, "How do I get there?"

She said, "From here, the best route is to take Cahuenga to Berry Drive. There's a short cut through the Outpost, but you'll never find it unless you've been there before." She rose again, said, "111 get you a map."

She brought a road map back with her, spreading it out on the coffee table. Using a ballpoint, she traced the intricate convolutions of the hill-roads that would take him to the desired address. Chan studied it, memorized its curves, then paused to look at a spot on the chart just south and west of the indicated address.

He said, "I believe I'm confused. Is this where I must go?"

Claudia crowded close to him to look. Her scent a heavy

jasmine, was unfamiliar to his nostrils. She redirected the pen to its previous spot, said, "That's not where the Heinemanns live. That's Gil Roberts' house. It may look close but it's about a quarter mile straight up from Harold and Rosy's."

"Sorry," Chan said, masking the excitement that rose within him. "I'd better get going."

"You'll never find it if you can't read the map better than that, Inspector," said Claudia, moving toward the door. "I'll drive you there. I'll be ready in about ten minutes."

She was back in less than five, wearing slacks and a grey sweater with an incongruous pastel mink stole slung over her shoulders. Chan, who had moved away from the telephone, regarded her with respect. He needed only one more piece in the puzzle to lock it up, and that piece could wait until morning.

Claudia said, pulling keys from the gold-mounted clutch-bag she was carrying, "Let's put the show on the road. Inspector."

XIII

CLAUDIA HAYNES took off from the underground garage beneath the House of Wu like a skyrocket, spinning her ciny yellow Porsche around curves and up grades with a speed that would have had Chan's insides up in his throat had he not quickly sensed that the agent was one of those rare drivers of either sex whose reflexes match her impulse for speed.

As they shot up the Outpost's corkscrews toward Mulholland Drive, Chan wondered if she were testing his nerve as a strong willed woman seeking any means of asserting her superiority—or was she pushed by some less obvious, less inner-directed motivation?

It was in part to discover this and other facets of Claudia Haynes that had prompted Chan so readily to accept her offer to be his chauffeur—plus the good and sufficient reason that she would probably get him to his destination much more rapidly than he could hope to do himself.

Chan also wondered if he would have arrived at the solution to the mystery of the strangling of Mei T'ang any more quickly if he had got around to talking to the Heinemanns earlier. Probably not, he decided . . . and there was still going to be a great deal to seek out and sort out once the strangler was safely under lock and key.

Merely thinking of those viselike fingers made his own

throat ache where they had gripped it that afternoon. His brush with death had been closer than he liked to think about. Had the killer not been interrupted . . .

"Hold onto your hat, Charlie," said Claudia as she half-skidded the sports car over what looked like the rim of eternity. "Here we go again."

They followed a staggering series of ess-curves at what seemed to Chan like a ninety degree drop, so steep that with each swerve of the front wheels he feared the rear of the Porsche would leave the rough pavement to somersault them arse over teakettle down the hill. Then, taking an abrupt left turn, Claudia powered the Porsche up to a briefer series of curves, swung right and skidded to a sudden halt on a well graded turnaround in front of a pair of bolted garage doors.

They were in a hillside recess, the night sky above them virtually shut out by the foliage of overhanging trees. Save for the faint glow of a distant street light—*again,* Chan thought, recalling the similar dim situation at Hiu Sai's deserted Santa Monica establishment—they were in a virtual enclosure of darkness.

The hillside rose to their left. To their right, barely visible stone steps led to a balustraded terrace that ran the length of a house that seemed embedded in the hill itself. No light shone in any of the windows.

Claudia's finger closed, claw-like, on Chan's right bicep. In a stage whisper, she said, "I don't like it. You just talked to them, didn't you?"

"I talked to Mrs. Heinemann," said the detective inspector, his own voice low.

"Something must have happened," said the agent.

"Maybe nothing has happened," said Chan.

She stared at him in the darkness for a long moment, then whispered. "I can do without riddles, thank you. I'm going to take a look."

"You'd be wiser to wait here," he said, but it was too late. Claudia had already slipped out of the car and was making her way toward the balustrade that led to the front door of the house. From the fact that her footfalls were silent, he judged that she was wearing soft-soled slippers. Was it luck—or forethought? At the moment, Chan was not sure.

Three times already in this case, Chan had been caught with his guard down—once by the unseen assailant who had robbed him of the jeweled fly in Mei T'ang's bathroom, once by the strangler outside of Gil Roberts' hilltop house who had

all but killed him, once by the Santa Monica police in Hiu Sai's workroom.

Three times was more than enough. He had no intention of beng caught off-guard again . . .

The crux of the entire case, he was convinced, was the strange treasure of ancient Chinese jewels and jadecraft that had been stolen from the murdered actress' "laboratory" and replaced with shoddy substitutes. Taken from the falling Republic of Nationalist China at the time of the Communist takeover, Mei T'ang had purchased the jewels honestly enough for an as yet unlisted sum of money.

The cultural representatives of the People's Republic currently in Los Angeles were willing to pay a large sum for their recovery and return to the land of their creation, according to his friend Hei Wei Chinn. They had virtually concluded a deal with whoever had managed the slow theft and replacement of the *objets d 'art.*

Mei T'ang's poor eyesight, plus the screen-star vanity that forbade her wearing glasses for so long, had rendered both the theft and the substitution relatively simple for the thief. The murdered star had allowed no one in the treasure room—her "laboratory" so called—save certain trusted individuals, and these only in her own presence. Otherwise, the bizarre chamber was kept under lock and key.

It occurred to Chan, as he quickly reviewed the basis of the case, that the old adage anent the Crusaders' wives' chastity girdles that has come down as, "Love laughs at locksmiths," would be more applicable as *"Lust* laughs at locksmiths." Lust for loot as well as for romantic fulfillment.

Certainly, someone close to Mei T'ang had arranged access to the treasure chamber during the late star's absence, had had the unique and priceless gems tri-di photographed, returned them and done the substitutions one by one. The slow theft had been scheduled to coincide with the visit of the cultural mission from the People's Republic—or had it been the other way around?

At the moment, Chan considered this immaterial.

It had been Mei T'ang's misfortune to visit the oculist and have herself fitted to glasses just before the deal was complete. Whether the jeweled fly had been knocked or jarred free of its tiny slots on the surface of the jade ginseng root, while being brought back from the photographer, or when its substitution with the imitation ginseng root occurred, was also immaterial at this point.

Newly keen of vision, the erstwhile actress had discovered it on the eve of her reception—and this had led directly to her discovery of how she had been victimized. It had also led directly to her murder, in a form so dramatic that it hinted more at extemporal desperation than at the careful planning that had been a feature of the treasure thefts.

The importance of the jeweled fly to the thief was self-evident. It remained the only concrete evidence that Mei T'ang's treasure, purchased under the counter, had ever actually existed—or that it had remained in her possession right up to the time of her death.

Small wonder the thief, who was also almost certainly the killer, had run the appalling risks attendant upon assailing Chan with the lavender towel in his victim's bathroom. It had been vital that the tiny gem be recovered lest the whole crime be unveiled before the loot was paid for.

The problem assailing Chan was—who could have known he liad it? The answer, of course, was—whoever had spied on him via the silent bathroom door. This, all of it, was the *corpus ilclicti,* the body of the crime.

Now it was time to bring the party or parties responsible into • unp and into court where justice due would be meted out. Apparently it was up to him to see that this was done.

His eyesight now fully attuned to the tree-shaded darkness, Chan followed Claudia's progress as she slithered, a darker exclamation point against the deep shadow of the house itself, along the facade toward the front door. There, she apparently found the door unlocked, for she vanished within the house, seeming to flow through it.

"Interesting," murmured Chan. He remained where he was, waiting for some visible or at least audible reaction to the agent's entry. But there was none.

Chan decided it was time for him to get into the action now that Claudia had committed herself. Moving with the greatest of care to avoid making any noise since, unlike the agent, he was not wearing soft-soled shoes, he avoided the balustrade steps that led to the front door. Instead, he worked his way along the side wall, hoping to find some sort of opening between the garage and the house, with the steep hillside immediately at its back. Chan was quite certain there had to be a rear entry, if only for delivery of groceries to such a sizable house on a hill.

He found it, a wooden

lattice gate that led to a path barely a yard wide between the rear wall of the house and the concrete revetment against the hillside to prevent landslides following spring rains. More important, at the end of this apparently blind alley, just short of the other end of the house, he found a concrete stairway leading steeply upward toward the scarp of the hill.

The light was better here than in the tree shaded front of the house. Chan could even see a narrow oblong section of night sky, complete with stars and scudding cotton clouds. He paused, checking his bearings, making sure of a return route should he need one in a hurry. To his right, a ground floor rear window was open. He waited, just short of it, for some sound or other sign of life inside the house. But there was none.

Chan wondered what Claudia Haynes was doing in there and if she was alone. If she was not, she had to be engaged in some sort of stalking game he very definitely wanted no part of.

Not unless he was sure *he* was the stalker. Chan had been stalked enough in the last thirty-six hours!

With continuing, practiced care against involuntary noise-making, Chan bent low to slip past the open window and went on to the concrete staircase at the end of the alleyway. When he reached their top, he discovered that less than two feet separated him from the roof of the producer's hillside mansion.

It was almost a flat roof, slanted enough to let rainwater flow off it into drains in the passageway at the rear of the house he had just traversed. About a dozen feet in from either end rose a massive chimney of light brick to a height of eight feet or more.

Chan hesitated. Since there was such easy external access to the roof, he doubted that there would be an internal opening. Hence, if he opted to use it and the cover of its chimneys while awaiting the imminent detonation he expected, he would be cut off from immediate and perhaps vital participation in whatever occurred inside the house.

At that moment, he heard the snap of a branch or large twig somewhere in the impenetrable brush tangle of the hillside above. At least one question was answered for the detective inspector-he had arrived ahead of the expected invaders. He would also be in plain view when the invaders drew nearer.

His decision taken from him, Chan leapt nimbly and silently

for the roof and moved quickly to the far side of the nearer of the big brick chimneys.

It took Chan less than a second to discover that he was not alone in his cover, when he felt the muzzle of a revolver shoved into the small of his back and a voice whispered, "Hands at the nape of your neck, you bastard—and shut *upr*

This time, although apparently caught offguard, Chan was physically and psychologically prepared for any sort of unexpected attack. He had little time even for the highly specialized disciplines of defense and counterattack without any weapon save his mind, spirit and body, that were a part of his lifelong conditioning.

But so unskilled was the attack that he scarcely needed such disciplines. Instead, falling to his hands and knees, he kicked upward with unerring savage accuracy at the elbow of the arm that held the gun. Its owner let out a hiss of anguish and the hand-weapon, a small automatic, described a slow parabola against the sky. Rising to his knees, Chan caught the weapon before it could clatter to the roof and pushed both his attacker and himself back behind the cover of the chimney and its shadows.

He whispered, "Mr. Heinemann, I hope I didn't hurt you."

"Charlie *Chan!"* the producer gasped. "What the hell? I sure w~~asn't~~ expecting you to be here at "

The rest of his speech was abruptly cut off when Chan clapped a hand over his mouth and whispered, nodding toward the steep hillside, "Company coming."

XIV

HAD ANNIE WORN blackface or a dark mask, it is doubtful that either of the men on the roof would have seen her at all. Clad in a dark jumpsuit, she was virtually invisible as she emerged from the nightswept hillside behind her at the top of the revetment and moved silently down the steps to the rear of the house.

There was a low whistle from below them, followed by a soft call, "Hey! It's me—*Annie!"*

Then came the sound of a door being unlocked and a sudden indirect glow as the lights went on, followed by a trio of voices in words of greeting—all of them feminine, all of them as easily recognizable to Chan as they were to his companion.

Claudia's husky contralto

said, "How did you manage to leave Gil?"

"Unconscious," said Annie.

"You're sure he's out of the picture?" Claudia asked. "I've known him to make a fast recovery when I thought he was passed out cold."

"A little laudanum can be a girl's best friend," Annie replied. Then, "What about the son of heaven? I thought you told me over the phone you were driving him here."

For the first time, Rosina Heinemann's shrill rasp made itself heard. "Harold's taking care of him."

"But Harold's a *pussycat!"* cried the girl. "After all, Charlie Chan has a reputation for knowing how to handle himself."

"Harold has his little surprises," said his wife. "He won a raft of combat medals in World War Two."

"Just the same, let's check it out," said Annie. "I don't want Chan running for the police at this stage of the game."

"The child's right," said Claudia. "Let's check it out. Where do we look?"

"Harold's on the roof," said Mrs. Heinemann. "We'd have heard some noise if anything had gone wrong. Claudia, why didn't you bring him inside with you?"

"I thought he'd follow," the agent replied. "He started to, but I lost him. *Merde!"* said Claudia. "Come on. We can't settle anything until we're sure."

The voices faded and there were sounds of movement two stories below. Heinemann looked at the detective inspector, said, "We've got less than fifteen seconds. Do you think you can trust me to make it look good?"

Chan said, "No, but it looks as if I'll have to."

He pulled the clip from the automatic, emptied it, put the bullets in a jacket pocket. Then he unloaded the cylinder, tossed that bullet up onto the hillside and replaced the empty clip before returning .ft to the producer. By the time the women appeared at the top of the concrete steps, he made a convincing captive with his hands clasped at the back of his neck and Heinemann standing behind him, covering his back with the automatic.

"Nice work, Harold," said Claudia. "Sorry, Chan, but you were making things uncomfortable and we have a lot to do."

"What shall I do with him?" Harold asked.

There was a brief, whispering huddle—then Rosina said. "Put him in the garage and tie him

up in one of the cars. Then start the motor running."

They stood aside as Harold pushed him down the concrete steps and watched by the glow of the lights in the house as the producer marched him along the narrow back passage to the trellis gate that led to the garage area of the estate.

Heinemann said, "Open Sesame," in front of the garage door, which rose in response to the sound of his voice to reveal a dark cavern with the rear elevations of a large Cadillac and a Country Squire station wagon.

Chan glanced quickly over his shoulder to see if they were being watched, saw that Annie was standing on the balustraded terrace with the other two women betiifld her.

"They don't seem to trust one another too well," Chan said as the door closed silently behind them after Heinemann had switched on the garage lights.

"That's putting it mildly," said the producer. He lowered the gun, added, "Sorry to have to play such a performance with you, Charlie Chan. I know all about you, of course."

"That is more than humble self know," intoned the detective inspector.

"At least I've read almost everything that's been printed about you over the years. And your performance in disarming me up there on the roof more than lives up to advance notices."

"Then you're not going to tie me up and leave me to the tender mercies of the soothing carbon monoxide?" Chan asked.

"And let those three furies have your murder hanging over me?" the producer countered, slipping the unloaded automatic into the waistband of his well cut "slacks. "Rosy's got enough on me already—never mind what—or I'd never have gone along with this cockamamie scheme in the first place."

"Perhaps trouble with the Internal Revenue?" said Chan.

"Perhaps," said Heinemann. "At any rate, it's bad enough to justify cutting a few corners."

"But not enough to risk a murder rap," said Chan.

"No way," the producer replied.

Heinemann went to the big Cadillac and got the motor going with the windows rolled halfway down. Then he did the same with the Country Squire.

"Between the two of them," he said, "they should do the job on a bound man in a garage this size. Let me go out first and see if anyone's still watching."

Chan didn't like it. He had a hunch that, once the garage

door was .closed, it would open only to' its master's (or mistress's) voice pattern. But .he could shut the motors off so there was no danger of asphyxiation. He simply had no desire to be trapped.

It was a chance he had to take. So Chan took it. If his relief when the garage door went up again in a few moments failed to show on his inscrutable face, it was none the less real. He got out the instant the producer switched off the garage lights and the two of them made their way silently along the passage behind the house to the open rear window.

Claudia was striding the carpet, smoking a cigarette in her long holder as usual, sounding off to the others. Slie said, "... interest from now on lies in reviving the picture and exploiting it for every cent we can make. Otherwise, this whole effort is up the spout. I don't think any of us want that, or can afford it. So what I propose is—"

Annie interrupted her to ask Rosina Heinemann, "What about the fellow who made the fakes?"

"He's on his way to Brazil by now. He called to tell me Chan was coming to see him, so I told him to burn the photos and take off. He's been well paid and he has no desire to be pulled in as accessory to a murder. He's got a record for fraud as long as your arm."

"One thing about a life of crime," said Annie over the rim of a highball. "You do meet such a nice level of people."

"Merde!" said Claudia impatiently. "What I want to see is some money. Without it, we're nowhere. We already spent a small fortune as it is—with no return."

Rosina shrilled, "Harold's meeting the Red China culture guy tomorrow—today, I mean, for the payoff."

"By rights," said Annie, "it's *my* money. After all, I'm mother's chief legatee."

"Honey," said Claudia hoarsely, "until the,,murder of your mother is solved, you've got about as mugn . chance of inheriting a piece of toilet paper as you have of cashing in. That's one little trap the law lays for matricides—or any kind of murderer."

"Don't look at me that way," said Annie angrily. "You seem to think I killed mother."

"Didn't you, darling?" The agent's voice cut like a surgeon's scalpel.

There was a moment of thick silence in the room. Somewhere, on the hillside above them a cicada began strumming its jew's harp incessantly, to be joined by a

swelling chorus of like-minded members of the species. But their tedious sound was insufficient to drown out the retort of the suddenly furious girl.

"You know perfectly well I didn't strangle Mei T'ang," she cried, "since you did it yourself. I *saw* you slipping into the elevator in the conservatory as I was greeting the guests."

"I wasn't even inside the apartment proper. I left my cigarette holder in my own pad and went back to get it. That's when Gil Roberts rang my bell and I came back up with him."

"Gil!" cried Rosina Heinemann. "I never thought he had the guts to kill a fly unless the script demanded it."

"He didn't do it," said the girl. "I had to take the next elevator down to take care of somebody's parking problem and met him coming in."

XV

CHARLIE CHAN had increasingly suspected that the alibi Annie and her new-found father had given one another that afternoon, while he was in the girl's house, was a phoney. He was quite sure it was the tall actor who had half-strangled him and pulled him from his car unconscious.

After all, the empty garage indicated that Roberts, or the girl, or both of them had been out somewhere while he poked around their hillside place and found it empty. Now he wondered why he had been attacked at all and why, in the circumstances, the attack had not been carried through to a finish.

If, in fact, Gil Roberts was not the murderer, then only one real possibility remained. And here, again, was a hitch. Vividly, Chan remembered the Heinemanns standing in the ground floor hallway of the House of Wu, awaiting the return of the interminable elevator to take them aloft. They had been waiting where they were for some little time, for he had not seen them enter the building as he and Doc Svorenssen came up the walk.

He had not seen them—and he would have remembered Rosina Heinemann's flaming hennaed hairdo had he seen it—because the producer and his wife had not been outside the building. They had come downstairs, probably by the service elevator, and were making their official re-entry as guests at the party.

Only then did it occur to Chan that he was in far greater danger than he had supposed. Evidently Heinemann had not carried out his wife's instructions to put him out of the way

for keeps because he hoped one of the women could be neatly framed for the murder he had already committed himself—that of Mei T'ang. But now such a possibility was vanishing in front of his eyes.

On a sound level between the zum-zumming of the cicadas and the voices of the women in the room, Chan heard the low growl of a barely touched police car siren. When he dialed them on the alternate link= in Claudia's apartment, while she called Rosina to set up the meeting as she dressed, he had asked them to be on hand at two-thirty. That hour was gone, but not by much according to the phosphorescent dial on his Bulova.

There was something else nagging the periphery of his consciousness—a faint, all too familiar, scent of some sort of cologne or toilet water, an odor with a lilac base. At first, as they watched and listened at the window,. Chan had been reasonably sure that it came from within the room, wafted through the open window by a current of air.

But, some moments before, Harold Heinemann had moved warily around the detective inspector and was standing wide of the window at his left side. Unquestionably, since what breeze there was came from the direction of the producer, he had to be the user of the scent—hence Chan's towel attacker in Mei T'ang's guest bathroom.

As far as Chan was concerned, this put the seal on the case. This and the conversation of the women in the late night talk he had so carefully arranged while making its participants believe they had arranged it themselves.

It was time to make his move—and he made it none too early. Apparently forgetting the gun was unloaded, the producer was in the act of pulling it from his waistband as Chan swung toward him in an explosion of frenetic activity that belied the placidity of his normal movements. " r"

He stamped a heel down hard on Heinemann's left foot, hooked one of his own arms through his opponent's right elbow, jamming his "gun hand, and drove his free elbow with rare precision, full into Heinemann's solar plexus, doubling him up without an ounce of air left in his lungs.

He was holding the producer thus, doubled over, when a patrolman came through the latticeworked gate and along the passage End shone a flashlight on the little tableau.

Chan said, "You can take his gun, officer. It is not loaded."

It was then that Charlie Chan was caught with his guard down for the fourth time since his involvement in the Mei T'ang murder began. As he removed the automatic from Heinemann's nerveless fingers, the officer's forefinger became caught in the guard and accidentally pressed the trigger.

The pistol detonated with a blast all the more startling because it was totally unexpected, causing both Chan and the officer to duck low as the bullet ricocheted angrily from wall to wall between house and revetment, finally to whine away to silence.

* * *

"Okay, Charlie," said Doc Svorenssen, removing the spit inhalator and the cotton wadding from his mouth, "that will do it."

"Mouth dry as camel's tail," said Chan, working his lips and tongue furiously to regain lost feeling. Outside, the view of the Miracle Mile from the dentist's window consisted mostly of smog. His new bridge felt tight, but he knew that would pass.

"Tell me, Charlie," said Svorenssen, untying his white apron behind him, "if you had known Harold Heinemann had reloaded . his popgun with a spare clip, would you have been quite so nonchalant about the whole thing?"

Chan took his time answering. Once again, he reviewed the entire case. Heinemann was the murderer, of course, abetted by sweet Rosina of the hideously shrill voice—though which of the two had actually suggested the conspiracy that ended in Mei T'ang's murder' would probably never have been known by anyone save the two principals.

The producer's career had been slipping but his life style had not. Hence, his tangle with the Internal Revenue Service and the State of California Franchise Tax Board. If Heinemann did not come up with a six-figure sum by June 15th, he was inevitably due to take crippling penalties, perhaps a prison term, for fraudulent returns.

At first, the picture Claudia and Mei T'ang wanted him to produce seemed like manna from heaven. He had had no other offers in two years and needed work—and the pay it would bring—desperately. However, most of his fee was to come out of subsequent profits, and it quickly developed that Mei T'ang's promise to finance the film, at least in part, was not to be fulfilled—and without the star's backing, in this case, no one else could be obtained.

It was out of this background that the conspiracy to steal her priceless collection of one-of-a-kind Chinese antique imperial baubles, replace them with imitations and peddle the originals to the Red Chinese cultural mission was born.

As Chan had suspected, the deal was all but completed when the erstwhile star determined to sacrifice her vanity at long length and be fitted for spectacles. Mei T'ang was motivated by her need to read the proposed script herself, an act that had further steeled her determination to have nothing to do with the film's financing.

Then she had discovered the jeweled fly and summoned Heinemann for a showdown, knowing him to have been the only person who could have had opportunity actually to commit the thefts over so long a period. Result—her own murder.

Mrs. Heinemann, morally at least as guilty as her husband, had summoned the caterers in a well designed move to impede immediate police investigation with confusion. She had used Jason Catering herself many times while entertaining at her hillside house and was well aware of the stand-by system and near-instantaneous response by which the outfit operated so successfully in Hollywood.

This strident lady with hennaed hair was sufficiently involved as an accomplice in the actual crimes to find a prison term awaiting her—not as long as that of her husband but one which would probably use up what remained of her natural life.

Actual ownership of the fabulous treasure whose substitution was the immediate cause of the murder would remain with its purchasers—the Bureau of Culture of the Chinese People's Republic. After all, they had paid for it and, if the deal was tainted, there was heavy pressure from certain high American government circles to prevent any effort intended to halt its return to the land where it was created.

The others involved in the conspiracy, drawn into it by less directly felonious motives, would probably get off more lightly. Gil Roberts, it appeared, was not involved at all—for the fortunate reason none of the other members of the conspiracy had felt able to trust him.

As for his attack on Chan, Roberts had ruefully explained, "Hell, I was afraid it was the murderer after Annie. She told me her life was in danger. When I heard a car start where no car was supposed to be as I was coming back, I blocked the

driveway with my heap and yanked you out of yours by the throat. When I saw it was you, I damn near passed out."

A pause, then, "What do you suppose will happen to Annie? I guess in a way it's my fault."

"As I understand it, her mother never gave you the chance," said Chan, thereby lifting the fallen star's spirits immeasurably.

According to the Hollywood trade papers which Chan had examined that very afternoon in his dentist's reception room, Roberts alone of the lethal little group had emerged professionally unscathed. According to a page-five news squib, the tall actor had been cast in two television series segments and had they/ inside track for a second lead in an upcoming feature film.

Chan's thoughts returned to the here and now. Doc Svorenssen, wearing one of his patented ultra-loud sports jackets—this one in a plaid the like of which the Highlands never saw—grinned at Chan amiably, his blue eyes alight.

Putting an arm around his friend's shoulders, the dentist said, "Hey, Charlie, since this is your last night on the mainland, how'd you like to come to a party with me?"

"I'd love to," said Chan, "but I'm taking a six P.M. plane to Honolulu right now. If you'd care to come along, I'll take you to nice party in Honolulu. Chop, chop."

"Okay—but at least let me drive you to the airport," said Svorenssen, an offer that Chan was glad to accept.

En route, Svorenssen said, "Hey you didn't answer my question."

"Which question?"

"Whether you'd have been quite so nonchalant about taking Heinemann if you'd known he'd reloaded his gun?"

"Cholly," said Chan, "assert better part of valor,—take the Fifth

THE SIESTA SPECIAL

He was a funny little man. Just to see him was to laugh. Laugh, until you could see what he held in his hand—a pretty little box just full of instantaneous Death.

by ROBERT W. ALEXANDER

HIS SOMBRERO was bright yellow. The man's pancho was a pomegranate red and even his faded pants were reddish. Pedro Gonzalez, the bus driver, sullenly appraised the man first in line to board his wonderful bus for its inaugural run to Vellegas.

Pedro said, "Take any seat."

It bothered Pedro that the man's brilliant costume was so bright that it dulled the nice yellow paint Pedro had applied to the luxurious bus.

The man carried a square box aboard. It looked to Pedro like a discarded chili box. Old wood. Of no matter, Pedro thought, except the man obviously wore a false beard and his over-sized mustache was not genuine, either! It was ridiculous for a man to beard his face with hairs not his own. Was it a disguise? Hardly.

Pedro turned and welcomed other passengers aboard. It was still a gala affair. The Siesta Special had upholstered seats and it was a brand-new reconditioned bus for which the owner, Senor Ricardo Sanchez paid five thousand American dollars.

A jubilant crowd waved them off as Pedro started the bus.

"Ah!" Pedro rejoiced. The springs were a wonder as he

drove down the rutted road, The bumps did not jar a man's spine. How fortunate Senor Sanchez had chosen to run the luxurious bus on his route—even the brakes worked. Yes, the upholstered bus might have been sent on the route farther north, where a driver by the name of Enrique Morrales would have been the lucky fellow.

Twenty-six passengers had boarded, including the strange man with the yellow sombrero, He had chosen the seat to Pedro's right; the seat by the door! It was annoying, but, of course, all seats were available. It was good to have a bus half filled at the beginning of a run. Why, if such prosperity continued Senor Sanchez might pay a driver a living wage. Yes, perhaps a driver could afford to eat his fill now and then, with conditions so much improving,

Pedro drove with gladness in his heart. He had slept on the bus during the last night; not too well with all the excitement. But he had jumped up early, freshly exhausted, and eager for today.

Pedro suddenly heard: "Psst!"

Pedro frowned. It had come from the man with the yellow sombrero. What was he up to? Could he not see he, Pedro the expert bus driver, was driving a valuable bus down the road? Did he not see Pedro's sign up above: *do not speak to the driver while in motion?* Then again the man violated the rules.

"Psst! Driver! Do not open the bus door."

Pedro concentrated on the road. There was no reason for him to open the bus door. Not until the first stop some eighty kilometers on ahead,

Pedro had to ask. "Why should I not open the bus door?"

"The bomb will go off."

"The bomb will go. . ."

A tremor grabbed Pedro's stomach. He chanced a quick glance to see if the man was joking. The man had placed his wooden box in front of himself on the lower step by the door, The bus door could not fold in to open without striking the square box. And, more strange, the man had stretched his bare foot to the top of the box and one toe was holding up a loop of small cord-like rope—*wet* cord-like rope that looped out of one hole on top and vanished down another.

Pedro considered the horrible possibilities. Was there a bomb in the box? Why was he doing this? Was he a bandit?

"You—you hijack my new bus?" Pedro asked,

"No, senor."

"You wish me to detour? To drive you someplace?"

"No, senor."

"What then? I have no money, save one peso. I take tickets. Oh! You rob my passengers!"

"No, senor."

"No?" Pedro glanced at the box and then up at the rearview mirror. All the passengers aboard the Siesta Special were slumped, or sprawled, in sleep. Pedro asked, "Is it a time bomb? Will it explode soon?"

"No. I made it myself. Ten sticks of dynamite with a short fuse. See? I hold the fuse with my toe so it will not drop and be lighted by the candle below. The candle is thick and will not go out. It sets in a pan of gasoline." ov

"Gasoline!" Pedro gasped. "The fumes! It will explode!"

"Si, amigo! When I am ready. But I have been most careful. See the holes in the box? The fumes escape. I practiced much before tying the dynamite in."

"Why do you do this?"

"Ahh, senor. Please understand. I wish to die."

The tremor in Pedro's stomach spread to his throat. Pedro was forced to swallow.

"Suicide?" he asked, hoping, he was wrong. It was up to a driver to save the bus and passengers, in that order. Senor Sanchez had said: *I give you the bus, Pedro. You are fearless. You handle unruly passengers. You fix buses when they break down. You will guard the bus with your life.*

"I will not open the door," Pedro nodded agreement. "Why you wish to end your life I will not ask. I will not argue." Pedro was sure he had said the right words. Now he must use reason, and talk the mad man off his bus. He said, "But, why must you take twenty-five innocent passengers, and me, with you?"

Pedro was pleased with himself. The man could not have a logical answer. There was no answer. Pedro smiled at him. The man said: "I do not wish to die alone."

Pedro blinked. He stared down the road. The man was indeed *loco!* That was no kind of an answer to speak. "What do you mean, alone?" Pedro questioned.

"Si, amigo. To die by one's self is terrifying. With company, it might not be so bad. We will all go together."

"Wait!" Pedro pleaded as he let up on the gas.

"Senor! Do not stop the bus!"

"Si!" Pedro applied the throttle and the bus resumed speed. "Si! I have not stopped. We are moving!" Pedro glanced at the man. "Amigo, it is not

nice to kill us all and to blow up this wonderful bus. See how smooth it rides. What would your friends say?"

"I have no friends."

"Uh—I will be your friend?"

"Si, amigo. But do not patronize me. I am committed, now, If I do not blow up the bus, I will be shot for the attempt. Then I would die alone."

Pedro wet his lips. Surely there was something the man wanted? Even loco men must have cravings. . .desire? He said, "Uh, you lost the love of your senorita?"

"No, amigo."

"You have no money?"

"Si, no money. My last pesos were for the bus ticket."

"AhaP[41] Pedro brightened. "Then if you were wealthy, you would not do this terrible thing? Am I not right?"

"Si, you are right. But no more talk. I am nearly ready to remove my toe from holding the fuse from the candle."

"Senor! Amigo, I—I have a plan to make you rich!"

"You joke with me? I do not like that! I hoped to be your friend in the hereafter!"

"Amigo, I do not joke," Pedro said earnestly. "I wish to be your friend in the here and now! Do I sound like I joke? No! I am very serious! Believe me, amigo, I do not wish to die. But I can get you money. Ten thousand pesos!' Ricardo Sanchez would gladly pay to save his bus—uh, the passengers. You hear? What is your name?

"Jaun."

"Si, Jaun. I am Pedro Gonzalez. I am his best driver. He trusts me. I can phone at the next village. At Reynosa! Senor Sanchez will have the money waiting for you at Rosalita, before we cross the river."

"Ten thousand pesos?" Jaun considered. "Si, I could—No! How would I get away? I would be caught! I would die alone!"

"No, Jaun. It is simple. Can you swim?" Pedro glanced to see Jaun nod. Pedro forced a smile. "Then, that is it! You see, when we reach Rosalita, you will allow the passengers off in exchange for the ransom. Then I will drive you towards Vellegas. When we reach the bridge you will jump into the river. The water is fast, the sides steep, but it is safe! You could drift for as many kilometers as you wish. No one will find you."

"I am not sure," Jaun puzzled. "I worry. Ricardo Sanchez would not pay ten thousand pesos. He is too stingy! Can I be wrong?"

"Si," Pedro assured. He informed Jaun how the bus had cost over sixty thousand pesos, and was a bargain. "Senor

Sanchez is rich. He will snap his fingers and say: A lousy ten thousand? I will pay to save the bus, and the passengers."

Jaun appeared to be impressed. He asked, "He would say a lousy ten thousand pesos?"

"Si! That is what he would say."

Jaun began to nod. "Perhaps he would be right?"

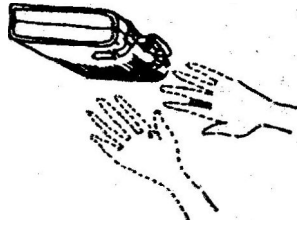
"Huh?"

"Ten thousand pesos is not so much. Twenty thousand would be much better. Do you agree? I could buy twice as much. Or—No,' no! It is my intention to kill myself with company—"

"Si! Si, twenty thousand!" Pedro waved one hand in agreement. "Ricardo Sanchez will be deliriously happy to give twenty thousand pesos. But ndt more, Jaun. That much is considerable, after buying an expensive bus."

Jaun suddenly nodded. "All right! Twenty thousand."

Pedro persuaded Jaun to allow passengers on and off as they drove for Reynosa, where Pedro would telephone. Each time Pedro held his breath as Jaun bent over and replaced his toe with a finger in the loop of the fuse cord. Jaun was very careful to balance the box. Then he placed it back on the floor and cautiously eased his toe back into holding the cord.



Pedro wiped at his forehead. "I am really sweating," he murmured.

But there was no mistaking that Jaun was also frightened of jarring his box, now that he intended to live. Pedro wouldn't start the bus moving until Jaun would expel a held breath and give him a solemn nod. Pedro hoped the candle had blown out. But there was no way of knowing. If he were to ask Jaun to check, Jaun could become angry. It would be all over.

Senor Ricardo Carlos Sanchez was furious. Over the phone he screamed at Pedro: "I should have assigned the new bus to Enrique Morrales. On the north route! Where there isn't crazy people like you down in that bandit ridden south!"

"Senor Sanchez, I am saving the bus and passengers."

"At what cost?" Sanchez stormed. "A crazy man wishing to have company in sucide, Enrique would have driven to Vellegas. Enrique would have driven him to the train depot and

shown him that the train depot has many more people to die with him, than my bus!"

"Senor Sanchez, I thought of this. I said to him, I will drive you to the airport. In an aeroplane you will be closer to heaven. Also, I said, an airline can afford many more pesos for ransom. But, Jaun is afraid of the risk. I was just barely able to convince him to accept twenty thousand pesos to not kill us all, and blow up your new bus."

"Tell him five thousand pesos!"

"Senor Sanchez. His price is twenty. For one peso less the bus explodes. Even now while we talk the candle is burning. If it reaches the gasoline, your bus is no more."

Ricardo Sanchez violently protested every way but pulling the phone wire off the wall. He finally agreed. "The money will be at Rosalita. So will the police! They will follow the bus and shoot him when he gets off. Where will you let him off?"

"I have no idea, Senor. He says he will tell me."

Pedro walked back" to the bus. If he had told Senor Sanchez the plan to jump in the river., the police would be waiting at the bridge. And, if Jaun sighted even one man, he would blow up the bus rather than be captured and shot to die alone. It was much better to pay. Why did not Ricardo Sanchez see that?

Pedro whispered to Jaun. "Senor Sanchez was delighted to pay." Jaun was carefully balancing his bomb. Pedro swallowed and walked to collect tickets from the new passengers aboard. He then got in the seat and started the bus on its way to Rosalita. The passengers settled down to nap.

Ten kilometers before the bus reached Rosalita, Jaun brought a bag of yellow burlap out from under his poncho. He gave it to Pedro.

"Tell the police to place the money in this bag."

Pedro nodded. Jaun was truly insane. He made so many jnistakes. He should guess the police would be notified. A yellow bag of money would be as easy to spot as Jaun's bright colored costume.

Pedro pulled the bus up to the Rosalita bus depot, a one room adobe building with a board walk in front. Jaun carefully held his bomb as Pedro ran into the depot with the yellow bag. A scowling police captain grabbbed Pedro's arm.

"Which one is he?" Captain Badillo demanded.

Pedro pointed Jaun out and looked at the table full of coins and paper money.

Captain Badillo pulled the black cigar from his stained teeth. He was a bull-shouldered man, both hefty and fat. He brushed the smaller, slim Pedro aside. "He is a bright target sitting there in a yellow sombrero. My men can shoot him through the window."

"No! His bomb will go off!" Pedro pleaded.

The captain ignored Pedro. He said, "Manuel! Shoot him!"

Manuel raised his rifle. Pedro cried, "Wait! Please, *capitan!* Wait until I run out the back and a block away! When the bus explodes it will blow this room in tiny pieces."

"Do not shoot, Manuel!"

Captain Badillo was furious as they stuffed the pesos into the yellow bag. He gripped Pedro's arm with fury. "All right! We will follow the bus. At a distance! When he gets off, we will shoot him!"

Pedro took the yellow bag of money to Jaun.

"It is all there," he whispered. Then Pedro announced to the passengers, "Everybody off! There will be a slight delay for repairs."

The passengers resignedly got off. They were used to delays for repairs,

Pedro started the bus and drove out of the town of Pvosalita. He checked his rear-view mirror. The police were following, at a respectful distance, in a black sedan. It was a very dangerous thing to do. Juan might turn and look back. He would be angry!

Jaun suddenly changed seats. He carried his bomb and the bag of money to sit directly behind Pedro. Pedro found he could - not see Jaun in his rearview mirror. And the bridge was only a few minutes away.

Jaun said in his ear, "You will not turn around, amigo!" A few long minutes passed and Jaun said, "You will stop the bus here!"

"Here?" Pedro protested. "There is nothing here but cactus. The river is up ahead, between the next hills. Surely you do not want off here?"

"No, Pedro. I do not want off here. We are stopping to exchange clothes. And, you will also put on my false beard. No, no! Do not turn around. You will face forward at all times! If you turn around, you may have time to see a bullet from my gun streaking for your eyes. But, amigo, I don't think you would live that long. Bullets are so fast. So you will please stop. And take off your clothes."

Pedro did as he was told. He donned the faded red pants, the large red poncho and fitted the hair beard on his face. He could hear Jaun putting on the bus-driving clothes that he had

taken off. As Pedro pulled the yellow sombrero onto his head, he could picture Jaun putting the. official bus driver's cap on and Pedro became angry.

"You are not crazy!" Pedro shouted, as he continued to stare forward at the windshield. "You do not have a bomb. You have used me as a fool!"

"Amigo, you may be right. However, do not be foolish and turn around to see my face. It would regrettably be your last look. Now here! Tie this yellow burlap bag to your waist. It is filled with paper. Though, you must admit it matches the bag holding the pesos."

Pedro reluctantly tied the bag to his waist. He said, "I may as well see you. The police are following us. I will be shot and killed when you force me to step from the bus. Did you know the police follow us?"

"Si, amigo. But do not get off the bus here! Your plan of escape is not too bad. It also is not too good, but it is better than no plan at all. Drive to the bridge. The chances are most good that you will live. I am hoping very much that you will live."

Pedro was puzzled. "That is very kind of you."

"Si, amigo. At the bridge, if you are quick, you can dive into the river and be swept away before they can shoot you. You can later swim ashorf on down river and remove the bright clothes. They will recognize you as Pedro Gonzalez, the bus driver, and not shoot you."

Pedro was surprised. The man must know him, but who was the man? Pedro asked, "Do I know you? Have you joked with me? You have no bomb? Perhaps you do not even have a gun?"

"Pedro! I do have a bomb! I have a bomb and a gun and I plead with you. Do as I say so I won't have to shoot you, amigo."

Pedro got back in the driver's seat and started the bus towards the bridge. In his mirror he saw that the police were again following and this ,stime much closer to the bus.

Pedro said, "Senor Jaun. When I stop the bus on the bridge, I would like the bus door open. To make a fast exit before the police shoot me."

"Si, amigo! Very wise. I agree."

Pedro bit his lip. "Senor Jaun, the river slows a short ways down. The police will quickly learn I am the bus driver. They will come after you and the bus—"

"Si," Jaun agreed. "All you say is true. That is why I would not jump in the river. Your plan of escape for me was a death trap not an escape plan."

Pedro shrugged. "I did not think that Senor Sanchez would notify the police and risk his bus. We are coming to the bridge!"

"I wish you good luck, Pedro. Just remember that Senor Sanchez will pay with his bus, I am going to blow it up! Open the door."

Pedro opened the bus door before he came to a stop. He had a choice of jumping out of the bus and diving into the river, or, of attacking Jaun in back of him. But, Jaun must have a bomb? He had just promised to blow up the beautiful bus. All his efforts had been in vain.

Pedro chose to leave the bus. He kept his face forward as he jumped from the seat. It was best not to see Juan's face. The police might miss from a distance, but Jaun wouldn't.

Pedro raced to the bridge railing. He heard a rifle bullet whiz by his ear. He took two more running steps and dived over the side. He seemed to hang in the air. But suddenly he hit the water. The strong current rolled him,

When Pedro gained the surface of the fast water, gasping for air, he looked back at the bridge. He was quickly being carried away. The police were on the bridge. Captain Badillo and three men! Pedro waved his arm for them to follow the bus. The bus was pulling away. But the police were aiming rifles at him. They were shooting!

Pedro dived under the water. He frantically tore at his bright clothes to get rid of them. The current finally began to slow. He began to swim for shore and he looked back. The police had left the bridge to follow him down river. There were rushes and trees along the shore ahead,

Except for his shorts, Pedro Gonzalez was naked when he came ashore. He peered

anxiously through the heavy green growth of tree leaves he was under. The police had run down the embankment and were running towards him. Pedro stepped out with his hands up.

He yelled, "It is me, Pedro Gonzalez, the bus driver."

One of the policemen shot at him. If he had been any kind of a marksman he would have blown Pedro's head off. The bullet singed Pedro's hair,

"I am the bus driver, you fool!" Pedro screamed again.

Two of the policemen were taking deliberate aim. Captain Badillo knocked their guns down; he had a revolver in his hand. He shouted to Pedro: "Do not call names! Come here! You have tricked us. You changed clothes, but your plan will not work!"

Pedro ducked under the leaves and hurried to them. He wanted to explain, but they knocked him down. Still dripping wet, Pedro found himself being rushed up the slope to the police car. He was roughly shoved into the rear seat. The bulky Captain Badillo got in front and ordered the driver in pursuit of the bus. Then he turned and scowled at Pedro.

"We will catch the bus! He can't get away! We will prove you were his accomplice before we shoot you! We have modern methods! We will find your fingerprints."

Pedro did not understand. Of course, his fingerprints would be all over the bus. Did it prove anything? Pedro protested, "I was not his accomplice! He had a bomb and a gun! He forced me to change clothes with him, like I told you. And—"

"What does he look like? Who is he?"

"—I did not see his face."

"You what? You put his beard on!" the captain thundered.

"Si, but with my head turned. He threatened to shoot me."

"I will shoot you! There is no bomb! We will catch the bus!"

Pedro winced. *"CapHan,* he said he would blow up the bus."

"Be quiet! No more of your lies! He will not blow up the bus!"

The distant thunder of an explosion rocked the canyon they were speeding up. If the two policemen on each side of him were not holding his arms, Pedro would have crossed himself. Pedro sighed. "That would be the end of the beautiful bus. He was crazy. He did blow up the bus, and himself. We are lucky he didn't take us with him."

"The money! What about the money?" Manuel demanded.

Pedro looked at the man beside him. "I do not know. He perhaps thought he could take it with him? He wanted company."

"That's crazy!" Captain Badillo roared.

"Si," Pedro agreed. "He was very strange."

The winding road up the canyon made a sharp turn and they saw the burning remains of

the Siesta Special. It had been driven down a natural opening between rocks and the brush to a level opening by the river's edge. The front half of the bus was completely gone. The rest was in flames.

They all got out of the police car and stood silent, watching the bus burn. In the shade of the trees Pedro crossed his hands to his shoulders and absently brushed the dampness from his arms.

"Terrible," Pedro said. "Not even a piece of him left."

Captain Badillo recovered. "Find him!" he roared. He sent one man down stream. Manuel was sent upstream. The captain then glared at Pedro.

Pedro said, "As I told you, he did have a bomb."

"I can see that!"

"He did commit sucide."

"Humph! He's run off with the money, that's what he's done! Where are you going to meet him?"

"I am not going to meet him. He—

"Be quiet!"

The man sent downstream returned first. He had been gone forty minutes. He came up shaking his head. "No tracks this way."

"You fool! He could have waded!"

"Si, Capitan. I think of this, and I searched most carefully.

On down I found a man in a fishing camp. A man must cross the camp to go farther down river. I questioned him at great length. He did not see the mad man who blew up the bus—"

"You fool! He could have been the man!"

"No, Capitan. He has a senorita with him." The policeman grinned. "Amor! I surprised them. They were— I questioned her. The man has been with her a week. They have two burros and their camp has been there at least that time. If the man left the bus, he did not go downstream." The other side of the river was an unclimbable rock wall.

There was the sudden squeal of tires as a nearly new Buick of fine color and polish rounded the curve above them. The car skidded to a stop and backed up. Senor Sanchez leaped from the car. He was wearing a white suit and clutched a slim cigar in his hand as he raced down to the smoldering bus.

"My bus!" he screamed at Pedro. "You let this happen to my new bus!" He then turned to Captain Badillo. "The money from the bank. Where is it?"

Captain Badillo took a breath. "I think. . .in the fire, Senor Sanchez."

"Put out the fire!" Ricardo Sanchez clenched his small cigar between his teeth. Even he realized how futile his order was.

Captain Badillo winced. "I think it is almost out."

Ricardo Sanchez puffed on his cigar until his face was flushed. He was furious. It was then that Manuel returned from upstream. His shirt was torn and his arms and face were scratched from the brush.

"I followed the river as far as I could go," he said, shaking his head. "No footprints at all. The river enters a gorge up above. No man could go up it. So, if he didn't go downstream, he ran up the road."

Captain Badillo hopefully asked Ricardo Sanchez, "Did you see a man running up the road?"

Ricardo Sanchez nearly struck the captain. "No, you fool!"

Captain Badillo shrugged. "Then it must be as this idiot claims. The man blew himself up in the bus."

Ricardo Sanchez turned on Pedro. "There will be no more Siesta Specials! No more buses with upholstered seats! I will not run another bus down to Calle Altos! A lawless country! The people can go by cart! By donkey! Never again will my buses come down from Vellegas!"

Ricardo Sanchez turned back to Captain Badillo. "And

you! You let a crazy man rob me of twenty thousand pesos. And, blow up my bus! I shall speak to the governor about you! And—" He glared at Pedro. "You are fired!"

Ricardo Sanchez stalked up to his car and got in it. He turned around and the rear tires threw small stones and dust as he abruptly accelerated back towards Vellegas.

When there was nothing left of the Buick to see but its dust, Captain Badillo suddenly shoved Pedro. He pushed him so hard that Pedro fell down.

"You see the trouble you caused?" the captain shouted as he pointed at the remains of the bus. "You prevented me from shooting him at Rosalita! It would have saved Senor Sanchez twenty thousand pesos! Perhaps he would not complain to the governor. You—I should have you shot! Come on, Manuel! *Vamos!* We will go back to the bridge. I want to see for myself what was in the yellow bag this idiot had tied around his waist."

"Si, *Capitan,* It was only paper."

"You show me!"

Pedro watched them get into the police car. They did not ask him to get into the car. Pedro got to his feet and lifted a hand to remind the captain that they were leaving him. They drove off without asking if he needed a ride.

Pedro watched their car go down the canyon road until it disappeared around a turn. Pedro shrugged. Perhaps he didn't need a ride? He had no place to go. All his possessions had been on the bus. The only thing he now owned was the shorts he had on, and they were worn thin.

What did a man do when he had nothing? Pedro wondered. The peso he had saved for dinner was gone with the bus. Well, there was at least water to drink. Pedro walked towards the large stream. There was a chance he could catch a frog for dinner. He began to hunt.

Pedro was wading. Something suddenly startled him. He heard:

"Psst, amigo!"

Pedro straightened. He looked down the river. Behind a huge rock a friendly face was peering over it. The man was a stranger, but he was smiling. Was it because he had only his shorts to wear? The man suddenly vanished, but then came leaping down in sight from behind the big rock. He made his way towards Pedro.

"Ahh, amigo," the man greeted him with an outstretched hand. "Aren't you Pedro Gonzalez, the famous driver of the Vellegas bus?"

"You have heard of me?" Pedro was amazed.

"Si, I am looking for a good bus driver. Come! Downstream my wife is roasting fish that she caught. You are invited to dinner."

"I—I have no clothes."

The man snapped his fingers. "I forgot. Si, but I have some clothes I am positive they will fit you. Si, Ester and I are on our way to the United States. To buy a bus."

"A bus? You will buy a bus?" Pedro found it incredible. "Why, a bus is so very expensive?"

"We have found one for twenty thousand pesos. The motor she is not so good, but it has new upholstered seats. We have managed to save twenty thousand pesos." The man winked. "Very suddenly."

"Si?" Pedro began to understand.

"Amigo, the bus that burned. The motor is still good, no?"

"Oh, si! Motors do not burn."

"Isn't that fortunate? Amigo, you can be my partner. After we eat we will go to the burned bus and bury the engine. When they come for the bus they will think someone has carried the motor away. We can put it in our new bus, later. Huh?"

"Si! Are you Enrique Morrales who drove a bus up north for Senor Sanchez?"

"Oh, I have heard of him. No, I am Pablo. They say up north that Enrique Morrales and his wife starved to death. His pay was too little. Are you glad for us?"

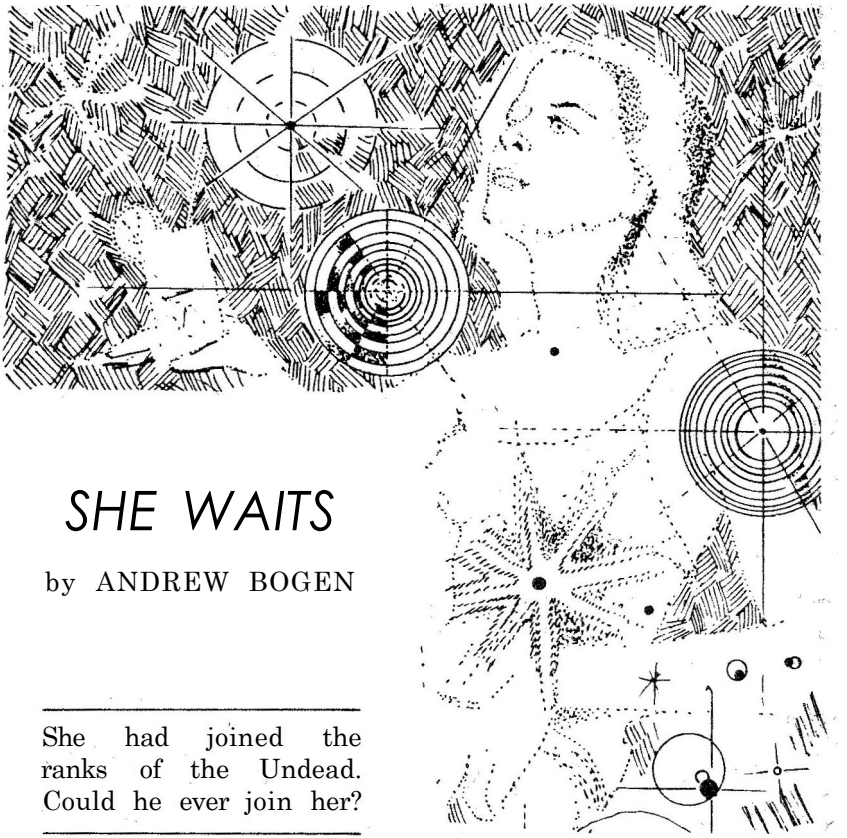
Pedro nodded. "I think so. But I was almost killed. They shot at me. They thought that I—Did you really have a lighted candle in the box of dynamite?"

Pablo grinned. "Amigo, I have been listening to all that was said. From behind the rock. I would not like you to think that I had done such a thing as blowing up a bus! No. But, I do not believe the man who did, would be so foolish. Amigo, I think he just told you. So that you would convince Senor Sanchez to pay the money. Si?"

Pedro shrugged. "Si. But I would have helped him."

"Oh, amigo! Never tell anyone that! You were a victim of a very cruel plot! That is why I make you my partner. We will never know who blew up the bus. *Comprender?"*

Pedro Gonzalez nodded. He wondered if he should also change to a new name.



SHE WAITS

by ANDREW BOGEN

She had joined the ranks of the Undead. Could he ever join her?

NOVEMBER rain tapped morbidly against the windows. The drops splashed on the grass, spread like gray spiders as they slithered downwards. I turned out the lights and went to sleep, The pillows, the sheets all felt clammy.

The ring of the bedside phone cut into my half sleep and I grabbed the receiver grudgingly. Who would be calling me after midnight?

. "Hello? Is this Mr. Russell?" the voice asked at the other end. It was the voice of an older man, somehow weak and drained of emotion,

"Yes, this is Barney Russell. Who is this?"

The man hesitated for an instant. "You may remember

me. Mr. Vincenti? the book store? You used to work for me when you were going to law school."

It took me a while. But I remembered. It was ten, twelve years at least. I was finishing law school and ran out of money. Vincenti's Book Store hired me for the evening shift.

Mr. Vincenti! He was old and gray even then, never had too much to say but had a quiet kindness about him. He paid me well over what I was worth, I remembered that.

After I passed the bar exam, I had made a mental note to look him up to say thanks for his help. But I never got around to it.

"Yes, Mr. Vincenti, I recall it well. You had the book store on Lombard Street. It's been a while, hasn't it?" I waited quietly, knowing there had to be an important reason for the call after all these years.

"Well, Mr. Russell, you are the only lawyer I know, I mean the only one I could think of. That's why I called."

The voice had that lifeless quality I'd sensed before.

"Where are you calling from Mr. Vincenti?" I asked. "Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"I'm at the 4th Precinct Stationhouse. They are holding me under suspicion of murder."

"Murder?" I echoed. I was trying to visualize the face, the soft-spoken bookseller I knew. It didn't seem possible. "Whose murder?"

"They have accused me of killing my wife," Vincenti said hoarsely. "I told them I don't need a lawyer, but they insisted. So—"

"I'll be over as soon as possible." I swung off the bed and yanked my pants on. "Don't make any statements. Say nothing to anyone until I get there."

Driving through the pounding rain, I thought of times almost forgotten. I was younger and thinner then, working the counter at the bookstore at night, cramming for exams, planning to set the world on its ears. A bittersweet taste of nostalgia rose in me as I remembered the years of college. Who would have thought that Mr. Vincenti would one day be coming to me for help? And under suspicion of murder!

I pulled up by the police station and braved the downpour. The unrelenting rain sneaked down the rim of my hat, into my collar. I shook myself like a chilled, wet pup as I walked inside.

"Barney Russell, attorney," I said to a morose desk-sergeant. "I understand you are holding a Mr. Vincenti. He is

my client. I wish to see him."

The sergeant nodded. "See Detective Bremer on this. First door on your left, all the way in the back."

Bremer was a heavyset man, about forty. He had three empty coffee cups on his desk and he needed a shave.

"You're holding a client of mine on suspicion of murder," I said. "Vincenti is his name."

He shook his head gloomily. "Not just suspicion anymore. He's been formally charged." Bremer leaned back.

"Oh? Has he been advised of his rights? Has he made any statements?" I didn't like this at all.

"He's made no statements. He has been told of his rights. That's why you're here, isn't it? The old fellow wouldn't hear of a lawyer at first."

"I see. What can you tell me about all this?"

Bremer spread his hands. "It's an open and shut case as far as I see it. Got a call from a Dr. Golden about eleven last night. He claimed he was the Vincenti's family physician and he was called to the house by the husband. Upon arriving, Dr. Golden found Mrs. Vincenti dead. From an overdose of phenobarbitol."

"What the hell!" I said. "It could just as well have been suicide."

"Not so! Vincenti admitted giving her the barbituates himself."

"You said he made no statements."

"He admitted it to the doctor, not to us," Bremer said with annoyance. "Naturally the doctor called as soon as he could."

"What does the death certificate say?"

"Barbiturate poisoning. Non-natural cause, of course. In other words—murder."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "I'd wait and see what the Medical Examiner has to say on this, don't you think? When is the autopsy scheduled?"

Detective Bremer raised his brows and peered into an empty coffee cup curiously. "That's the only thing. By the time the squad car arrived at the Vincenti house, the old lady's body was gone—no corpus delecti. But we're looking."

"What-no body?" I exploded. "And you call this an open and shut case? What's going on here?"

Bremer stood up. "Look, you can discuss this with the District Attorney tomorrow. We feel we have enough evidence. I've told you as much as I could."

"Okay," I said coolly. "I

don't suppose bail has been set yet?"

"First thing tomorrow morning. Just as well, if I may say so. Your client seems highly upset and he is probably better off spending the night here, Mr. Russell. He is acting very strange. He's no youngster, of course, but still, muttering, saying funny things, if you know what I mean?"

He opened his door and pointed. "Room straight ahead. He should be down from fingerprints in a few minutes. You can talk in there."

Somehow in my mind, Vincenti was always to remain as I remembered him. He used to be a slight, neatly dressed man, given to conservative tastes. Now I could see how the years had taken their toll. His gray hair was only a fringe now, the once round and full face was sallow. He wore a wrinkled suit and white shirt but no tie. I noticed a slight trembling in his pale, bony hands.

"It's all right now, Mr. Vincenti," I said. "I'm Barney. Barney Russell."

He extended his hand. "I'm really sorry to get you out on a night like this. I told them to leave me alone, I don't need a lawyer. But you know how things are these days. The police are scared of their own shadows."

"Not exactly, Mr. Vincenti," I said. "You don't seem to understand. You have been charged with a most serious crime. Homicide is no, light matter. You must be represented by a competent attorney."

"I know, I know. Not that I really care."

Once more it struck me, that resigned quality in the voice, as if nothing I said or would yet say, made any difference.

"Mr. Vincenti," I said, "the police are claiming your wife

had an overdose of phenobarbitol. They also claim you admitted giving her this overdose. Is any of this true?"

He walked to the small desk in the corner of the room and sat down. His eyes had a faraway look. "Thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight. And now, she waits." He trailed off into a whisper.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Did you tell your family doctor that you in fact administered a fatal dose to your wife? Try to concentrate. This is very important."

A sad smile flickered on the wrinkled face. "Fatal? What, Barney, do we know of fatal? Did I give her that overdose, you ask? Yes, I did. I never denied it. I never will."

"I see. What about the body? Detective Bremer claims the body of Mrs. Vincenti had been moved by the time the police got to your house."

He gave me a long look. "Stop being polite, Barney Russell. You mean they're saying I got rid of her in some way. No?"

"They're not really saying that," I said carefully. "It's merely that the body is missing."

"I know, and wish I could tell you about it now. But really can't. We need time."

I had that uncomfortable feeling again, a sense of foreboding perhaps. Somehow I wasn't getting through. Somehow this soft-spoken man was holding on to the secrets of the wet, gloomy night, and I could see he wasn't letting go. There was something else bothering me too, some incongruous bit of detail. Was it Bremer? Did he say something that didn't seem logical, or was it Vincenti's cryptic answers that annoyed me? I couldn't tell, not yet.

"I know this must be hard for you," I said, "but you must tell me more. Remember, I'm Barney. You used to show me how to reorder the stock. Then ring up on the register. And, I did appreciate your help. It hasn't been that long ago."

Vincenti sighed. "Twelve years, Barney. A dozen years. I used to tell Rose about you. That's my wife's name, you know. We never could have kids of our own. So we used to talk—maybe if we had a son, he'd been a lawyer, she used to say."

The way he looked when he said her name gave me a start. There was life coming back to the pallid face, the eyes shone with an inner light, it seemed. Suddenly I realized that whatever he may have done, Mr. Vincenti had loved his wife, a love he couldn't hide even now.

Why then all this? The

over-dose, the missing body. Why wasn't Vincenti confiding in me?

I took a deep breath and stood up. "Maybe tomorrow," I said. "I'll come again. We'll talk more. I'm afraid you'll have to spend the night here. It was too late to raise a judge or bail or anything."

He grasped my hand for an instant and I could see the eyes were lonely and asking for help. Then the fingers slipped away from mine. "That's all right, Barney. I'm so sorry to bother you. I haven't got much money left, and I hear your fees are not' exactly cheap these days. Maybe I should have taken the court's lawyer. That's free."

"Nonsense. No one is talking about fees."

He shook his head. "Maybe if you just do the simplest paperwork, just the formalities. I don't believe I need anything else."

"Don't worry about it. Tomorrow we'll go over everything." I pulled up my collar and left. Outside the rain tapered off.

I CANCELLED my appointments for the morning and went to see Dr. Golden at ten. His house was a neat brick colonial set in the residential part of town. A short, middleaged nurse let me into the den where the doctor had his offices.

There were so many questions I had to ask that I wished I had notes. The Vincenti case was full of disquieting .overtones, I don't care what Detective Bremer said.

Dr. Golden sat behind a large, pencil-cluttered, fruitwood desk. He was a round-faced man of about fifty, with thick-lensed glasses in a black" wire frame. He fidgeted with a letter file on the desk.

"We have an hour before my first patient," he said, motioning me to a brown leather armchair.

I sat down, thanked him for making time for me. Then 1 came right to the point. "Doctor, my client is in serious trouble. Not only is he accused of murder, but he refuses to cooperate with me. He ought to have confidence in me. We're old friends, so to speak. Yet he tells me next to nothing. Now, the whole thing seems to fringe on your statements to the police."

The doctor raised his brows. "You're not suggesting I should've withheld information from the authorities? After all, the man told me, he admitted it as soon as I confronted him. That poor woman had a definite overdose."

Suddenly I knew what was

bothering me earlier. I knew where the discrepancy lay in the case.

"I see your point," I said reassuringly. "Believe me, I meant no criticism. As a physician, you're legally obliged to report such cases, of course. However," I raised my voice, "have you considered something very curious?"

"What is that?"

"Well, the way I've heard it, you received a call last night from Mr. Vincenti himself to come to his house. When you arrived there, Mrs. Vincenti was dead. As soon as you examined her, the husband admits giving her the barbiturates. Now ask yourself—if that is so, why would the husband call you, why would he request you to come, knowing he had just murdered his wife?"

The doctor lifted his head and gazed at me in surprise.

"I haven't thought of that," he muttered. "As a matter of fact, he seemed almost anxious to have me there. She stopped breathing, he said. I think she may already be dead. Hurry, I must know. Yes, I'm quite certain, he said, I must know."

"And he said, 'hurry'?"

"Yes, I'm positive. He was very agitated about that. Hurry, he kept saying."

"Not exactly what a wife-killer would ask for, is it?"

Dr. Golden shrugged. "Well, who is to say what a man would really say under such circumstances?"

"True, of course that's true. At any rate, I'll appreciate any further details about the Vincentis."

The doctor's features relaxed and he poked a finger at the manila folder on the desk.

"It's all here, Mr. Russell. I have been the Vincenti's family physician for sixteen years now. Of course, it was mostly the wife. She wasn't a well woman, as you probably know."

"As a matter of fact, no one had told me that."

"No? Well then let me say that she was a very sick woman, although she stood up well under it. Even in the last two years."

"WTiat about those two years?"

"She had lung cancer."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Let me see, we first detected it in the left lung. She had a semi-successful operation. By that I mean she got better temporarily. Unfortunately, the other lung was soon affected. And there we could do nothing."

I looked up quickly. "You mean she was a terminal case?"

The doctor nodded. "Uncurable. It was only a matter of time."

Finally, I thought I was beginning to see a pattern. "Doctor Golden, isn't it unlikely then for the husband to commit murder? After all, she was not long for this world. Unless," I pointed my finger at him, "she was in pain. Real, unbearable pain."

He looked at me coldly. "That's not so. The pain factor was quite negligible. In fact, her resistance to pain was astounding. Sixty-five years old, but great endurance. I wish some of my younger patients would have half as much. Anyway, she did suffer from nervous tension. That's why phenobarbitol was prescribed."

"But not as a pain reliever?"

"Only as a tranquilizer, Mr. Russell. In other words, if you're going to present this as a mercy killing, I would have to testify against it. The husband saved her from no pain—his action has only shortened her life."

"Isn't that surprising? I gather they loved each other very much."

Golden shook his head. "Yes, perplexing. Why would he do a thing like this?"

"Tell me," I said, "where did you find Mrs. Vincenti's body?"

"In the upstairs bedroom."

"In your opinion, would Vincenti be capable of carrying her body down the stairs, away from the house, all by himself? And be back by the time the police arrived?"

There was a short pause before the doctor answered. "Well, I did treat him for arthritis recently. So if he did carry her as you say, it would be a great physical feat."

"One more thing," I asked. "Was there any problem financially?"

"No problem at all," Golden replied. "In fact, Vincenti insisted we fly in Dr. Farber from New York for the first operation. If you knew what that surgeon charges—" He spread his hands.

"I can well imagine," I said, and thanked him for his time. I could tell he was glad to see me go. He obviously did not relish sending his own patient to jail.

From a candy store phone-booth, I called my office. Something else Vincenti told me at the police station stuck in my mind. Another discordant note. I recalled hearing that the bookstore had been sold for a fair price a few years back when Vincenti retired. It had always been a successful business. The Vincentis were a well-to-do family. Yet just a few hours ago, he apologized for not having money to pay my fees.

"What have you got, Connie?" I asked my secretary over

the phone. "Did you go to the bank?"

"Very strange," she said. "According to bank records, Vincenti withdrew most of his savings last Friday. A lump sum of seventeen thousand dollars, to be exact. Seems he told you the truth. The account has almost nothing left."

So now the puzzle had many new pieces. They kept arriving in all shapes and sizes. Unfortunately, none of them fitted so far.

"Have you been in touch with the D.A.'s office?" I asked. "I want the bail made at once for Vincenti."

"We are standing by," she said. "Harvey is down at the courthouse for us since morning. Seems Judge Klingman got stuck in the rainstorm last night. He'll be late or something."

"I see. Were you able to track down the endorsement on that check? Was it cashed yet?"

"Listen, you don't know what I had to go through to get this much," Connie complained. "These bankers are worse than—it was like pulling teeth to get something out of them."

"Okay, then. IH call in later."

It took me the better part of the day in the bank. But by night, I had as much information as there was to be had. The seventeen thousand dollar check was cashed by "CBN Incorporated" in Charlestown, which was just fifty miles across the state line.

A phone call to "CBN, Inc." produced confusing and seemingly evasive replies from their general manager. The quietly cold voice on the phone wouldn't even tell me what their business was, let alone any information "about our clients."

The chilling way he said that, gave me my first inkling about the whole thing. Suddenly I knew there was something totally strange and peculiar about "CBN Inc's" business, and that the nature of their business and their "clients" held the key to this whole perplexing Vincenti affair.

Later that night, I went to see Vincenti at his house. He was now free on $50,000 bail. Actually the Assistant D.A., a morose young fellow called Warwick, had asked for $100,000 and to press charges for murder in the first degree. Harvey, my assistant, argued for, and got lower bail due to the long established roots Vincenti had in the community. What did come out at the hearing was unfortunately more damaging information to our case than I had supposed.

It seemed a retired carpenter, who lived across the street from Vincenti, had been working in his garage at about the time of Mrs. Vincenti's death. He now claimed he saw Dr. Golden's car leave at 11:30 last night, and five minutes after that a blue van with out-of-state license plates pulled up in the Vincenti drive-way. The carpenter, John Claremont, had stated that two men then got out and went inside the house, emerging soon with a long narrow bundle wrapped in white plastic which they placed inside the van. The bundle looked *very much like a body* to Mr. Claremont!

"The prosecution will now claim," I explained to Mr. Vincenti, who sat hunched by the dark-shadowed fireplace, "that you not only murdered your wife, but actually hired someone to dispose of the body. In other words, murder with aforethought, intent and malice. The worst kind. Now we both know you're holding out on me, and that's not what I would've expected from you. I know about her sickness. I know about your check to CBN, Inc. whoever they are."

He ran his finger through the white fringes of his hair and looked at me for a long time. His eyes were trying to assure me, they were deep and warm, the skin crinkled around the corners from too many hours and nights of worry,

"All right," he nodded. "I guess now I can tell you. It's been long enough. The thing is all done, anyway. They can't stop it now."

I sighed as I lit up a cigarette. "I wish I knew what this all means, Mr. Vincenti."

When I knew what it all meant I went racing for the phone to call Assistant D.A. Warwick.

"This had better be really good," Warwick said the following afternoon as we rode in a black County Sheriff's car toward Charlestown. "If I hadn't known you from the Pectora case, I would never go along with this, Russell."

"I appreciate you did," I nodded. "Perhaps in a short time you'll see I was justified in asking you to come with us."

Warwick was a short, narrow-shouldered man of thirty, with intense, fierce-browed eyes and a shock of kinky brown hair. He was known as a tough prosecutor. It had taken me a great deal of effort to convince him to come along.

He sat up front, while Vincenti and I were on the back seat, watching as the car turned onto the gravel road of a rusty-fenced suburban cemetery.

"To the right," Vincenti

said. "Stop by the second building past the mausoleum."

Inside the building, down a damp corridor, the small marble engraved sign said, CBN INC.—AUTHORIZED ENTRY ONLY. The door opened before we reached it and a tall, white-frocked man looked us over silently.

"I'm Doctor Loden," he said. "As per Mr. Vincenti's call, I'll be able to answer all your questions and show you the patient."

Warwick and his aide who drove us, looked at each other uneasily. In the silence of the corridor, the doctor's voice seemed to echo.

"Follow me please," the tall, dark-eyed man said. Spotlessly white marble steps led us downstairs into a circular hall which had twelve stainless steel doors paced at identical distances.

"Number 3, please," Doctor Loden said and opened the door.

The four of us stood there in awe. In the center of a small room, a horizontal, lime-colored capsule seemingly made of plastic, lay on a wood-paneled low platform. A black-on-gold name plate was fastened on the side. We all read the inscription at once.

MRS. ROSE VINCENTI
(1905-)

I saw Warwick turn sallow. "What in heaven's name?" he muttered.

"Maybe Dr. Loden should explain," I said.

"Yes, somebody ought to explain," Warwick remarked drily. "For example, what does CBN stand for?"

Loden looked at him intently. "Cybernetics Incorporated. And let me state in advance that it is not our policy," he said, "to reveal information about our clients. However, Mr. Vincenti and Mr. Russell specifically asked—.

"At any rate, our organization is engaged in preserving terminally ill patients and bringing them back to life when a cure will have been found. Mr. Vincenti has engaged us to help his wife in this manner."

Warwick shook his head, started to speak, but then kept quiet.

Dr. Loden went on: "What you see here is a seven by seven foot capsule in which Mrs. Vincenti is permanently frozen at 330 degrees below zero in two hundred gallons of liquid nitrogen. We have used dry ice to initially lower the body temperature, and her blood has been replaced with a neutral substance, dimethyl-sulfoxide. When and if a cure for her lung cancer is found, we shall thaw

the body and attempt to apply the cure."

There was an eerie silence in the room. Finally Warwick turned to Vincenti. "If all this is true, why did you kill her? Why couldn't you just wait, until she passed away naturally? You could've done it then."

Vincenti stared at the capsule and shook his head. "That was what I didn't want. You see the Cybernetics Organization will not proceed until a patient is legally declared dead. That's why I needed that death certificate. I had to call Dr. Golden, otherwise Cybernetics wouldn't touch her. But, I couldn't wait. If she did finally die of cancer, what does it mean? The disease would have already destroyed all. What could a cure do then? No—I figured Out to stop the disease, before it was too late. I killed her first. This way there'll always be a hope."

Warwick pointed at the nameplate. "How do you prove this is her body in there?"

Dr. Loden handed over some papers. "Documented proof. A medical affidavit, signed by two practicing physicians. Everything is perfectly legal. There is no law telling us what to do or not to do with a body after death. Mr. Vincenti has engaged us. provided a patient. That is N othing else is our concern."

"And when you thaw her. What if she does not survive it?"

"Science disagrees on this point," Loden admitted. "Some say it's a great gamble. We'd like to believe it isn't. Our service, replacement of nitrogen, care, continues as long as needed."

Vincenti looked at us slowly. "In the meantime she waits."

The dampness was all around us, and Warwick rubbed his hands together nervously. "The van last night?"

"Ours," Loden said. "As soon as Mr. Vincenti called."

"I don't know," Warwick muttered. "He still killed her. You can't dispute that."

"But for what?" I asked. "He did it to save her, in a sense. This was an act of love, if anything. You'll never get a grand jury to indict on first degree, or even murder. Let alone get a conviction. I mean you can't even say she's really dead. In a moral sense, she isn't."

"He withheld information from the police."

"Only to give time for Cybernetics. He was afraid to tell, figuring you or the police would stop Cybernetics first. I suggest you reduce the charges to withholding vital information," I pressed.

Warwick seemed to shiver.

He walked over to the capsule where Mrs. Vincenti lay suspended in eternity.

I pointed at the lime-colored container. "Think of it, Warwick. What if you convicted this man of murder and ten, twenty, even a hundred years from now she is saved. You will have convicted a man, yet the victim shall be alive!"

Warwick scowled. "If I'm wrong, I may not even be around when they find out."

Vincenti shuffled in his overcoat. Then he took out nail and hammer and put up a time-worn black and white photo on the wall. It was of a woman in her late twenties. She had a delicate oval face; neat, shiny black hair. The eyes were large and ageless, the skin fresh, the expression painted with a timeless smile.

"It is her favorite," he explained. "I took it myself on our wedding day." He smiled.

Head: In the next issue:

THE SILENT CORPSE

A Thrilling New CHARLIE CHAN Short Novel

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

More than a hurricane isolated the elegant mansion from the rest of Hawaii's island chain. Money and murder locked the inhabitants together in a mystery so bizarre it almost fooled Charlie Chan himself. Then Chan opened the closet door and found the second body. Suicide, the police said. But Charlie Chan knew better. . . .The Honolulu detective knew suicide was impossible in this case.

BUTTERMILK

He sighed. The woman must die. When?Now. How? That would take a little doing. ..

by **BILL** PRONZINI

FRAN was drinking a glass of buttermilk in the kitchen when Stanton Tarrant came home from the .office.

She greeted him perfunctorpy as he entered, turning her face up for his kiss. But Tarrant did not kiss her. Her upper lip was mustached with a thin, yellowish residue. *Lord,* he thought. He sat heavily on one of the vinyl-covered chairs, a tall, thin, sandy-haired man, and rubbed his neck with an

already damp pocket handkerchief.

"Why do you have to drink that damned stuff?" he asked.

"What stuff?"

"What stuff do you think?"

"Buttermilk? I like it."

"Well, I don't."

"It's just the thing in this heat."

Tarrant went to the sink and turned on the cold water tap. It ran tepid. He cursed and shut it off again. Behind him Fran said, "You look a bit flushed tonight."

"It's ninety-five outside."

"I know."

"You know," Tarrant said. "You know." He returned to the table.

"What would you like to eat?" Fran asked.

"I'm not hungry now."

"You'd better eat something. The Bensons and the Waverlys will be here at seven for bridge."

"God, not tonight!"

"Why not?"

"It's too damned hot."

"It'll cool off later on."

"Cancel it, can't you? I'm not in the mood for bridge tonight. I want to relax."

"I won't cancel it," Fran said peevishly. "You know how active Ida Benson and Jean Waverly are in the Country Club. If we want to get that membership—"

"The hell with the membership!"

"Stan, what's the matter with you tonight?"

"I don't like the Bensons," Tarrant said, "and I don't like the Waverlys. They're boors, they're pompous asses, the lot of them."

"They happen to be very important people around here," Fran said angrily. "Maybe it doesn't matter to you, but their friendship means a great deal to me and I'm not calling off the bridge game. Now stop acting like a child, will you?"

Tarrant glared at her for a moment, and then stood abruptly.

"I'm going out for a while," he said.

He turned and went out through the screen door onto the rear patio. He sat on a tubular white lawn chair beneath the ineffectual shade of a gumberry tree that grew there. The white flagstone piazza reflected the sun like a mirror; he closed his eyes.

My head feels like it's going to explode, he thought. *The proverbial rat race at the office today, work backlogged, those secretaries chattering like a bunch of wind-up squirrels; I can still hear them even now. And then the freeway traffic, all those gleaming metal monsters, their horns braying and*

their brakes screaming. Oh yes, and we can't forget this omnipresent heat, two months now, two months with no relief in sight; God, now I know what a chicken feels like on a barbecue spit. . .

"Hey-o, Stan!" a voice called.

Tarrant opened his eyes. Across the crushed-rock drive to his right was a waist-high green hedge separating his property from that of his neighbor, Tom Nichols. Nichols was standing at the hedge, a bright blue baseball cap pulled low on his forehead; in one hand he held a tall, thin tumbler filled with ice and a clear, effervescent liquid.

"Hello, Tom."

Nichols said, "Hot enough for you, boy?"

Tarrant's lips pulled into a tight white line. *You damned fool, why do you have to ask such a silly question? Why do people always have to ask the same silly question in the summer?*

Nichols raised the tumbler.

"Gin and tonic," he said. "Want a belt to cool off?"

Tarrant shook his head.

"You look like you could use one."

"Not right now."

Nichols shrugged. "What time you want to leave in the morning?"

"What?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday,' Nichols said. "Golf day, remember?"

"I don't think I'll be playing tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"I just don't feel like it."

"Hell, we haven't missed a Saturday in two years."

Tarrant's temples began to pound malignantly. "What difference does that make? Is there some kind of law that says we have to play golf every Saturday morning? Is that what living is all about, banging a little white ball around a golf course every Saturday morning?"

Nichols frowned. "I thought you enjoyed the game."

"It's a great game," Tarrant said trenchantly. "Oh, it's just a wonderful old game."

"Well, if that's the way you feel-"

"Does it really matter to you, to anyone, the way I feel?"

Nichols started away from the hedge in a huff. Then he paused and looked back across at Tarrant. "What the hell got into you all of a sudden, Stan?"

Tarrant didn't answer. He got out of the lawn chair and went back inside the house. Fran was shredding cabbage into a colander, making cole slaw. "We'll eat in twenty

minutes. You'd better shower and get ready."

Tarrant entered the livingroom and walked through to the hallway leading to their bedroom. From his dresser he took a thin cotton shirt and a pair of summer slacks, and carried them into the adjoining bathroom. He stripped off his lightweight suit and his sodden white underwear, laid them on top of the hamper, and turned on the cold water in the combination shower-and-bath.

After fifteen minutes under the cool needle spray, he began to feel a little better. The pain in his temples abated. He toweled himself dry, dressed, ran a comb through his hair, and went out to the kitchen. And stopped in the doorway, the tentative smile on his lips vanishing.

A large, beaded pitcher of buttermilk sat on the table.

Tarrant thought savagely, *Damn it, what's the matter with you, Fran? I told you about that, didn't I tell you about that?* He whirled and crossed the livingroom, and then sank into a chair and stared through the front window at the quiet, suburban street outside. Beautiful Shady Port: a sweltering sea of heat.

Fran came in a moment later. "Everything's on the table," She said desultorily.

"I told you before, I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat, Stan."

"Why? Why do I have to eat?"

"Do you think I like working for nothing?" she said. "I've had a very hard day, Stan, and you're not making things any easier for me."

"You've had a hard day," Tarrant said. "What about me? What about my day?"

"I don't want to argue."

Tarrant stared at her. "That's what I thought," he said. "That's just what I thought."

"Oh, what's the use?" Fran said in an exasperated voice. "There's no point talking to you when you're in that kind of a mood." She returned to the kitchen and slammed the door.

Tarrant sat in the chair and stared out the window. It was dusk now, and the sky was a collage of vivid orange and yellow streaks, seen through a gossamer haze. Abruptly, he stood and walked to the console television and switched it on. The screen lit up almost immediately, but there was no picture. The set emitted a swelling hum that vibrated intolerably inside his head. He drove the palm of his hand against the *Off* button.

"Fran!" he shouted.

"What is it?"

* "Come in here!"

She opened the door and looked into the iivingroom.

"What's the matter with this damned thing?" Tarrant demanded.

"The television? I don't know. It won't play."

"Why didn't you call a repair man?"

"I had too many other things to do today."

"Oh, that's fine, that's just great. What do I do for some relaxation this weekend?"

"Read a book or something," she told him. "At least that may improve your mind." She retreated into the kitchen again.

Tarrant ran his hands through his hair, and then wiped them across the front of his shirt. *Why doesn't this headache go away, why doesn't it?* He sat down again and looked out once more at the quiet street.

Time passed. Tarrant sat motionless, breathing painfully through his mouth, his temples palpitating with such force that there seemed to be the roar of surf in his ears. Fran came in after awhile and began setting up the card table and laying out snacks. Her lips were pursed, and she said nothing to him.

The doorbell rang at exactly seven. Fran came out of the bedroom and paused in front of Tarrant's chair; she had changed into a fashionable summer dress and fluffed her auburn hair and applied makeup. She said, "They're here, Stan. Try to be civil, for heaven's sake. This is important to me."

"To you," he said. "To you."

"Stan, please!"

"All right," he said. "All right."

Fran admitted the Bensons

and the Waverlys, and Tarrant shook hands with each of them and smiled until his jaws ached. *I don't want them here,* he thought. *I don't want anything to do with them, they're boors, they're snobs. I just want this headache to go away, and some rain, and some peace.*

"A scorcher today, wasn't it, Stan?" Frank Benson asked.

"Yes, a scorcher."

"Damnedest heat wave - in the history of the state."

"Yes."

"Did you catch Parker's speech tonight, Stan?" Brian Waverly asked.

"Parker?"

"Sam Parker. You're backing him for assemblyman, aren't you? Every right-thinking person in the community is backing him, Stan."

"Oh," Tarrant said. "Parker. Yes. Yes."

"Did you catch his speech on TV tonight?"

"No, our set isn't working."

"Too bad," Waverly said. Fine speech."

"Damned fine speech," Benson agreed.

I don't care about Parker's speech, Tarrant thought. *I don't :are about Parker, I don't care ib out anything except this ~.lthy headache!* But he smiled md nodded and took their hats and coats and put them away in "jie hall closet. The pain in his temples was furious, distorting his thoughts, enshrouding his mind in a miasma of agony.

The evening went badly. He and Fran were paired against the Bensons in the first rubber, the Waverlys kibitzing, and he could not keep his mind on his own cards, much less the bidding around the table. He played stupidly, ignoring Fran's dark, angry glares, sweating profusely.

They lost the rubber, and they lost it soundly. The Waverlys took their places, and Tarrant groped his way into the kitchen and drank a glass of lukewarm water from the tap. Fran came out momentarily.

"What is the matter with you, Stan?" she snapped. "You played like a child and you bit poor Mrs. Benson's head off twice for no reason at all. Why can't you act decently tonight, of all nights? Don't you care about my feelings at all? Don't you,Stan?"

Tarrant didn't respond. He opened the screen door and went out onto the patio. It was very quiet; the sibilant call of summer insects and the distant hum of an electric drill in some basement workshop were the only sounds.

It was slightly cooler now, but the air was still choked with cloying humidity. Tarrant turned his face up to the sky,

drawing air heavily into his lungs, his thoughts random and dream-like; he held that position for a long moment—until the gentle, sucking sound reached his ears.

His head jerked around and he stared through the screen door. Fran was standing at the sink, head tilted back, eyes closed. Her expression in the bright light of the kitchen was hideously ecstatic, grotesquely obscene.

She was drinking a glass of buttermilk.

Tarrant's fingers knotted into fists, stretching painfully the tendons in his wrists. Hot, mucilaginous sweat flowed on his body. He could not seem to breath now, and the pain in his head was out of control. He trembled, trembled—and then, suddenly, the trembling stopped and he was very calm. Even the pain was gone. He looked through the screen, watching Fran as she smacked her lips over the last of the buttermilk; then she rinsed the glass in the sink and finally disappeared into the living room again.

Quietly, Tarrant turned and crossed the patio to the garage. It took him less than a minute to remove his hunting rifle from its storage place, to find the box of bullets. Carefully, deliberately, he [1]oaded the rifle; then he left the garage, recrossed the patio, and entered the house again.

The smell of buttermilk was overpowering. . ,

MAN GOES BERSERK, KILLS SIX PEOPLE

A Shady Port man went berserk last night in his quiet suburban home, and killed his wife, four house guests, and one police officer with a hunting rifle. During the two-hour reign of terror, some fifty shots were exchanged before police succeeded in mortally wounding the crazed citizen, Stanley L. Tarrant, 34.

Described by friends and neighbors as a quiet and unassuming man, Tarrant had exhibited no previous proclivity for violence. Police were at a loss to explain exactly why he suddenly ran amok.

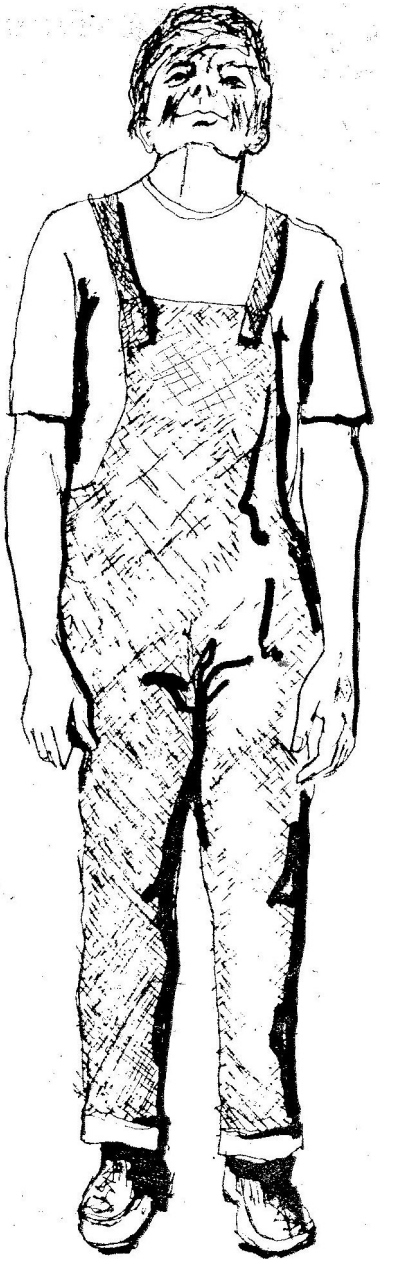
Inspector Jack Haskell was quoted as saying: "It happens this way sometimes, particularly during a prolonged heat wave such as we've been having. Pressures build up in the sanest of men, and finally something triggers the breaking point. Usually it's some simple, inconsequential thing—a word, an action, an item—that is impossible to foresee or guard against. And that's what makes cases like this so completely terrifying to the average man. . ."

BERNARD and the BUST of his FATHER

by

PAULINE C. SMITH

He had taken my youth my beauty, my hopes, what was left of my life. Now it was my turn.



EVERY THURSDAY night I think of killing Bernard.

That is his club night and when he's gone, I think how easy it will be to kill him upon his return. All 1 have to do is stand at the right of the front door in the shadows of the hall—shadowed because Bernard's parsimony will not allow any but forty-watt bulbs for light,—and wait until he opens the door to crack him over the skull with the bust of his father.

The bust is bronze and heavy. I think it would be a fine bit of irony for the smug male

supremacist to do in his male chauvinist pig of a son through the hand of a mild and meek female.

So my thoughts go every Thursday night, planning with scrupulous detail the murder of Bernard with Bernard's father.

The bust stands in impressive ponderosity on a pedestal in the shadows of the hall at the right of the front door. Why, since the bust is presumably a monument to Bernard's father, first mayor of the town, does it stand on a pedestal in his old empty house, empty that is except for Bernard and me, out on the edge of nowhere instead of in a niche of busy importance in the city hall downtown?

After pondering this question for the twenty-five years I have lived here with the bust of Bernard's father and with Bernard, I have come to the conclusion that it was not the citizens of the town who had it made as a monument to Bernard's father, but that Bernard's father had it made as a monument to himself. It's the type of self-glorification Bernard's father would indulge in. Even though I never knew him, I know the son, and, believe me, Bernard would like to have a bust made of *himself* but he hasn't any excuse, never having been mayor even for one term.

Bernard is an accountant and bristles with pens and pencils and reams of terribly important papers he works on under the forty-watt bulbs here in his father's house every night, except Thursday, of course, when he goes back to town to his club and I think about killing him.

In the beginning I did not think about killing Bernard. Even though our marriage certainly wasn't what I expected it to be, still, being brainwashed into his male-oriented version of the wife's role in life I became subjugated. I remained that way, in servile yet neutral resentment, until about seven years ago when the Bookmobile, driven by a new man who thought he was still within the town limits, wheeled into nowhere, which is where I live in Bernard's father's house. From that day on, the Bookmobile drives into the yard once a month, at which time I load myself down with library books and read them all long before it returns and I can get some more.

After eighteen years of learning by heart what is in Bernard's father's bookcases, which includes The Complete Works of Rudyard Kipling, twenty volumes of The Great War (Illustrated), and the Five-Foot Book Shelf, *The*

Feminine Mystique was a revelation, and started me to thinking about killing Bernard.

Bernard is a small man, weighing about one hundred forty pounds, not easy for me to handle, but certainly not impossible, as I have discovered by laying two twenty-pound sacks of chicken mash on a one hundred-pound sack of cattle grain and dragging it all around the barn.

I cannot practice hoisting such a weight into the car, because Bernard always has the car, but I did tie the small sacks onto the large sack and yank it up over the gate, so I should be able to haul Bernard's dead body, after I have killed him, into the trunk of the car. I do wonder occasionally, with some trepidation, whether or not I will be able to drive a car after twenty-five years of never having my hands on the wheel, but I think I can. After all, way out here there would be no traffic problems, especially late on a Thursday night.

I plan my killing of Bernard only on Thursday nights after he has gone to his club. All the other nights I am so tired from working this "family farm" and doing up the housework quickly enough so I can read during the day, that I go to bed the minute I get the supper dishes done and leave Bernard, in all his male splendor, under his forty-watt light bulb.

Bernard has never allowed a television set in his father's house—"a monumental waste of time and money," he puts it. That's the way Bernard talks. I wouldn't be surprised if that isn't the way he monumentally wastes his time on Thursday nights, watching television at his club.

These Thursday nights have become so filled with punctilious deliberation upon murder that it is now difficult for me to separate reality from imaginative planning. I have paid such particular attention to every detail that I sometimes wonder —is it happening or is it yet to happen?

It is rather woodsy around Bernard's father's house, and what with the trees dropping their leaves each autumn, buried beneath the snows of winter, always providing a fine rich loam for easy summer digging. The woods would be an ideal grave for Bernard, except that there is no access for driving a car through the dense brush and the tire marks would show. I should have to physically drag him from the trunk of the car, along with the shovel, at least a quarter of a mile for perfect concealment, and although I am able to drag those three sacks, weighing one

hundred forty pounds, around the barn, I am practically certain I could not drag dead one hundred forty pound Bernard a quarter of a mile.

When Bernard arrives home in the evening, he occasionally drops small segments of local news, couched in simplified form for my woman brain to comprehend. The most recent of these reports advised me that an old dying orchard, five miles down the south road, was being torn out and ploughed up, to be made ready for a subdivision.

While he said it, he looked like the bronze bust of his father; hard, cold and dull. Bernard does not want any subdivisions close by. He likes his kingly isolation as the son of a one-term mayor. He explained the progress of the work so that I could understand. "The trees have all been pulled out, the land ploughed, dragged and levelled, the sewer lines in, and once the soil has settled, they'll' truck in the lumber and start construction. . ."

A wonderful place to bury Bernard, I thought on Thursday night. A soft-earth-sewer-line-grave for Bernard.

At the time of his mayoralty, Bernard's father drove a Model-T, the first in town, and had the garage, that looks like a tall chicken coop, built to an exact fit. Bernard naturally continues to use this old building, being regressive by nature, and is forced to use great care to ease his larger car between the double doors because there are only inches to spare. I know I can drag Bernard's body the twenty feet of distance from the house to the garage because of my practice with the sacks of feed, and I am not concerned with fingerprints on the steering wheel for I shall rub mine off and everyone knows that Bernard wears driving gloves, summer and winter, the ones his father wore. What really worries me is whether or not I shall be able to back Bernard's car out and return it inside that narrow slot without a mishap.

Bernard has the look of a man subject to colds. His pale blue eyes are red-rimmed due to years of strain in the light of forty-watt bulbs and he sniffles frequently, but I have never known Bernard to have a cold. However, once J have killed him and buried his body, thus bringing about his involuntary absence from his office in town, I am sure that his employers, remembering the sniffle and red-rimmed eyes, will think a cold has kept him home, and since we have no phone out here in Bernard's father's house— "An unnecessary expense," Bernard states flatly—

no one will call, being unable to, and no one will come for awhile.

I have also given much thought, on Thursday nights, to the eventual discovery that Bernard, instead of being absent with a cold, is absent with total disappearance; and my plan of reaction is as meticulously worked out as are the rest of my careful Thursday night deliberations. I shall simply be the meekly confused wife who never knew the car was safely latched in the chicken coop garage all the time. How could I, a mere woman, totally unfamiliar with either cars do anything but presume to think that my liege was gone somewhere in his car on male business that I, the female and therefore inferior, could not and would not question?

Then they will search, sparing me, the down-trodden stupid wife, their fearsome beliefs, and will not find Bernard in the sewer where I have placed him.

It is Thursday night, and I plan so pictorially and so auditorially that I cannot be sure if I am still planning or acting out my plans. Is it being done or is it still to be done?

I hear the sound of the car in the warm summer night, and , the sound of the crickets too. I hear the iron latch of the garage

this far away, and the clang of the bolt as it drops into place.

A katydid chirps from a tree and footsteps sound on the gravel.

I walk from the pallid glow of the forty-watt bulb and stand in the shadow of the pedestal at the right of the front door.

The steps reach the porch and mount the stairs. I pick up the bronze bust and hold it high in both hands.

I hear the slide of the key and the click as it turns. A movement rustles the grass outside the window.

The door opens, bringing darkness and Bernard. I strike and the bust clatters. Bernard slumps with a sigh.

Well!

I lean over, trembling and peering, it being difficult to see in the pale, sick light, but I think I discern a flicker of the ^

features, a gleam in the red-rimmed eyes, a quiver of the long smug nose. My God! Is he still alive and shall I have to strike again? The door is open and the warm summer night flows through. I reach down and grasp his ankles. I tug and move him slightly, only slightly, breathing heavily—why should one hundred forty pound Bernard be heavier than 140 pounds of grain? But, of course, he is not heavier, it is I who am weaker with the weakness of panic.

I straighten, inhaling and exhaling slowly, breathing in the warm green scent of summer and breathing out the cold gray scent of Bernard. I can do it. Of course I can do it after all my planning, or I can do it within my plans. I shall do it—some way.

Again I grab the ankles and pull, thinking of the sacks, thinking of pulling sacks instead of Bernard, jerk him over the sill and note the movement again—a flash of the eyes and a twitch of the nose. I drop his legs and walk around him, into the house, pick up Bernard's father's bust from from the floor, crash it down on Bernard's skull, hear the dull crunch of bone. Then, in neat housewifely fashion, I set the bust back on the pedestal.

Kneeling to investigate, I note that there is very little blood. I reach out and with one finger brush a thin trickle of it from his temple, back into his hair before it drops and stains the porch floor. Then I rise, walk through the house to the kitchen, where I wash my hands.

I return, close the front door, yank Bernard down the porch steps and drag him the twenty feet to the chicken coop garage as easily as I would drag three sacks of grain.

The night is soft and filled with the chirp of night things. I drop my burden and listen with delight. Then I remember* and run to the backyard where I have propped the shovel against the barn door. I hear the sleepy flutter of chickens inside and a slow, methodical crunch as the cow chews her cud. All the sounds are magnified. I am one with the night, and my plans, and my deed.

I hurry with the shovel back to the garage, draw out the bolt, unclasp the latch and throw open one side of the doors. Bernard is lying against the other, holding it shut.

It is black dark and I fumble my hands over the back of the car, finding the little metal thing that must be pushed aside before a key can be inserted to open the trunk.

I grope my way from the

black dark to dim dark just outside the one closed door of the garage. The moon shines upon the yard and filters through the trees, but does not reach the garage. I move my fingers over Bernard's body, feel the gloves on his hands, reach under his suit jacket to his vest watch pocket.

There are no keys!

Then I remember the key still in the front door keyhole, never removed, with the car keys hanging from the key ring. I run, stumbling through shadows and moonlight, across the yard and up the porch steps. I yank the key from the keyhole and palm the keys on the key ring.

Bernard still holds the one garage door closed. In a fit of petulant anger, I jerk him away and fling open the door. Then I finger the keys, not knowing which is the right one to fit the trunk of the car.

Peering blindly and touching with groping fingers, I slide the metal thing aside, and holding the front door key separate from the others, I attempt to fit each key, one after the other, until, at last, the correct one slides in and I am able to lift the trunk lid!

First, I throw in the heavy shovel.

Then, by pulling and heaving Bernard's inert body, I manage to prop it in an almost-sitting position against the bumper. I grasp his armpits and haul him up so that his head rests upon the lower edge of the open trunk. I lean against him to hold him in place, and rest, listening to the rustle of leaves and the song of the insects.

The night is filled with beauty and gentle sound.

I hold Bernard there with the flat of my hands, and step back, trying to gain leverage. I push upwards, but he does not budge. I step toward him and clasp him about the hips, and lift.

I am breathing hard now, and making no headway.

I crouch, my arms still around his hips, I wedge my shoulder under his knee and push mightily, and the top of him is inside! I hang onto him, just catching my breath, then I shove, cram in the legs, curl him up, slam down the lid and pull out the key.

I wait awhile, panting, leaning heavily against the back of the car, listening to the crickets and the cicadas and the lone katydid in the tree.

I push the garage doors back as far as they will go, make my way around the car and open the door, thankful for the dome light that goes on; I get inside, close the door, and the light goes off just when I need it

most. I run my fingers over the darkness of the dashboard, searching for the ignition. I find it at last and hold it there with one finger while, with the fingers of my other hand, I separate and jam various keys at it until the right one fits.

There!

I must get rid of the tightness in my throat.

I feel as if my lungs are bursting.

I sit quietly, holding my breath, trying to relax.

I listen once more to the calm and contented night sounds, and turn the ignition key, Nothing happens except for two red lights that glow up at me like red-rimmed eyes.

I remember then to put my foot on the accelerator. Again, nothing happens.

In frustrated fury, I jerk the ignition key as far to the right as it will go, the motor chugs to sudden life.

The two red eyes go to sleep.

I let out my breath with a sob and press my foot up and down on the accelerator, allowing the motor to hum, roar and purr at my will. I remember the lights and fumble around, pulling at one knob that comes out in my hand, at another that swings the windshield wipers into action. I jam it back, and with the third, the headlights abruptly brighten the studs of the garage while the dash lightens up the inside of the car.

All this light is like hope. Now I can see the letters on the inside of the steering wheel, the red-circled P, the R, N, D and the L. I pull at a lever that causes the circle to jump over into R, and the car leaps backward in a short spasmodic jump. Instinctively I change my foot from the accelerator to the brake pedal.

I am beginning to feel slightly liberated. I am beginning to feel the freedom of a car again. I remember the hand brake and release it. I take a deep breath, lift my foot gradually from the brake pedal, stare straight through the windshield at the lighted studs before me, and the car moves slowly backward, straight as a die, between the open garage doors.

It rolls in free abandon into the carrot patch before I realize that this reverse momentum must be halted and slam my foot on the brake pedal. My exhilaration with my new-found power ceases as I search the alphabetical letters before me to discover how to drive forward, out and away from Bernard's father's house in order to bury Bernard in the sewer trench.

D seems the most likely

letter, since N appears to do nothing. I push the lever until the red ring circles D, and the car starts forward, out of the carrot patch.

I am very careful, keeping the bail of my foot lightly on the accelerator and turn the steering wheel with a butterfly touch that takes me away from the carrots, around the turn of the gravelled driveway, between the trees and into the road.

I brake with a jerk. I am most unaccustomed to the world beyond Bernard's father's property, and must sit quietly with my foot on the brake pedal in order to orient myself.

The road is dark and tree-lined. The cicadas still shriek softly, the crickets chirp and the katydid is lost back in the trees around the house.

I lift my foot from the brake pedal, place it on the accelerator and give the steering wheel a sharp turn to the right. Too sharp. I turn to the left. Again, too sharp, and waveringly traverse the country road. I feel as if I am flying, swift as the wind, but a nervous glance at the speedometer informs me that I am traveling at twenty miles an hour. Yet, it is glory and it is freedom; and before I know it, I am at the old orchard on south road that is no longer an orchard, but ploughed and levelled and slightly softened ground.

The moon shines bright out here with no tree-obstructions, and little flags fly on iron rods in a straight line of specification—probably, I suppose, to indicate the sewer line recently installed.

t

The soft-earth-sewer-line, Bernard's grave.

This thought causes me to brake with a jerk. But how can I park for the period of time it will take me to bury Bernard?

I study again the alphabetical markings on the steering wheel and recall, in retrospect, that parked in the chicken coop garage, it was the P that had been circled in red, so I push the lever up until the P is so marked, lift my foot from the brake, and the car is quiescently parked!

I keep the motor running as an insurance factor, pull on the hand brake and step from the car. The dome light flickers on and off.

There is no sound here without brush for the crickets, leaf plants for the cicadas or trees for the katydids. This is a soundless and empty graveyard.

I walk around to the back of the car and realize then that I need the key to unlock the trunk! The key, or course, is on the key ring, hanging to the ignition. I breathe a word that I have recently read, go back to the front, open the door and the dome light goes on, thus making it easier to manipulate the key ring without turning off the ignition.

The key ring is a problem that I finally solve but do not understand, by flicking a section with my thumbnail that opens the entire ring. I carefully work all the keys off except that one which keeps the motor alive, palm the keys, close the door and the dome light goes off. Strange. Perhaps it is the mechanism of the door that operates the light.

I walk back to the trunk, and after several fruitless tries, find the trunk key again and the lid flies open. There is Bernard, coiled in moonlight death. I reach across him for the shovel, swing it over his body and fling it to the black-heaped, flag-waving trench.

Now I must lift Bernard out.

Before doing so, I return to the front of the car, open the door, the dome light goes on, and I fit the keys to the open key ring, then I must slip the ring over the slot, push back the section, and it is closed.

I slam the door and it is dark.

I work by the light of the moon.

I stand in momentary contemplation while I decide whether to take, Bernard from the trunk before I dig his grave or whether to dig the grave first and take Bernard out when it is ready. I decide upon the latter course.

The soil is easy to handle. I come upon the sewer pipe

about four feet down; and, being a planner, once I reach the pipe, I step along the soil-heaped causeway about six feet, allowing an extra few inches beyond Bernard's head and below his feet, and work from each end to the middle.

The grave is soon dug. I stand for a few moments, leaning on my shovel, to rest.

Now I must remove Bernard.

I sink the shovel into the soft soil.

Then I turn to the trunk of the car. Bernard is still curved in trunk-shadowed moonlight. I grasp his legs and heave them over the edge of the trunk. They hang there like limp wood bananas. I clutch at his middle, but I cannot move him. Then, reluctantly, I curl my hands around his neck and raise his torso hesitantly. He is poised in the air. He bends toward me. I brace myself and pull, with both hands about his neck, but delicately, hoping to topple him gently. He moves with full force and rocks from the trunk so that I stagger and let go and fall with his weight, knocked to the road, smothered by Bernard.

I lie there a moment, the breath caught in my chest, feeling dead myself. Then I breathe again and push him aside and scramble free, leaving Bernard, a helpless thing, on asphalt. I lean over him, resting against the open car trunk, breathing heavily, regaining my strength.

There is no sound in this arid ploughed section, no flicker of moonlight, no insect throat-tunes. Well, there is Bernard, moon-pale and vulnerable, silent, colorless and sniffless. I push myself away from the edge of the trunk, I lean down, I grab him by the ankles, I pull him as I would three sacks of grain, to the grave I have dug.

I bend and place my palms on his back and roll him in. He lands face down. I study his position, and reflect upon the problems of turning him face-up, toward the sky; then I decide that, no matter, face up or face down, the earth will still close him in, so I leave him the way he fell and shove the soil over him—carefully, so that the soil upon his grave is heaped exactly the same as the soil upon the sewer pipes under the flags.

I slam the trunk closed and bring the shovel into the car with me and drop it against the passenger seat. The dome light goes on, then off, the motor idles. I yank the red circle over to D and sail down the road at twenty miles an hour.

There is a problem, for I must turn. Fortunately, a crossroad looms up in the headlights and, by twisting the

lever from D to R, back and forth with starts and jerks, I finally retrace my way, pass Bernard's grave and reach the tree-lined driveway into Bernard's father's family farm.

I wheel into the driveway, dip into the carrot patch, and enter the chicken coop garage right-on. I slam on the brake, circle the P on the steering wheel, pull the handbrake, wipe the steering wheel glove-clean with an edge of my apron, turn off the ignition, palm the key ring of keys, grab the shovel, open the car door—the light goes on.

I pull out the shovel, slam the car door and the light goes off.

I grope my way in the dark around the car to the doors of the garage. I drop the shovel outside, pull the doors to, swing the latch over that hooklike thing, drop the bolt, pick up the shovel and walk to the backyard to lean it against the barn door. Again, the chickens flutter inside and still the cow chews her cud.

The crickets chirp, the cicadas shriek softly and the katydid chatters in the tree. The night is enchanting, the breeze is a zephyr, and the moon is a golden disc in the sky.

I enter Bernard's father's house and close the door behind me. Bernard's father's bust stands grandly bronze on the pedestal by the door.

I sit in the light of the forty-watt bulb.

It is still Thursday night and I hear the sound of a car. I hear, through the thin summer night, the rap of an iron latch, and the clang of a bolt as it drops into place.

The katydid shrills a song in the tree. Footsteps roll the gravel.

I plan with pictorial perfection. I deliberate with auditorial absorption, considering variables and their irresolute solutions, possibilities and their problems. My plans are so scrupulously detailed that it is difficult for me to detect that fine line of distinction between planning and acting the plan.

The steps reach the porch and mount the stairs.

I walk from the pallid glow of the forty-watt bulb and stand in the shadow of the pedestal at the right of the front door.

The crickets chirp and the cicadas trill. I hear the slide of the key and the slight click as it turns.

I pick up the bronze and hold it high in both hands, not knowing if I am really waiting with Bernard's father's bust to kill Bernard or if I am still no more than planning it. . .

DEATH ON DECK

by JIM DUKE

Something evil was following him. Something so evil it spun webs of death that trapped any man mad enough to fight it. He nodded. They had killed his friend. Obviously, it was their turn to die...

One of the truck jockeys found the body between the warehouse and loading dock. Now they were standing around watching the police and coroner's men.

• "Thing to do is have a beer," said one of the jockeys.

"Who could keep it down?" said another.

A pair of grim-faced detectives circulated among them but got nothing.

"You guys're like the Mafia," one of the detectives said in frustration. "How can a guy get a face full of shotgun pellets and nobody knows nothing?"

Marcus Aborn had said nothing because he knew nothing, and he never said much anyway. They had called him "Yak" in the big leagues. That was a long time ago, before a line drive cracked his wrist. His roundhouse curve was never the same. He hung on doggedly, moving from team to team. Now he was a floater, truck job to truck job. Only right now he didn't feel like driving or drinking beer. He stood numbly and watched his friend, Webe Devany, get wrapped in a black rubber coroner's bag.

"How do you like that?" somebody said to him.

"Aw, leave him alone," another said.

Shivering against the cold early morning air, Marcus shoved his big hands deep into his jacket pockets, so deep the seams threatened to rip.

"Ole Webe kept to himself," Hank Lane said aloud to no one.

"Yeah. But Yak, here, he was kinda buddy with him, huh Yak?" said Perry Drabowski.

Marcus glared at the two men. They were invading an area in which they were not wanted. They both saw the look. All the truckers but Marcus carried tire irons under the rig seats. Marcus didn't need one.

"You bums get your butts untracked!" Lassiter, the yard boss, yelled from the dock.

The men began drifting away, all but Marcus. He stood, his jaw working hard and slow, as he tried to cut through the shock. Saturday he had planned to take Webe to a Dodger game, introduce him to the players. Webe was fifty-five, but he was a kid about meeting big leaguers.

Marcus watched the body loaded into the coroner's carryall. His eyes blurred and he felt ashamed for the hole inside him filling with sadness and anger and a little piece of a thing men didn't admit feeling toward other men—love. Simple, like a hand shake, or a joke you didn't have to tell. That's what he and Webe Devany had, like a father and son, only not the tension of that. Something simple.

No words for it.

Now, only sickness.

"Damnit, old man," Marcus choked out, turning away from the stains on the pavement.

He drove his route that day, hauling transistors to Compton on the other side of L.A., but all the time his head was clouded, and that evening he went to see Dolores Devany,

Despite an effort to hide it, Webe's widow looked older than time. Marcus sat in the small neat living room staring at the cup of coffee in his hand.

"The police were nice," Dolores said finally. She was sitting very stiff and very formal. "But I still can't understand it. What happened? You and him were close. He always talked about you and him and how he liked you and admired that you were in baseball."

"What was he doing down there last night?" Marcus asked.

She shook her head, her eyes going to the tears she'd been holding back. "God, Marcus, I don't know! Heaven's my witness! He left and said he was going over to the Apple Bar for a beer and watch TV."

"He was never much for TV," Marcus said, puzzled.

She looked helpless. "All I know, he's been acting secret like. Not so you'd really notice, I guess. But he'd go out and say he was going to the drug store and be gone an hour. Saying he met somebody—" She halted.

"What'd the police say?"

"They just ask questions, Marcus." Her face sank into her hands and she cried. He went to her and held her until it was cried out.

"Webe was nice to me," Marcus said slowly, feeling the words come out without any effort, without calculation. "With him I could talk and not feel I had to show myself like a personality. He took me like I was."

He stopped talking. He looked around the small room. It seemed very big because only Dolores now would be there.

When he left he did not have to say what he was going to do, or why. She seemed to beg with her eyes, but she could see it was no use; maybe she wanted him to find out and do something.

The next morning Marcus got Arlo to sub for him on his route and he went to the police station. It was a tall building full of windows and the big man felt uncomfortable riding up the silent elevator to the fifth floor where the homicide department was.

The detective behind the metal desk in the office was named Max Brown. He was a stocky man with a bull dog's tenacity in his small, blue eyes. He didn't looked pleased.

"You lost?" he asked.

"That guy at the truck yard," Marcus said. "Him and me were friends."

"So maybe you can tell me who shot him?"

Marcus shook his head.

The detective snorted. "Then why the hell're you here?"

"Figured you might have some idea."

The detective's frown broke deep angry lines across his face, which did make him look like a bull dog. "What am I, information center? Listen, we get dozens of murders a week in the city. I got five jokers working for me. They're overworked and beat half the time. Hell, what'm I beating my gums for? Get outta here and let me do my work!"

"You saying you don't have anything?"

"Persistent, aren't you? I'm saying if you know nothing then mind your business. Drive your truck. You guys, none of you know nothing. And you, his friend, you know nothing, right?"

Marcus nodded.

"See? Now beat it."

Marcus rode the elevator down, wanting to break the walls. He walked through the ground floor lobby and dared anyone to stumble in his way. He wanted to smash a skull. Outside, trembling, he looked

at anonymous faces and cars going by and nobody knew about Webe Devany. Nobody gave a damn.

That afternoon at the truck yard he waited for the shift to end. When the drivers began to arrive, the big man started asking.

Answer after answer, the same.

"Webe, he never said nothing to me, Yak. You knew him better'n me. What'd he ever say about any trouble he was in?"

He was on the dock after a fruitless hour of questions when Lassiter barked at him from the office:

"Aborn, get your butt in here a minute!"

The yard boss, his ruddy bald head shiny under the florescence, glared up at him as Marcus entered the office.

"You a detective now?"

"I was just asking around," Marcus said.

"You drive for T-J Trucking and you're a jockey, not a godamn detective! The guys don't like somebody poking!"

"Was Devany in trouble, Mr. Lassiter?"

"You don't hear so well, do you?"

Marcus leaned across the desk. His eyes were cool and steady to match the thing in him that had been building.

"I listen pretty good," Marcus said. "What bothers me is I hear nothing when there oughta be something. Webe, he worked here couple of years, gave his gut and soul to this place. Nobody cares."

Lassiter leaned back as far as he could in the swivel chair to give Marcus room. "He had two years, Aborn; all you got here's three months. You ain't got any seniority, big man."

Easing off, Marcus took a deep, cautious breath. This job was important, paid good money.

"Now cut out pressing everybody," Lassiter added. "Let the cops do their work."

Marcus started to say something, but the knot in his throat wouldn't let him. When he got outside he tried to spit it out, but it was still there when he drove off.

IT WAS COOL and dark when, after dinner in a hamburger joint, Marcus parked outside the apartment building where he had a small two-room flat on the third floor.

He opened the door to his room and got a piece of something hard against the side of his head. Lights exploded in his head as he pitched forward. He reached out to break his fall, but something else hard slammed his ribs.

"Catch this one, pitcher," a

graveled voice in the dark said.

Another hard thing hit , Marcus. On his back, trying to work away from the action, he thought he saw two of them, both big, both broad across the shoulders. But they were just shadows. He could feel the side of his face burning, but his head was sorting things out. A shadow moved in for another swipe and Marcus grabbed a foot. His big hands swallowed the shoe, which was more a boot, like a dockman wore. He twisted it and the owner squawked. The other lunged, but after shoving the one man away Marcus was now on his knees.

"Sonofabitch!" Marcus growled.

He rammed the second man with his shoulder, driving him over a table and against the wail. He could feel air exploding from his assailant's mouth, With all his power, he drove a fist into the man's belly, turned and saw the little wink of light on a blade.

"Come to daddy, pitcher," said the graveled voice.

With a bellow that rocked the air Marcus kicked out at the wink of the blade, It sailed like a comet across the room.

Then the two men were scrambling for the door. They jammed through together. When Marcus got there he saw only dark jackets going down the stairs.

Later in the bathroom the cold wet washrag felt good on his hot swollen face. He straightened the room a little and found the knife in a corner, It was an ugly pearlhandled job. At the window he jabbed the point into a rut and broke the blade off and tossed the knife out the window,

He was sitting by the window when two uniformed patrolmen came a few minutes later.

"What's the racket up here?" the taller one asked,

"Had a fight," Marcus said dully.

"Old lady down stairs said it sounded like somebody was getting killed."

The shorter cop was looking at Marcus curiously. "Don't I know you? Didn't you used to pitch-"

"Not any more," Marcus cut in. "Now I drive trucks."

"What was the fight about?" the taller asked.

"I don't know."

"You mean somebody tried to mug you in your room?"

Marcus gazed out the window. "Ask a guy in homicide named Brown."

An hour after the two cops left, Marcus got the phone call from Detective Max Brown.

"What's this crap about me knowing who clobbered you?"

Marcus flexed his hand and surveyed the knuckles still red from the punishment they'd given,. "I didn't say you know anything. All I know is I ask some questions about Webe and couple of goons try to work me over. You figure it. You're the cop."

"And who asked you to nose—"

Marcus slammed down the receiver.

Later in bed he tried to sleep but he kept thinking. He was mad because he hadn't grabbed at least one of the goons. He could've made one of them talk. It was all very obvious, of course. He'd been asking. Somebody didn't like it. Funny thing was, he'd about decided to forget it, to do what Lassiter recommended and let the cops chew it over. Now it was a little different. Maybe because he didn't like being jumped. Or maybe because he really never intended to forget it.

The next morning he started the questions again. It didn't take long. Lassiter called him into the office. The way the short, bald man looked Marcus knew why.

"Pick up your check at the cashiers."

"Why?" Marcus said.

"Your work isn't satisfactory," Lassiter snarled.

"Who says?"

"The drivers say! They don't want you around!"

"Which one? I'll talk to him."

"Like hell you will! Just get your check and get out!"

When Marcus left he slammed the door.

He was walking down the dock after picking up his last check when Nibs, a young, thin dock clerk gave the high sign. Marcus ambled over and the clerk drew him behind a stack of crates.

"They cut you, Marcus?"

"No surprise."

Nibs' eyes darted around. His skin didn't show it, but

Marcus knew the man was sweating. "I liked Webe. Nice old guy. He loaned me two hundred dollars when my wife needed teeth work. Listen, you know the Sandroom on 44th?"

"I can find it."

"Eight, tonight."

Turning quickly, the clerk disappeared around the crates. Marcus hesitated. He wasn't sure that he shouldn't press Nibs for more right now, but the dock was full of ears. And full of something else. He figured it could wait until that evening.

The Sandroom was a beer bar like any other that went with the neighborhood. A couple of chippies decked out for the evening tour perched on tall stools at the end of the dimlit bar. Around small tables in the shadows were an assortment of has-beens and never-weres.

The barrel-chested bartender drew Marcus a glass of draft. "Never seen you here before," he said.

Marcus shrugged. "Lotta bars around here."

"That's the truth. Cuts business thin, I'll tell you."

He swept loose water off the bar, strolled down to the other end and Marcus waited. He was on a second glass and getting to know the bar pretty well when Nibs came in. He motioned Marcus to an empty corner table.

"Tough about your job," Nibs said as they sat down.

"I'll manage."

"Maybe you can get a coaching job?"

Marcus swallowed some beer and looked across the table at the skinny man. "What's this about?"

Nibs wiped his mouth with his fingers. "My wife, Liz, she says I'm nuts. None of my business, she says. Maybe she's right; I don't know."

He looked at the table top and Marcus watched him.

"You know," Nibs said finally, "the rumor is Webe was killed by the syndicate. That he'd been working with 'em and somehow they didn't like what he was doing, or wouldn't do. So they hit him."

"That's pure crap," Marcus said. His big hands squeezed the beer glass. "He wouldn't've messed with that."

Nibs shook his head. "All I know is, a year ago when I first started working here, I heard some of the guys joking on the dock. You know, things like if anybody got outta line they'd call on Webe and Webe's friends would set the contract. I mean, at first I figured it was just jockey jabbering. Well, later when I get to know Webe better, one day we're eating

lunch and I mention my wife needs-this mouth work and I need a couple of hundred. I tell him I hear this guy'11 loan me the stuff, no credit problems.

" 'Who's this guy?' he asks me, and I tell him it's a guy named Sampson. Old Webe's eyes get tight. 'Sampson, he's a shark,' he says. 'He'll give you two bills and cut your heart out with fifty percent interest.' And I ask him how come he knows that. " 'Never mind,' he says. 'I know. If you need two bills 111 loan it to you. Pay me back when you got it.'

"The next day I tell Sampson I got the money, and he asks me who gave it and I say Webe did. 'That bastard!' he yells. 'He knows the rules!' And then he shuts up."

Marcus finished his beer. One of the whores had left with somebody; the other was hippy with a tall kid at the bar. Marcus watched and then rubbed his eyes wearily.

"That's adding up a lot of iffy stuff," he said with a sigh.

"Here's the kicker," Nibs said quickly, as if saying it was like cutting his own hand. "A few weeks ago Lassiter comes up and tells me: 'Devany's a syndicate man, and we don't want that kind around. So we're gonna fix him.' "

"Like how?"

"Smart, real smart," Nibs said. "I add a few things to his bills of lading. Once in a while that happens, a mistake. But it builds up, like Webe's losing some, maybe lifting merchandise enroute?"

"Lassiter," Marcus said thoughtfully. "That don't surprise me one bit."

"Listen, I don't want you should blab this. I mean I trust you and I know you can take care of yourself. I couldn't tell the cops. My job's important to me. I mean', Liz, she's pregnant and we need all the scratch we can get."

"So why're you telling me this?"

Nibs shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe feeling bad about what I was doing, I mean even if Webe was syndicate. Maybe he was trying to start clean, you know? Anyhow, I've felt dirty about it ever since."

Marcus touched the still tender part of his face. "If Webe was once in the syndicate, then maybe Lassiter was putting the squeeze on for them."

"Like blackmail?"

"Maybe. But why?"

Nibs stood up. "I donno. I gotta get. Maybe I was wrong saying this. But I feel better."

MARCUS ABORN watched Nibs go and then sat in the shadows feeling a chill that came from the use of words like

"syndicate" and "contract." At this moment he wasn't so sure he was wise pursuing this any further. Of one thing he felt pretty certain: the two muscles that tried to bang him up weren't the type from a syndicate. That kind sent permanent messages, like the kind Webe Devany got.

The nagging suspicion he was playing in the wrong league carried with him all the way through the night. The next morning when he went to see Dolores Devany it was still on his shoulder.

"Funeral's tomorrow, Marcus," she said, still looking like a dry leaf. "I'd appreciate it if you'd go with me. I don't know if I have the strength by myself."

"Wouldn't do nothing else," he said and they sat and talked quietly about Webe and little things he did and Marcus only partly listened or participated. He was waiting for the right time. Finally the words died off. Dolores seemed occupied by very personal memories.

Marcus hesitated to break into that special privacy, but he had to.

"Dolores, what do you know about Webe before you and him were married?"

It took her a second to come back. She registered no particular reaction to the question.

"Why, we never talked much about before, Marcus. Only being married five years, I guess we both thought what happened before wasn't too important. And you know how Webe was. Our special thing was what we had now."

"So he never told you? Never hinted?"

She looked at him curiously. "I don't understand."

The big man shook his head slowly, now wishing he hadn't started it. "Never mind," he said.

"No. You're asking for a reason. You think what Webe did before came back and got him killed? I know one thing. He drove trucks and he was good, and he was proud of his job and how good he was."

"You hear things and they don't make sense," Marcus said, almost apologetically.

"What things?"

He looked at her, a frail slight woman with a burden she was barely carrying now and a lonely future. He had no desire to burden her with anything more.

"Heard he might've gambled," he lied.

She was relieved. "My goodness, Marcus! You knew him better than that. He wouldn't have flipped a coin."

He forced a grin. "Yeah, it was silly, just silly rumors."

When he left he felt better for stopping where he had. She obviously knew nothing. There was no reason why she should be drawn into this, if indeed there was anything in which to be drawn.

He was driving slowly through the late morning traffic toward the employment office when, glancing in the rearview mirror, he saw a dark blue sedan and he remembered suddenly seeing a similar sedan outside the Sandroom. It was too much for coincidence.

He took a sharp left at the next corner, then hung a right two blocks down. The sedan had dropped back a little, but it was still following.

He couldn't make out the driver or his passenger, but he figured one of them was missing a pearl-handled knife. He knew they wouldn't tangle with him hand-to-hand any more, not after the last time. Then he thought about Webe and the alley with Webe's face all over it from a full shotgun- blast, and he shoved the accelerator to the floor.

The ear lunged forward. Rubber shrieked as he cut a hard left, then swept past a bus, narrowly missing an old man stepping off the curb. But when he checked again, he could still see the sedan. Only now it was close, real close. He

could see their faces. Square, lantern-jawed characters. He didn't recognize either of them, but the way they looked at him they knew who he was. He tried to drill those faces into his memory.

He was nearly by it before he saw the police building. He yanked the car to the curb, lept out and sprinted across the boulevard. The sedan barreled out of sight before he could catch the license number.

For a moment he stood at the building entrance, trying to catch his breath. When his heart finally settled down he still had the taste of copper in his mouth, a taste of fear he hated. One other time he had that—when the cast came off his wrist and he walked out on the practice field to toss some pitches to see if he'd ever have it. It didn't take long to find out, but he hung on, praying it would come back.

He had tried to shake the memory of that downswing, the futile efforts, the home runs they hit off him. And him standing on the mound, boos, endless ugly boos. And every-time he thought he had forgotten, somebody would remember. Somebody who wanted to hear how it was, the top of the heap and then the slide.

Webe had said something Marcus remembered: "Most guys never do nothing important, or nothing to be proud of. Few of 'em get the chance. And if they ever did, they'd blow it. But you were there, Marcus. Just bad luck sent you down."

Marcus left his car parked where it was, passed through the lobby of the police station and an hour later he found a pawn shop he'd heard about. The little man with bottle-bottom glasses didn't flinch when Marcus asked for a hand gun.

"Take your pick," the man said, opening a cardboard box.

When Marcus left, the ,45 automatic was jammed in his belt and he had a box of cartridges in his pocket. He was also one hundred fifty dollars poorer, which was the going rate to buy a gun without the three-day wait for a record check in the state capitol.

He hung around a small side street bar until after five o'clock. Then from the pay phone in the bar he called Nibs' home. It rang for a long time before he gave up. He thought of several reasons why nobody would answer. Only one of them made any sense right now. He felt sick thinking about it.

It was dark when he returned to his car and drove across town to the young dock clerk's home. He noted with relief that no sedan was tailing

him. His break for the police station had apparently iced their courage.

The neighborhood was run-down and there were no street lamps to keep prowlers honest. Marcus parked a block from Nibs' place and walked the rest of the way. When he approached the small, green stucco cottage there were no lights in the windows.

He still harbored some hope when he pushed the doorbell. Finally he just leaned on it. It was no use. With a sharp breath he turned the door knob. It wasn't locked. He pulled out the .45 and let the door swing in. There was a small pink nightlight near the baseboard at the end of. the hallway. He reached for the main light switch and then decided against it. At the entrance to the living room, he paused to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. In a moment he could see the form on the couch sitting upright.

"Godamn," he murmured when he stood in front of Nibs. The young man's head was angled back, his throat cut ear to ear. Marcus made it nearly to the other end of the hallway when he saw a pair of bare feet sticking into the hallway from a doorway. A pair of small woman's feet.

He closed his eyes; "My wife, Liz, she says I'm nuts. None of my business, she says. . .Maybe she's right, I don't know. . .1 mean, Liz, she's pregnant now. . .Maybe I was wrong saying this, but I feel better, anyhow. .

He didn't want to look, but the slow growing rage commanded him to look at the ugly work so he could remember when he had to.

His short cry was less that of a man confronting horror than of an energy released from a dark instinct. Turning, he groped almost blindly down the hallway to the front door, and he had no thoughts. Only a memory. Outside he shoved .the gun into his belt. He was afraid to hold it any longer, afraid he'd discharge it.

He sat in his car a long time and didn't want to drive. He thought of Webe in the alley, a strange rendezvous he'd gone to voluntarily and then Nibs and his little pregnant wife. They had received it in their home. And how neat, too. Now no witness to tie Lassiter to Webe, doubtless no doctored bills of lading.

And yet Marcus was certain Lassiter, although a link in the mess, was hardly the type to spearhead it; that was higher, if not the syndicate itself, something akin to it. Something so evil it spun webs of death that ensnared any man daring to

fight it—not even fight it, really. Just get in the way.

His drive to his apartment was laced with the grim hope for the blue sedan, and when he opened the door to his room he half-prayed the hulking shadows would be there. There was nothing. Of course not. They would pick their time, their place. But only if they were allowed to, if he sat back and waited and let them.

At his window he looked at the night and the neon beacons above those places where you hid from life and waited for it to happen. They, whoever they were, probably were waiting for his dull move. They had the lead and were sitting on it. In baseball that could lose you the momentum. Games and seasons were lost when momentum was lost. Seventh inning, . he thought. Now's the time to pick away at the lead.

A game. A game from hell,

IN THE morning the clouds were massed overhead, like a grey quilt. A steady drizzle was coming down. The old knitted break in Marcus' wrist ached like a bad tooth, the way it always did with rain.

Today it didn't bother him.

Dolores Devany was waiting when he picked her up. After a brief service at the funeral home they went to the

cemetery and a small canvas canopy sheltered them as the pale blue coffin sank into the hole to a minister's eulogy, Marcus was escorting Dolores back to the car when he saw the dark blue sedan parked a block away. He pulled her to an abrupt halt and she glanced at him, puzzled.

For a moment he ignored her, thinking that now only he and Dolores Devany were the possessors of any knowledge, And while she knew nothing, how were they to know? They weren't taking any chances,

Muttering an apology to Dolores,;he asked the minister to drive her home,

"I'll talk to you later," he said to her. "I wouldn't do this unless I had to."

"Something's going on, isn't it, Marcus?" she asked nervously. "And it's about what you were asking yesterday."

"I'll tell you later," he said softly but firmly.

As the minister's car pulled away, Marcus turned to see the sedan still waiting. Through the drizzle that had not slackened he could not see if anyone was in the car; but he didn't have to see.

And this time he wouldn't try to lose them. There was a slim smile on his narrow lips as he drove off.

Like nothing had happened, like Webe wasn't dead, nor Nibs and his wife, the big double rigs sat with their backs against the loading dock in the truck yard. All the way to the yard Marcus kept an eye on the rearview mirror. The sedan kept a regular distance behind. He knew they were puzzled when they realized his destination.

Marcus parked in the yard across from the platform, and the sedan stopped outside at the curb. Leaning over, he snapped open the glove compartment, removed the .45 and shoved it under his belt, concealed by his jacket.

Strolling across the pavement, he could smell the damp heat of the trucks and the sour smell of damp asphalt. He shielded his eyes from the drizzle and scanned the platform for Lassiter. The fat yard boss was not in sight.

"Hey, Yak!" someone yelled to his right. "What're you doing back?"

Marcus, glancing back, saw the two men leave the sedan and enter the yard slowly and uncertainly.

Bottom of the ninth, Marcus thought. Go ahead run's on third. Yes sir, new pitcher. Ole Yak, fifteen saves this year; eyeing his sixteenth. . .

When he opened the door to the dock office, Lassiter looked up from his desk, first surprised, then suspiciously.

"Whatdya want here?"

As he closed the door, Marcus could see through the office window the two jacketed men now at dockside. They stopped. Lassiter was glaring at him when he turned.

Marcus grinned. "Who gives the orders?"

"What's that suppose to mean?" Lassiter snapped.

"There's a man who told you to pad Webe's bills of lading."

Lassiter's face reddened. "You're full of it! Now get outta here before I call a cop!"

He was reaching for the phone when Marcus pulled out the automatic. The fat man's mouth fell open.

"Tell the two characters

outside it's okay. Everything is all right. Just like that. You don't, I blow the back of your head off."

His eyes frozen on the .45's muzzle, Lassiter stumbled around the desk to the door.

"And call them by name," Marcus said as Lassiter cracked the door.

"Willie! Kyle! Come're! It's okay!" he said into the drizzle.

Marcus could see the two men come up the steps onto the platform. Lassiter stepped back as they entered.

"Shut the door," Marcus said.

"What's going on?" the big red-headed man said in a familiar graveled voice. His partner, dark eyes, black curly hair, said nothing; like Lassiter he was interested in the artillery.

"I'm pitching now," Marcus said. He motioned for the trio to move against the far wall. "I want everybody's hands on the top of their heads. Yeah. Nice, very nice."

"You'll go up for five years for this," Lassiter said.

"Five?" Marcus smiled. "The way I figure, then, I knock off all three of you and I get life. That means in seven years I'm up for parole, right? So now the only thing keeping you three alive is my worry about two extra years in the pokey."

"Aborn—" Lassiter tried, but not so defiantly now.

"Shut up!" Marcus said. "Now one of you is gonna tell me the name. *The* name. Unless I get it, I set three of you down."

The seconds ticked off. No one said anything. Marcus, with a sign of resignation, slowly raised the .45.

Lassiter cracked.

"Dasco!" he said. "Vince Dasco!"

"Call him," Marcus said.

"You don't call him. He don't have a number."

"Dasco's no mark," the gravel voiced one said.

Marcus picked up a pencil and pad off the desk and flipped it to Lassiter.

"Write an address," he said.

After a moment's hesitation, the yard boss scribbled and tossed the pad back. Marcus ripped off the sheet and stuffed it in his jacket. At the door he surveyed the lineup of trucks. Tony Grindi's reefer was at the far end. It was a refrigerated rig for hauling perishables, in this case, sides of beef.

Marcus let the three men stand and sweat while he watched the dock wallopers load the reefer. When the doors slammed ten minutes later, Marcus stuffed the .45 into his jacket pocket, but kept his hand on it, and motioned

Lassiter and the two muscles to precede him out the door.

"Down to the end," he ordered. "No funny moves or the slug breaks your spine."

A pair of rigs were already pulling out on their routes when they reached the reefer. Marcus waited until it was clear and then hung open the latch and aimed the three men inside.

"We'll freeze!" Lassiter protested.

"Get in," Marcus said, "and no noise or I pop open the door and you join the cows." He slammed the door, secured the latch and stood by until Tony came out with his bill of lading.

"Where you heading?" Marcus asked, stepping beside the cab as Tony hopped in.

"Frisco," Tony grinned. "Eight flat-out hours I gotta rocket this baby."

"Just tool it along," Marcus said with a cordial wave.

When the truck was gone, he crossed the yard to the gate. In the blue sedan he found the over-and-under .12 gauge shot gun. Extra shells were in the glove compartment.

Later, driving across town toward the address on the paper, he tried to figure what it was these guys wanted Webe to do. Why pick on an old man? Maybe Lassiter or one of his muscles would've told him, but he wanted to hear it from number one himself—before Marcus killed him.

But when he parked outside the rambling ranch-style red-brick house where Vince Dasco lived, Marcus suspected he'd labored under a serious delusion. He'd gone along by instinct up to now. And it had worked, because he'd been dealing with characters pretty much on his own level. But staring through the drizzle at the big house he knew the league had changed; all this time he was in Triple A, if that; now it was the majors. Sure. Like Vince Dasco was a sitting duck waiting for an ex-major league pitcher to stroll in with a .45 and shot gun.

It seemed patently ridiculous, and Marcus felt a chill of futility.

His eyes scanned the grounds, trying to see a way. Then he spotted the power lines from the house to the main poles along the street. He studied the set up for several minutes before he turned the car around and parked a block down the street. With only his .45 he returned to the pole from which the power lines to Dasco's house was strung.

Ten minutes later he had gathered a dozen baseball-size rocks he found along the parkway.

The first rock sailed off,

missing the glass insulator cone on the pole by eight feet. Warming up, he thought, and after two more he was getting the feel. The fifth came within a few inches. The seventh hit it and wanged off. The eighth missed, but the ninth caused some breakage. Bits of glass drifted down with the drizzle. No curves, baby, he thought as he wound up and sent the tenth sailing.

The cone broke, the wire fell away and crackled yellow sparks as it hit Dasco's soggy lawn.

Now it was waiting time.

An hour passed before the electric company's utility van came up the street. Staggering at the curb, Marcus faked injury and the van pulled over. A straight left and the young, lanky repairman with an urge of the Samaritan crumpled to the ground.

Marcus shoved the limp form into the rear of the van, crawled in himself and in a few minutes was wearing the repairman's blue coveralls. The fit was tight but adequate. He tied the man with insulated cable and gagged him.

A FEW minutes later, Marcus' .45 in one of the coverall pockets, he parked the van at Dasco's front door. He rapped on the door several times before a heavy-set man with cropped grey hair opened up.

"Gotta check your power panel on the outage," Marcus said. "Should be in the basement."

The big man hesitated, then he nodded Marcus in.

"Cold as hell out there," Marcus said.

"Wet, too," the man said.

The hallway was long, tiled and accented with elegant fixtures; but it was dark with no lights.

Marcus followed the man and as they passed an open door he glanced in to a den to see a thin little man in a green smoking jacket standing by french windows gazing reflectively at the rain. That would be Dasco, Marcus thought. He was smaller than he imagined. Somehow he figured the man that pushed the buttons and fingered men dead would have regal stature.

The stairway leading to the basement was narrow, but there was room enough. Marcus brought his fist down across the big man's nape.

An extra rap with the .45's butt and the man would be sleeping a long time.

When Marcus entered the den, quietly shutting the door behind him, Dasco was still contemplating the rain.

"Hello, Mr. Dasco," Marcus said.

Startled, Dasco spun around. His face was gaunt, chalky, his eyes deep set. There was altogether the look of a hawk to his face. Then a slow smile crept across it.

"Some tool you electric guys use now," he said.

Marcus had to give it to him; Dasco had ice in his veins.

"But then," Dasco went on, unperturbed, "I guess you're not from the electric company. A cop? No. Not their style nowadays. The courts' put 'em out if they tried a dumb stunt like this. Let me pull one outta the hat, okay?"

"You got the floor," Marcus said.

"It's not hard. Lassiter said some ex-ballplayer was nosing around. Aborn?"

"Right."

"So you're a one-man vendetta on behalf of what's his name? Devany?"

"Add a guy named Nibs and his wife," Marcus said.

"Life's full'a losers. Never heard of them."

"Course not."

Dasco's smile had gradually gone to a grin, and there was an almost paternal look in his eyes.

"What's your play? You gonna drill me?"

"Didn't come this far to play," Marcus said, very quietly.

"Which makes you a dead man. I got friends. You shoot me and you buy time. No matter how much, you're gonna be where my friends can get to you."

Dasco's paternal look was gone, now there was only the look of things found in caves.

"And they can get to Devany's old lady. Right?" Dasco said. "Yeah, you know I'm right. One chance you and the old lady's got. You walk out and forget you ever came."

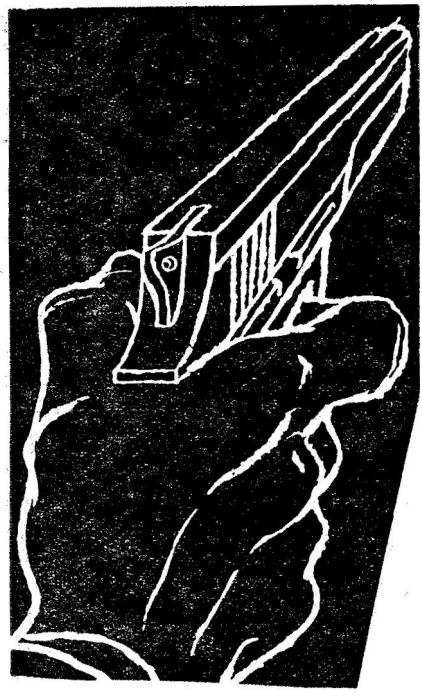
Marcus knew there was a grim truth to what Dasco was saying, and Dasco could see in Marcus' eyes that the big man understood it. Slowly DAsco removed a cigar from his jacket pocket, lit it with an ornate desk lighter and blew a casual cloud of blue smoke into the air.

"Your play's to try and disappear now," he advised expansively.

Marcus looked out the window behind Dasco at the rain, the grey, the endless smeared grey of the landscape. Then he thought of the wires lying on the ground.

"Why was Webe killed?" Marcus asked.

Dasco perched comfortably on the edge of his desk. "Devany was a stool for the cops. Lassiter didn't know that for sure, so we started the game



of screwing up his bills of lading."

Marcus stared at the hawk face for a few moments, imagining now the cops upset because Marcus was prowling around with big feet. And seeing why they were tight-lipped. And he felt bad for ever suspecting Webe of anything crooked. No, all the old man did was find something important to do at last.

"You padded his bins," Marcus said coldly. "That way you could make certain. Yeah, I see it. Get enough of 'em to show a pattern, then if he wasn't a stoolie you had another recruit in whatever lousy game you guys are playing. If he was, though, you could get him fired."

Dasco puffed at his cigar. "For a big dumb-looking character, you make up good stories. Imagination like that might fit in with my operation."

Marcus ignored that. "What happened? The goons down there catch Webe digging into records that night?"

"Holster your rod and take off," Dasco said, smiling again.

"What's the game?"

"No dice, baby."

"Let's walk," Marcus said.

"Are you still dumb?"

"Walk!"

Outside with the drizzle now a gentle rain Marcus shoved Dasco in front of him as they crossed the lawn. Dasco didn't see the live wire until he was nearly on it. He stopped and stared down at it.

"You stumbled on it looking around," Marcus said.

The little, thin man's head jerked around. "This is nuts! Nobody'd buy it!"

"If they wanted," Marcus replied grimly.

The little man tried to bolt free. Marcus grabbed him by the collar. It was like holding a flopping fish. Dasco screamed

as he was spun around and flung away. He stumbled and fell back across the wire.

Marcus watched for only a second as the body shivered atop the power which raged through it.

Then he went home.

His room was dark. He lay exhausted on his bed. He had taken a long hot bath; now he was trying to let it all fade away. His arm ached from the extra use he'd put it to and, of course, the wrist was still crying against the damp air. He had done some strange things today, some very strange things.

He was still lying there when Detective Max Brown walked in. Marcus gazed up with peculiar indifference at the small toad eyes of the man.

"Busy day for you," Brown rasped, pulling up a chair and sitting.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Trucker's are all dumb," Brown said. He sucked on a short cigarette and a look of contempt curled his face. "You know damn well what I'm talking about. Three human carcasses in a reefer truck in Frisco. A beat up electric repairman. Vince Dasco's bodyguard laid out with a brain concussion. And Dasco himself, fried on his own lawn."

"Count some others," Marcus said. "Webe Devany under six feet, and a clerk named Nibs and his wife and an unborn kid."

"So you take the law into your own hands, huh?!'

"Arrest me," Marcus said dully.

"Maybe. For cracking a repairman. But for the rest, you know damn well nobody's gonna finger you. Nobody at the truck yard saw anything, which is usual. And Dasco's man? He'll be lucky if he remembers his name, much less a joker in a jumpsuit."

Marcus sat up. "Tell me something. What was Webe trying to get for you guys or do for you?"

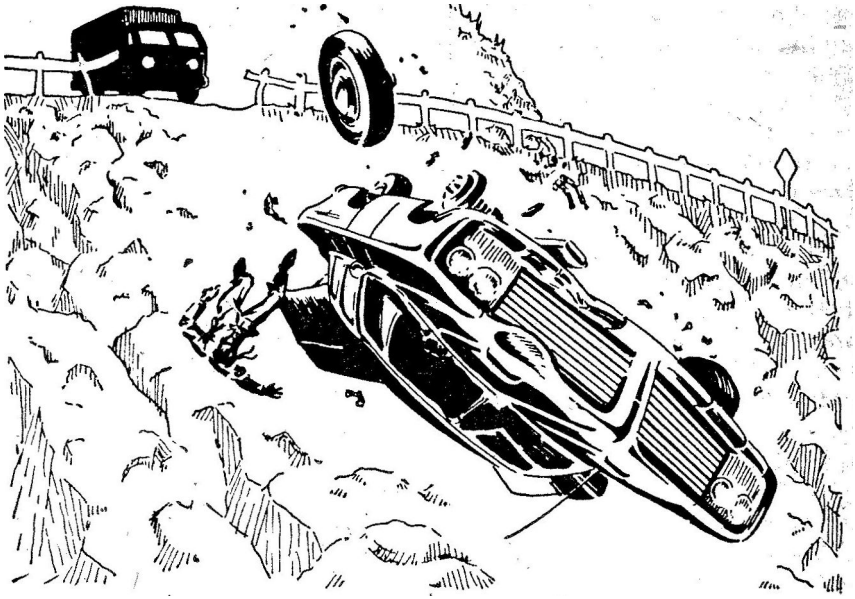
Brown said nothing for a moment, then shrugged. "Delivery schedule for heroin, cocaine, pot, pills, the whole works. From San Diego to L.A. And something to tie Dasco to the operation."

"Using regular truck runs," Marcus said slowly.

"Lassiter was cute, but Dasco was cuter. Devany never was able to get a tie-in on Dasco we could use in court."

"Dasco knew it all. He told me."

"I didn't hear that," Brown said, standing, and he let appear what might have been a smile. "And that ought to be the last thing you have to say about it."



GOING STRAIGHT

The car shot past, a crazy man at the wheel.)
Brokaw smiled. Soon—soon he would die•

**by GEORGE ANTONICH **

I DIDN'T stop shaking until we were well out of San Francisco, heading south on the Coast Highway. The pounding crash of surf to the right of the road was a lover's whisper compared to the frantic thumping of my heart. Only one thought held me together. *This was my last job.* After this nerve-shattering caper, come hell, high water I was going straight!

Beside me, driving the stolen van, Brokaw whistled cheerily, He amazed me. After each successful burglary his spirits soared, while mine sank like a bride's dumplings in a stew. My

mouth felt cotton-dry. My fingers ached to reach for the forbidden pint of bourbon in the glove compartment, but I didn't dare. The mere mention of alcohol was enough to shatter Brokaw's happy mood and turn him into a raging brute. Since he was carrying two hundred and forty solid pounds on his six-four frame, I was not about to tempt instant mayhem for one calming drink. Instead, grimly, I gritted my teeth and tried my damndest to relax.

The whistling stopped abruptly and Brokaw's intense green eyes were on me.

"Feeling better?" he asked. When I nodded, afraid to trust my voice, he said, "It was a piece of cake, Kidd. A breeze. I can't understand why you want to quit. We make one hell of a team!"

"Some team," I said, my voice coming out falsetto. "After every job I'm ready for shock treatment."

"That's what makes you so good. That gushing adrenalin keeps you on your toes."

I shook my head. "Let's face it, Broke, I was just not cut out to be a thief."

Still in high good humor, he laughed. "What else could you do? You've put six of the last ten years in stir."

"I know," I said. "Sometimes I wish I was back in the joint."

"Are you out of your skull?"

"Life was so peaceful in there, Broke. Three square meals a day, library privileges, a chance to study and make something of myself. This free-life is making a wreck out of me."

"On the level," Brokaw said. "What are you going to do?"

"You won't laugh?"

"I promise."

"I'm going to write a book. I figure with all the time I've spent behind bars, and all the weirdos I've met, it would be a natural." I stopped, waiting for the guffaw I expected. When it didn't come, I said, "Well, aren't you going to give me the old horse laugh?"

"Naw," he said. "Hell's bells, I had ambitions once myself. There were scouts from most of the pro teams romancing me when I played tackle at Fresno State. My future looked bright, rosy and prosperous, until—" He broke off, shifting heavy shoulders angrily under his jacket. "Yeah, Kidd, I had it made, until that drunken s.o.b. ran into me."

He fell into a thick, morose silence. I was glad. I'd heard the story before, many times. How a drunk, hit-run driver had crashed into his car. How he'd

spent almost a year in the hospital. How his right knee had never been the same. How his career as a pro had been nipped in the bud. I'd heard it all. And after each telling, Brokaw just had to take his hate out on something—or somebody.

To keep his mind off his festering anger, I said, "Have you got it all straight, Broke? I mean, do you remember our plan?"

"Sure," he growled, his good humor completely gone. "I drop you off in Salinas. I go on to L.A. to fence the loot and ditch the van. Then I send your share to Salinas. Right?"

"Right on," I agreed. "How about you?—What are your plans?"

He shrugged. "I'll lay low in Fresno for a while, visit some relatives and old girl friends. But I'll be working on a king-size caper to put me on easy street." He looked at me hopefully. "If I come up with a fat one, do you want in?"

I shook my head emphatically. "No way! I'm going straight."

"You really mean it, don't you?"

"So help me," I vowed. "I'm going to get started on my book, no matter what. Unless," I added, tapping superstitiously on my head, "unless lightning should strike me down first."

The lightning struck much sooner than I would have liked. And when it did, it came and was over in a short, disasterous time.

It struck in the form of a late model hard-top. Brokaw was easing the heavily loaded van around a sweeping upgrade curve when it passed, its horn blasting. Brokaw cursed savagely. I didn't blame him. The driver couldn't possibly see if another car was coming from the opposite direction. If there was one, they would have to meet head-on—

POW! Screeching obscenely, Brokaw hit the brakes and pulled toward the side of the road.

"Not too far," I yelled. "There's one hell of a drop straight down on this side!"

Luckily, there was no oncoming car. The hard-top shot by and lurched back into the right lane. It streaked along the smooth, straight stretch of road leaving the cumbersome van behind in the murky darkness.

"Oh, that damn crazy drunk!" Brokaw shouted. He cursed again, changed gears and drove the gas pedal half through the floorboards. He was fuming now, raging to catch the hard-top, to take his hate out

on the man who was driving. But the speeding car was only a pair of faintly glowing taillights in the distance.

"For God's sake," I pleaded, "slow down, Broke. We're almost at the summit. From here on down, this road is crookeder than we are!"

"How well do you know this section?"

"Like the back of my hand. It's treacherous."

"Is there a service station ahead, a phone booth?"

"No stations until Pacifica," I told him. "But there is an observation pullout ahead, near Devil's Slide. There's a phone booth there." I was about to ask why he wanted a phone when it dawned on me. Incredulous, I said, "Broke, you can't mean that you're going to turn him in?"

"Your damned betcha I am. I know the make and model, and I got the last three numbers of his license."

"But you can't do that."

"Like hell I can't. He's either drunk or crazy, or both. He's a menace that's gotta be stopped."

I tried to keep my voice calm.

"You just can't do that," I repeated. "Broke, buddy, we can't afford to get involved. We've got ourselves a stolen van overloaded with refrigerators and TV sets. What do we say when the cops start to question us? Do you want to blow the whole caper for one lousy drunk driver?"

I shouldn't have asked. Brokaw stomped harder on the gas pedal. The van was picking up speed when we reached the summit. He changed gears smoothly and urged the truck forward, beating on the steering wheel like some maniacal jockey run amuck.

I looked out the side window—and wished I hadn't. There was a sheer, murderous drop to the rocky beach below. I closed my eyes. I tried to make myself think about the good life ahead of me if I managed to survive this crazy, far-out ride. A cozy pad of my own. An electric typewriter. A novel that would instantly hit the best-seller lists. Maybe even a sloe-eyed little beauty to help me around the place. All my dreams come true.

Two minutes later we rounded the curve approaching Devil's Slide. Ahead of us in the headlights' glare we saw the hard-top. Brokaw let out a baying howl of victory.

"There it is," he screamed. "That's his car. I've got the drunken s.o.b. now!"

He changed gears and slowed the van. The observation pullout was a shambles. The

soft dirt looked freshly plowed where the hard-top had skidded broadside. The pay phone booth and telescope had both been knocked over. The hard-top, its lights still on, had ploughed head-on through the guard rail and stopped. It hung there now, balanced precariously over the edge of the cliff. A hearty sneeze would have sent it toppling over.

Brokaw eased the van to a stop inches away from the car's rear bumper. He opened his door and started to get out. I grabbed his huge arm. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to beat some sense into his drunken hide!"

I looked through the windshield into the car ahead. The driver was slumped over the steering wheel, unmoving.

"It looks like he's been hurt enough already," I pointed out.

"He's probably just passed out, the drunken swine!"

I clung to his arm. "Broke, let's just move on. He can't get out of there without help. Let some other passerby report it. The cops will see to it he gets punished."

He let out a short, nasty laugh. "Punished? He'll probably sober up before he's found. Then he'll blame some other driver for forcing him off the road."

"Broke," I pleaded, "let's go. He's not worth dirtying your hands on."

He pondered the point for a long moment, then settled back in the driver's seat. He slammed the door shut. "Maybe you're right, Kidd. Why should I dirty my hands on him?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Now you're using your head. Let's cut out before a Highway Patrol car comes by."

Brokaw kicked the engine to life. He gunned the motor. Then he did something that made my stomach crawl. He shifted into low gear instead of reverse. When he looked over at me his rugged face screwed up in a smile that was downright obscene.

He said,, "Maybe you'd better close your eyes."

"Wha-what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill him," he said. "I'm going to kill him because he could be the one who fouled me up."

I felt panic race through my body. "You must be out of your mind. You can't kill him just because he *might* be."

"Like hell I can't."

And he did.

He let the clutch out slowly and eased the hard-top over the cliff. I heard the sickening crunch as it hit an outcropping of rock on the way down. Then there were a series of splashes as

the broken pieces plunged into the surf below.

Neither of us said a word all the way to Salinas. Brokaw stared at the road ahead, a fixed smile on his face, lost in the sheer joy of his dubious victory. As for me, I dared not open my mouth for fear of throwing up. In Salinas, our good-byes were brief. He said he'd send my share of the take in a few days. I said take care of yourself, and got myself a hotel room. But I had a bad night of it. I didn't sleep a wink. I kept hearing that sickening crunching sound.

I got up early the next morning and went down to the lobby for a San Francisco paper. There was no mention of the murder. I spent a miserable day wondering what to do. Go to the police? Would they believe that I had nothing to do with it? No! Just being with Brokaw in the process of committing a felony, the burglary, made me equally guilty in the eyes of the law. Should I run away, or stay and sweat it out? I decided to stay.

The next morning the item was on the second page. It stated that the body of B. W. Grodin, well known spokesman for the Bay Area Temperance League, had been recovered after a two hundred foot plunge down Devil's Slide. The California Highway Patrol said Grodin's car was traveling south on Highway 1 when it swerved through a guard rail and sailed over the sheer cliff. A rescue unit from the Pacifica Fire Department had brought the victim's body up to the highway. An autopsy revealed that Grodin had not died as a result of the crash, but had apparently suffered a fatal heart attack while at the wheel. He was, the police reported, dead before his car hit the guard rail. Grodin's widow stated that her husband, who had a history of coronary ailments, was on his way to Bakersfield to lecture on the evils of hard liquor.

I read the article twice, then a third time before the full impact of it hit me. Grodin hadn't been drunk at all, but was having a seizure when he first passed us. And Brokaw hadn't murdered him. We were both in the clear! I was anxious to get in touch with Broke, to tell him the good news. But he would be in L.A. for a few days. It would be better if I waited until he sent my share of the take, then I would write to his Fresno address.

The next week was one of the happiest of my life. I took my time choosing just the right apartment, buying an electric typewriter, stocking up on food and liquor, getting ready to settle down and start my book.

By the time I'd made all my purchases my ready cash was at a dangerous low. But the money from Brokaw would see me through nicely. At first I went to the General Delivery window of the Post Office once a day. After a long month went by I was practically living there. But still no word from Brokaw—and no money.

Two months after settling in Salinas, almost broke, I ran into Jojo Bragoshian, a buddy of Brokaw's from Fresno. When I asked about my ex-partner in crime, Jojo warned me, "Stay out of his way, Kidd. He's really sore at you."

"Sore at me? But why?"

"He told me all about your last caper," Jojo went on. "Broke found the bottle of whiskey you had in the glove compartment and blew his stack. He says you could have fouled up the whole deal and he does .not intend to send you your cut. He says it will teach you a lesson."

I couldn't believe my ears. After what he'd pulled with the late B. W. Grodin, the pint of bourbon seemed insignificant. Remembering Grodin, the germ of an idea gnawed at me. I said to Jojo, "Did Broke tell you what happened that night on the Coast Highway?"

Jojo laughed. "You mean the drunk driver bit? Yeah, Broke still gets his kicks about that one."

My plot began to hatch. If Brokaw still got his kicks it meant he still believed he'd killed Grodin. Evidentally his home town paper had not carried the item concerning the death, or Brokaw had not read it. I asked-Jojo if he was going back to Fresno soon.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Soon as I drop off a load of hot rugs I brought up here. Why?"

I fixed him a tall drink. "Just relax for a few minutes, Jojo. I want you to deliver a letter for me."

I got out my new electric typewriter. After all, hadn't I planned all along to go straight with the proceeds from it? I wrote a short, to-the-point letter to Brokaw. I told him the fuzz was investigating the brutal murder of Grodin, the driver whose car he'd edged over the cliff. For my silence concerning his part in that affair, I wanted—no, I demanded—not only my full share of our mutual burglary, but his share as well. I knew, I pointed out, that I, too, was involved. But I was prepared to go back to stir if necessary. Since the death penalty had been abolished in California, what did I have to lose? As a matter of fact, I explained, the high cost of going straight was almost more

than I could cope with. Actually, my old cell would be a welcome relief.

One week later I received a certified check for $5000 from Brokaw. In the envelope with it was a short note casting certain vulgar asperations on my parentage. I shrugged off the insult and laughed all the way to the bank.

Less than a month later my laughter stopped. Jojo Bragoshian, in town with a load of hot tapestries, dropped by my pad. "Get out of town," he advised. "Or, better yet, get out of the country altogether."

"What are you talking about? I'm already into the third chapter of my book. I've got it made."

"Go," he said. "Run. Flee. Brokaw plans to come up here to tear you into little pieces for fleecing him."

In my mind's eye I could picture Brokaw, all two hundred and forty pounds of him, lashing out at me. It was not a pleasant vision. "Just what," I asked Jojo, "has he got up his nose?"

"You know how he feels about liquor?"

I nodded.

"He joined the Fresno chapter of the Temperance League," Jojo told me. "At a meeting last week, a Mrs. B. W. Grodin made a speech."

The flesh along the back of my neck began to itch. "Grodin's widow?" I gasped.

"The same," Jojo verified. "It was a kind of eulogy to her late husband. She told all about his life—and his death. Brokaw got the full picture. He swore, if he has to follow you to the ends of the earth, to take care of you."

Within the hour I was on a Greyhound en route to San Francisco. But, even as we approached the downtown terminal, I knew it was no good. There was no place for me to hide. Brokaw would follow me. Once the big man made up his mind to do something, especially to a liquor-swilling swine like me, nothing would stop him. I got off the bus with all the good humor of a man stepping into the gas chamber.

The gas chamber. Oh, how wonderful an instrument is the human brain! Thoughts of the chamber reminded me of San Quentin. San Quentin in turn reminded me of my former cell. It was the one place in the entire world where Brokaw was not likely to follow me. What did I have to lose? Eighteen months, a year or two at most. Being inside would give me a chance to finish my book. And it would give Brokaw time enough to cool down, to lose his murderous impulses.

Sitting in the nearest bar, I gave the idea further study. Once inside I would have three square meals a day, all the library reference books at my disposal, and the safety of my cell. When my time was up I could come out with a clean record. With the proceeds from my book I could begin to go straight!

My mind made up, I tossed down a double bourbon, squared my shoulders, and took a cab to the Kearney street police station. In clear, concise fashion I confessed to the burglary of the appliance warehouse three months before. My account of the caper left no doubt in the minds of the police. I gave them information only they and the guilty parties could possibly know. I omitted only one small detail, the name of my accomplice. I flatly refused to name Brokaw.

The big, red-faced detective named Hughes shook his head.

"Such loyalty," he observed, "is very touching."

"It's a kind of a code with us criminals," I said. "Besides, I have my own reasons for not wanting my partner involved."

"You must be very fond of him," Hughes commented.

"Not really," I said. "Actually, I hate his guts."

"Funny you should say that," said Hughes, grinning.

"Funny? Why funny?"

"Those are precisely the same words Brokaw used when he refused to name you as his accomplice not two hours ago."

My mouth fell open.

"You-you've got Brokaw in custody?"

Hughes shook his head. "Not us. The Fresno police. The L. A. cops busted your fence. He named Brokaw. But Brokaw refused to name you. He did mention that he hated your guts, but he wouldn't put the finger on you. When I talked to him on the phone, he said he'd take care of you in his own way."

The world was falling down on my head. "You mean, if I hadn't walked in here and confessed I'd be in the clear?"

Hughes nodded. "We had no idea who you were." He picked up the confession I'd just signed and chuckled. "Who knows," he said, "you two being such close friends, you might even get to be cellmates in San Quentin."

I groaned.

"Considering my luck," I said dismally, "I'd almost make book on it!"

Well, I've made up my mind. There's only one thing I can do. When I get to Quentin, I'm really going to go straight—straight to the warden; to ask for a transfer!

She was all I had. the only girl—and she was locked in another man's arms. Luckily I am a very good shot. . .

THE INNOCENT ONE

by LAWRENCE TREAT

EVER SINCE I can remember, I've had a dream.

Make fifty or a hundred grand. Send it over to a Swiss bank to avoid taxes. Double it at Monte Carlo, where I have a system. Then triple it at a certain casino where I know somebody. And live on the proceeds for the rest of my life.

Security; that's what I've always been after.

This is the story of how I got it, with Minnie.

The first time I saw her was in the J.C. Berger furniture department. She was sitting at a gate-leg table. She had a paper napkin and a couple of sandwiches spread out in front of her, and she was eating lunch. She had blue eyes, soft, ripply hair, and there was a serenity about her, like an invisible halo. I knew immediately she was the girl for me and I could see it in her eyes.

Still, I'm a cautious man. There had been Karen, who had flopped and almost dragged me down with her. It had taken all my talents to persuade her to plead guilty and not drag me into it. She'd gotten five years, but that was out in California and so, naturally, I'd left the state.

Then there'd been Barbara. We'd started off nicely and we'd taken that Florida real estate man for ten grand. Then I'd found out she was on drugs, and I'd paid her off to get rid of her. Because in my line of business, you can't play around with dope. It leaves you too

vulnerable, and so I was looking for somebody.

At the time that I saw Minnie, I'd been wandering around the big department store. I don't go in for petit larceny, but these were hard times and I was down to my last shoe lace. I was hoping to pick up a few dollars' worth of merchandise that I could cash in for a hamburger and a cup of coffee. So I wandered, picking up stuff and examining it, and then putting it down. Because the store dick had spotted me and was tailing me. But the way I was leading him along, he must have gone crazy.

After a while I got tired of

playing games with him, and besides, I was hungry. I decided to go into the employees' locker room in the hope of finding an unattended lunch box. It was merely a matter of walking through a door labeled "Employees Only." But I had to shake loose from that store detective, so I went up to the furniture department. He wasn't going to worry about my walking off with a couch or two. And that was how I happened to see Minnie.

I had her tagged right off. Ever try to get hold of a furniture salesman in one of those big stores? You go around looking, and by and by you find a couple of clerks huddled together in a corner and analyzing the stock market, and you ask one of them to wait on you.

They look at you as if you were crazy, then they tell you to wait a minute, they'll be right with you. If you wait around for a half hour or so, they'll probably condescend to tell you they're about to go off duty.

Under the circumstances I had her spotted. She'd simply walked in here, sat down at a table and was eating her lunch. So I made like a furniture clerk and walked over to her, and she merely glanced up and said, calmly and matter-of-fact, "Sit down, won't you? There are plenty of chairs."

I took a comfortable one and said, "You know that this isn't allowed, don't you?"

She nodded. "I suppose so. Would you like a sandwich?"

I reached out for one, and from the way I devoured it, she must have realized I was no clerk. Which made me admire her all the more, for, when she'd taken me for an employee, she hadn't even been flustered. She'd merely glanced at me and suggested that I take a seat. Now that she saw her mistake, she didn't bother apologizing or trying to cover up. Which made her the kind of girl I'd been looking for.

Nevertheless I didn't go overboard. I munched on that sandwich and asked her her name. She said it was Minnie. I told her I was J. Sanford Green—J. for Jimmy—and that I was in the city for a few days and was stopping at the Waldorf. I invited her for dinner that evening and suggested the *Grand Bourgogne,* which is posh and expensive. I said I'd make a reservation and that the head waiter knew me.

"Just ask for my table," I said. "Eight o'clock."

I was waiting for her when she arrived. She was wearing the same outfit that she'd had on at noon, and I decided these were

probably the only clothes she owned. The way she walked in and the way the head waiter bowed and ushered her over to my table left me with nothing but admiration.

She ordered the most expensive dish, and I selected a good wine. We talked easily and told each other all about ourselves. I believed nothing she said, and I sensed that she returned the compliment, although neither of us let on. That came later.

Mentally I added up the bill, which amounted to around eighty dollars. I had a few credit cards with me under various names, but I had no intention of using any of them. I wanted to test Minnie under fire and see hqw she shaped up.

Over the coffee, I told her I had to make a phone call and I'd be right back. On my way out I borrowed a dime from the maitre d'hotel.

"For the meter," I said. "I parked down the block."

Outside, I waited within sight of the *Grand Bourgogne*. If the police came, I'd know I was mistaken about Minnie and that she wasn't for me. But the police didn't come. Instead, after about fifteen minutes Minnie stepped out, saw me standing at the corner and walked straight towards me. I was a little afraid she'd be angry, but on the contrary she took my little ploy in good humor.

"I wanted to thank you for a wonderful dinner," she said calmly.

I burst out laughing.

"Minnie, I said, "tell me how you managed to get out of the place. Didn't they try to stop you?"

"Of course not," she said. "Why would they, when I said I'd be back?"

Talent? It oozed all over her. An eighty dollar tab, and she simply walked out on it. She was a gem, a find, a miracle. People believed her.

A week later our partnership made its first coup. We pulled it off in a camera shop that was having its annual sale. I'd picked it because I figured there'd be a crowd, and in a crowd things are easier. I wanted to bring Minnie along slowly and build up her know-how until she was ready for the big one.

We went into the store separately, but we headed for the same counter. I was only a few feet away from her when she whirled suddenly and screamed at the man who happened to be standing next to her.

"Take your hands off me!" she yelled. "If you do that again I'll have you arrested!" Then she swung around and

turned her full fury on the clerk. "Where's the manager? Maybe he can stop this kind of thing, it seems that you can't. And in a store like this—"

In the confusion I picked up a couple of cameras and slipped off into the crowd. I already had one of the store bags. I put the cameras in it, attached what looked like a sales receipt and stapled it to the bag, which I showed to the guard as I left.

"Seems to have been sort of trouble inside," I remarked. "What happened?"

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I just check things here at the door."

The camera shop wasn't much more than a dress rehearsal. We hit a couple of jewelry stores, where I managed a fair haul when Minnie fainted. Our next job was pure artistry. It involved my walking out of a fur shop with a white mink coat on my arm, while Minnie threw a fit of hysterics that - sent everybody in the store scurrying around for smelling salts and glasses of water and the nearest doctor.

We met a few hours later.

"That was fun," she said. "They took me to the hospital in a taxi, to make sure I was all right. They were really sweet to me. What did you get?"

I showed her the coat. "Retails for around ten grand."

Minnie stroked it admiringly.

"You took only one of them?" she said.

That's Minnie for you; high standards, idealistic and insisting on the best.

In the course of the next few weeks we built up our cash assets to a fair amount. With a solid financial stake and a genuine bank account and with Minnie to help, I was ready for the killing that I'd planned all my life.

Minnie and I, registering as brother and sister, would show up at one of the expensive resort hotels. I'd pose as an eccentric genius who had developed a non-polluting plastic and needed a hundred thousand to put it over. It would be up to Minnie to convince the mark that this was a good investment.

I had everything set up; my references, my lab credentials, my bank account. The stock certificates which were to bring in the hundred thousand were numbered and engraved. I had the chemical lingo down pat and I even had a kind of sample to show, which I could pretend I'd worked up by myself.

Once. Minnie had gotten the sucker to put up his money, we'd be off to Europe. And with no worries, either. He'd be too embarrassed to accuse us, because no business man of

standing could afford to admit that he'd been taken. We might even rack up an extra dividend for a promise not to show him up. In any case we'd be there in Switzerland, with a few Alps and a lot of dollars.

Obviously, the only risk was that Minnie would end up marrying the sucker for his dough and leaving me out in the cold. It was a minimal risk, since I could show Minnie up as my partner and a girl with a record. Nine months in the penitentiary of a western state, and out on a parole that she'd broken a few months ago. I could queer her any time I wanted to. I had her hooked, and she knew it. But more than that, the con game was in her blood, same as mine.

I explained the scheme to her, and in her quiet way she approved of it.

"I'd better get the right wardrobe," she said. "And the name Minnie lacks class. From now on, I'm Minerva."

We arrived at the Blue Clay Inn without fanfare, and Minnie—excuse me, Minerva—made her first appearance at the cocktail hour on the broad, glass-enclosed veranda. She swept in like Swedish royalty, sure of herself and scarcely aware of the attention she was attracting. I was plenty aware, and as soon as we sat down, I told her.

"Him," I said. "The guy in the green madras sport jacket. Over there on the right-hand side, sitting by himself and looking lonesome."

"I noticed him, too," she said. "However, let's wait until after dinner before making contact."

"At least until then," I said. "I want to check up on him."

A ten dollar bill to a desk clerk can get you a lot of information, and the clerk seemed to be well posted. Our sucker's name was Tobias Frothingham, and he'd reserved a room about a month ago.

"Prominent San Francisco family," the clerk said. "He's been here a couple of times before, each time with a different wife, but they tell me he's cured. The average wife costs him about a half million, so how many can you afford at a price like that?"

"How many has he had?" I asked.

The clerk shrugged. "Just the two that I saw. It's been a full year since his last visit, but this is the first time he's been here alone."

"Interesting," I said, lighting my pipe. I hate pipes but Minerva claimed it helped me look my part.

I struck up a conversation

with Frothingham that evening. We discussed the weather, the hotel golf course and the advantages of coming to a place like this, where you met the kind of people you could make friends with.

"I'm told they screen every guest," he said. "Finances, social background, things like that. Makes the place almost like a club."

"That's why I came here," I said, wondering who'd handed him the line about exclusiveness.

After a suitable interval, I introduced myself by the name I was using.

"I'm Jim Gilly," I said.

He shook hands.

"Call me Froth," he said. Aid then, blushing, he added, "My full name is Tobias Frothingham, but—" and he blushed even deeper.

"I guess I'm lucky to have a good, short name," I said.

He agreed. Then, a little self-consciously, he said he was going over to the casino to try his luck, and would I like to come along. I said I was waiting for my sister and that she disapproved of gambling. As in fact she did.

"Jim," she said to me once, "your Monte Carlo idea is bad. All gambling is bad, because it's crooked. You have to be in on it, but then it's not gambling, is it?"

I couldn't dispute her on that one.

Froth and I got to discussing roulette, concerning which he seemed to know nothing except that you needed money to indulge in it.

"I don't mind dropping a few thousand," he said, "because there's always the chance that I might win." Then he grinned sheepishly. "Although I'll admit it hasn't happened yet."

"Maybe I can help you a little, I said. But he wasn't listening to me; he'd seen Minerva.

Merely to say that he fell for her is an understatment. He dropped like a paving stone dumped into a puddle; he hit bottom right off, and he stayed put. For her part she gave him the quiet, innocent look that fools practically everybody. They feel sorry for her and want to ease her lot in this hard and hostile world.

I let Froth moon over her for a half hour or so, and then I gave her the high sign—enough for the evening, time to go. And back in our room we compared notes and talked over the best approach to use.

Minerva's job was cut out for her. I asked her to pump Froth on his hobbies, his background

and his connections in the business and political worlds. Besides that, she had to build up my image as the kind of person whom people trust.

Since Froth was no moron, he'd probably investigate me, and I went to work solidifying the character of one James Gilly. In my role of chemist and inventor, I needed business cards and a couple of companies to state that I'd worked for them and that my abilities were outstanding.

I'd had the business cards printed long ago. I kept a collection of them under various names, in case of need. At the moment, I had a four thousand dollar bank account. As for the business references, I pay the phone company on an annual basis for listing the names of a couple of non-existent firms.

It was pretty much my usual method. A couple of days before I expected the mark to call, I had somebody manning the phones and ready to say, "Whom do you wish to speak to? Our credit department?" Then, in a different voice he'd say, "Credit department, Danforth speaking." And in answer to the big question he'd give me an A-1, hundred per cent, flawless reference.

Finally, I had the phone number of a national credit agency that works on a computer system. You dial the number, ask your question and get your answer promptly. With my basic information I called Frothingham's bank, his accountants and his attorneys. I found out that his income came from a family trust of around ten million. Although he couldn't touch the capital, he got most of the income, and his bank account averaged between one and two hundred grand.

Both Minerva and I worked hard for a couple of days. She spent most of her time with him, whereas I saw him casually, in places like the bar or the hotel pool, where I found him lounging in a deck chair and. studying the bikinis—or what was underneath them.

"Not going in for a dip?" I said.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm not much of a swimmer."

I remembered that remark.

Eventually Froth himself brought up the subject of my non-polluting plastic. I reached in high gear. I spouted the jargon and made it as complicated and convincing as I could. I gave the impression that, once I'd perfected a process, I lost interest in it.

Froth looked surprised, but Minerva goaded me on and told me to describe some of my

other inventions. I came up with a few beauties, like a self-igniting charcoal that gave off no fumes and could be burnt indoors. Or a solid rubber tire that had the elasticity of air when injected with S-18 isopetrine. I made the word up as I went along and Froth listened spellbound, although I was aware that the real spell was cast by that choice bit of femininity called Minerva.

By the third day we were ready to go, but I'm no ordinary operator. Anybody can line up a sucker, impress him with a lot of gobbledygook, handcuff him with a beautiful gal and then make the big play for his money. But I figure the odds are still no better than fifty-fifty, because there are dozens of unknowns.

Suppose, for instance, he has a hard-headed financial adviser or that his money is tied up in some legal hocus-pocus. Suppose a friend or a relative shows up and spoils the whole game. Suppose—suppose. . .

So I don't take chances, even when everything looks bright. I want my suckers to come begging, to feel obligated to fork over even if they suspect they're being taken. For no man parts easily with a hundred thousand.

Did you ever ask a landlubber if he'd like to go sailing, in a real sail boat? The less he knows about it, the brighter his eyes and the greater his excitement. Froth jumped at the invitation and he went around laughing and saying, "Ahoy! Starboard tack—luff the sheet—raise the spinnaker and furl the taffrail!" He laughed like a kid about to go to his first circus, and Minerva laughed along with him and corrected some of his lingo.

The following afternoon, which I figured would be a squally one, I rented a sloop. We set off with a quart of gin, a bottle of vermouth and a bucket of ice. I stowed Froth in the cockpit, cast off my lines and headed straight out towards the center of the lake. I had a quartering wind and, although it wasn't particularly brisk, we skipped along nicely.

I told Minerva to mix us some martinis. Froth gulped his, Minerva sipped hers, and I dumped mine overboard when Froth wasn't looking. I needed a clear head and fast reactions.

It took him two cocktails before he got around to saying what we'd been leading up to.

"Jimmy," he said, "I've been thinking about that plastic of yours. Have you tried to market it?"

"I'm a chemist," I said, "not a business man."

"But I am, and I want to

invest in it. I'd set up a corporation to develop it."

"I set one up long ago," I said. "My lawyer saw to that. Anything I develop, I patent in the name of J. Gilly, Inc. Maybe in my old age I'll do something about it."

"Why wait?" Froth said. "Think of all the money you can make right now."

"Why think of money, where here we are on the bright blue waters of a beautiful lake?"

"Don't you want money?"

"Not particularly. Minerva and I managed to get along, we're happy."

That threw him. Probably for the first time in his life he'd heard somebody say he didn't particularly care about money. After a minute or so, Froth tried another tack.

"Jimmy, think of all the good you can do for the world. No more plastic pollutants, no more of that junk all over the place. I'm told it takes a thousand years to destroy a piece of plastic. Don't you want to make the world beautiful?"

"Sure," I said, "but not with X-emithysoline. I don't want to solve the problems of the world by a kind of magic. Presto-change-o, and everybody can throw away their junk? Oh, no. That would make things worse than ever."

"How? How could it possibly make things worse?"

"Because people have to think non-pollution, they have to work at it. If you hand them their solution as a gift, it's an invitation to keep on messing things up. They'll figure they can go ahead and pollute, and somebody will always come along and invent something to make things all right again. X-emithysoline wouldn't do the world any good at all. In fact, the net result would be harm."

"You and your ideals!" Froth said. "Minerva, let's have another drink.

"Good idea," I said, "but better watch yourself and not have too many. Boats are tricky things, so make sure you have your balance and can stand straight."

He let out a roar of laughter. "On just a couple of martinis?" he said. "Want me to stand on one leg, or two?"

I was watching the wind carefully.

"Try it on two," I said mildly.

He stood up and I swung the tiller hard, to come around. I figured the boom would hit him on the chest and knock him right overboard. He might crack a rib, but that would be the worst that should happen to him. Once he was in the water, I'd dive in and rescue him. I'd

save his life and earn his eternal gratitude, and Minerva would tell him tactfully how he could repay the debt, A hundred thousand, in a personal check to James Gilly, to finance his next invention.

Clever? You bet I am. I had everything figured out except one possibility. Minerva. She knew nothing about sailing, and she stood up at the same time as Froth. She went overboard, at the exact moment when my squall hit us.

I don't mind admitting that I was stunned. Froth a non-swimmer, the boat heeling over, Minerva maybe knocked out and thrashing around helplessly. For maybe a second I was paralyzed, but within that second, Froth dived overboard. He could barely swim, but he grabbed a life preserver and jumped. And he saved her! It was spectacular.

I was furious, but I couldn't show it. I had to thank Froth. I had to tell him how brave and fast-thinking he was, and that I was in his eternal debt for having saved my sister's life.

Sister! I almost choked over the words, while Minerva gazed up at us with stars in her eyes and an angelic smile on her lips.

"Both of you," she murmured. "You were both wonderful!"

When we were alone in our room, I let her have it. "Minnie," I said angrily, "you queered the whole damn thing. What in hell made you stand up when I was coming around?"

"Coming around?" she said, uncomprehending.

"On the other tack. Letting the boom swing. Didn't you realize what I was doing?"

"Oh," she said. "You mean you did it on purpose?"

That was about all I could take from her, and I could have throttled her, But instead, I stormed out of the room and out to the corridor, where I saw Froth coming towards me.

"Just wanted to see how Minerva's getting along," he said.

Repressing my rage, I took him by the arm and turned him around.

"She's fine," I said. "Froth, come down to the bar with me. There's something I want to say to you."

The idea hit me like thunder. You think you're losing a sucker like Froth, you think you're all washed up and that your whole scheme is falling apart, and then you look at that trusting, insipid face, and your self-confidence zooms up like a rocket, and you're your good own reliable self.

In the bar, I came out with my brainstorm.

"Froth," I said quietly,

"there's only one way I can thank you for what you did this afternoon."

"I don't want gratitude," he said.

"Nonsense! You wanted to invest in my X-emithysoline, and I refused, but after this afternoon I'd give it to you. The only hitch is that the patent's in the name of the J. Gilly Corporation. So I'm going to do the next best thing—give you stock for your investment, enough to control the company and the entire operation."

"Why, Jimmy!" he said. Gratitude? He was so choked up he could hardly talk.

Minerva and I worked out the details that night. We set the scheme up in the orthodox way that you handle any sucker—you put up some of your own money to show your good faith. We decided that the following afternoon Minerva would go to the bank with Froth. She'd have our check for four thousand, and a perfectly good one, and he'd bring his check for a hundred thousand. We'd explain that he'd have to wait a few days for the stock certificates, that they had to be countersigned.

Meanwhile, once the checks were deposited to the account of J. Gilly, Inc., I'd draw out the entire amount, pay it over to a Swiss bank, and we'd be off to Europe. Since the checks were genuine, they'd be cleared, and as soon as that happened, I'd take out my money in cash, and Minerva and I would be sitting pretty.

At two o'clock the following afternoon she and Froth started out on their errand. I figured she'd be back around three or so. When she didn't show up, I assumed she'd stopped off somewhere with Froth. By four, however, I began to worry. Minerva is no dope, and if she could get her hands on the whole sum, she'd do it. She'd be off and away, probably with Froth. And as for her parole violation, Froth and his millions could take care of that.

At five o'clock I was pretty sure I'd been doublecrossed, and I started looking. I checked at the desk, and then I covered the taxi line and found out that nobody had taken either Froth or Minerva to the station or the airport or anywhere else.

By six I no longer had doubts, and I went up to my room and got the thirty-eight revolver that I take with me in case of emergency.

I was raging mad. Me, James Green Washburn Sayville Gilly, tricked and outsmarted by some slut I'd found eating sandwiches in a furniture store. I'd trained her, taught her,

educated her, and now she walks out on me! I had a lot more than money at stake. I wasn't worried about being left here with no prospects and a whacking hotel bill to pay. It was much more than that. My very self-respect was in issue.

I found them at dusk, at the water's edge. Silhouetted in the dim light, they were locked in a passionate embrace. I felt the blood pounding in my temples and I raised my gun. I took careful aim and waited until she leaned back and their heads were separate and distinct objects. Then I fired. I'm a good shot, and I didn't miss.

Minnie must have realized immediately that I'd done the shooting, and she turned around and saw me. I waited for her to reach me, and for the first time since I'd known her, I saw a genuine emotion in her face.

"Jimmy, you fool!" she screamed. "That wasn't Froth. Froth was a con man. I realized it when we got to the bank and he wanted to cash our check. He had all kinds of reasons, but they were all phony and I saw through them, so he finally admitted who he was. A con man named Roth. He picked the name of Frothingham, bribed the desk clerk to vouch for him, and went looking for somebody. And he found us."

"But I just saw you, the guy you were with—"

"David Ensworth, and he was for real. He was perfect. He was loaded, he was a mark if there ever was one. I met him this afternoon at the bank and I watched him draw a thousand dollars, just like that. Everybody treated him with respect and called him Mr. Ensworth, so I smiled at him and he spoke to me and—and now he's dead!"

Our four grand went to my lawyers, for all the good it did. As for Minerva, she's Minnie again and she's shacking up with Roth. Or Froth. Or whatever you want to call him. They don't pull anything sensational or artistic, the way Minnie and I did, but they make a living, they manage to get by.

He takes her up here to the state penitentiary every month, and he waits outside while she visits me. We talk over old times and we remember how she was having lunch in the furniture department when I first spotted her. And we remember that dinner at the *Grand Bourgogne,* and then she tells me what I was after and how I drummed it into her head that I wanted one thing and one thing only.

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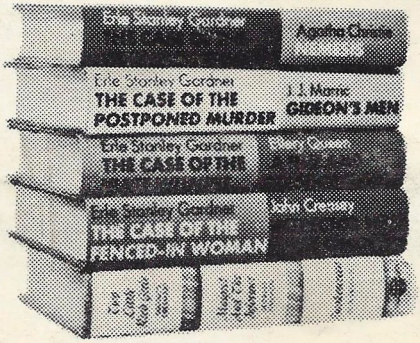

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