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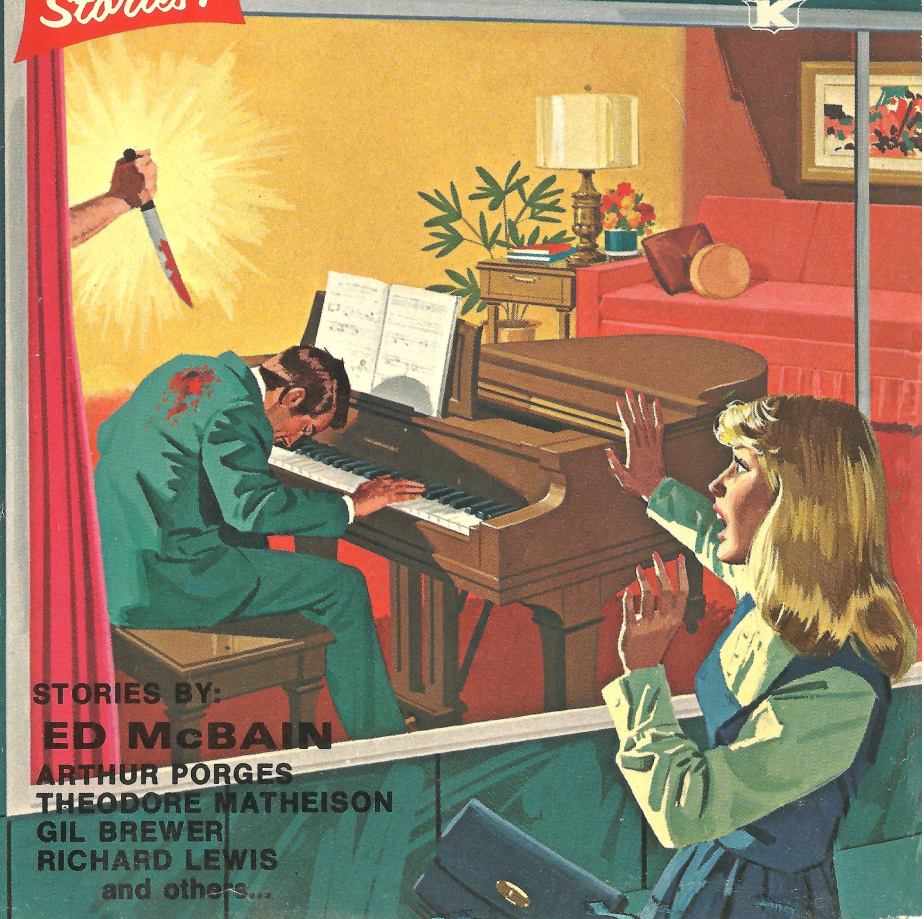

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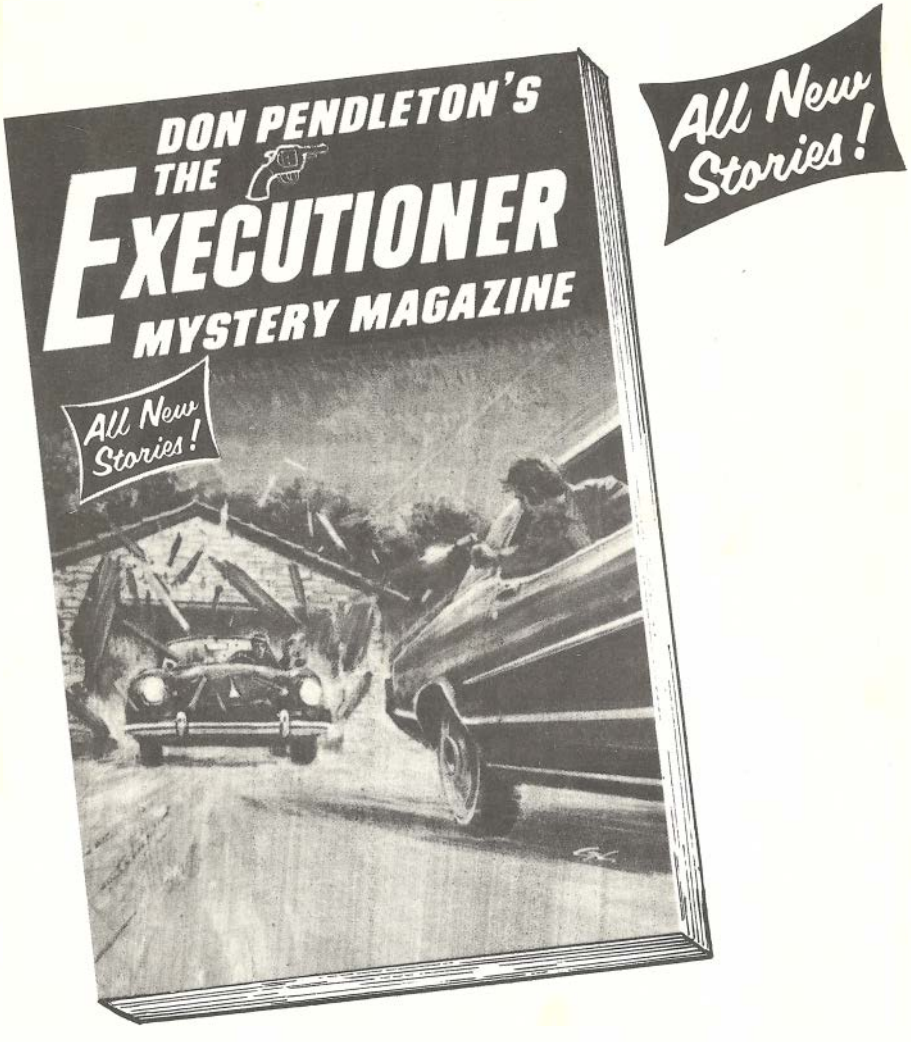

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ED McBAINES 87th PRECINCT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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87th PRECINCT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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THE MANNEQUIN MURDER

by Irwin Porges

The girl, like one yanked abruptly from the darkness of a dream into the glare of electric lights, found herself blinded and confused. For a moment she was in a world of floating colors; then, awareness returning, she discovered the cement under her feet and the stretch of sidewalk about her. The brilliant square of light came from a huge window. Her eyes focusing, she stared and saw the figures take shape. Of course—a department store window, and these were dummies, mannequins, posed in some kind of scene. But she couldn't recall how she had gotten here.

She gazed about, seeing the grayness at the edge of the light

and the blackness beyond. It was late, very late, she felt. Her mind groped for the place and the events. She was in the downtown area, alone, not a soul in view, not even the sound of a footstep. The deep gloom beyond the patch of light brought a sudden touch of fear. She shivered. She turned to the shining window, moving nearer to its bright safety. The scene itself was homey and comforting. She looked at a living room, the furniture and carpets in vivid colors. A man and woman, both gray-haired, sat on a divan, while nearby, a younger woman sat in a club chair. They all seemed poised in listening attitudes. The girl noted the grand piano set to one side and the man who occupied the bench, his hands raised stiffly above the keys.

There was something wrong, some jarring note in the pleasant scene. The man's mouth strained open, as though to cry out, and his face was oddly contorted. Behind him, emerging from the drapery, an arm slowly descended. The girl stared at the gleam of the silver knife. But she was quickly reassured. The arm moved mechanically, operated by some electrical device. Even now it was rising again, fingers wrapped about the knife. Curious though, how careless somebody had been. The knife would strike wide of its mark—that was obvious. The mannequin was placed on the bench in the wrong position.

Her eyes were drawn again to the pianist's face with its expression of agony. The red moistness on the forehead was puzzling. Why there? She stared as it trickled down one side. The pianist tilted forward; she could have sworn that he moved. Then he fell face down onto the keys. There was a discordant crash of notes. She cried out. A voice sounded in her ear, and her heart jumped. "Why did he do that, lady? Why?"

She swung around in terror. The liquor breath was overpowering. A bum, a wino, the kind that always roamed the downtown area. A dirty, shaky old man who leaned toward her and appeared menacing. "Lady, please, could you give me some money. I need . . ."

"Stay away from me," she said. He moved and she turned to run blindly down the street, out of the brightness of the store into narrow dark lanes that seemed like alleys. After a while she panted, slowed, caught her breath and stopped. She peered about the unlit street in despair. Memories of a car came to her—a car parked somewhere. She heard rustling, scraping noises and ran again down one black street after another. Exhausted, she grew calmer and no-

ticed a pattern of lights in the distance. Soon, she came out on a broad boulevard. Cars passed, some slowly while men called out to her. She stood at the curb, waving frantically at cabs until one stopped.

She tugged the door open and climbed in. As she talked incoherently the cabbie, with the boredom and annoyance of one who has heard everything, interrupted: "Look, do you want to go someplace? I don't know anything about bodies and store windows."

"Take me to a police station," she said. "The nearest one."

"Police station? Well, if that's what you want."

The ride was short, and when she got out, she remembered and gazed helplessly about. "My bag—is it in the cab?"

The man gave her a sour look and turned to search the cab. "No bag, lady," he announced.

"I guess I lost it," she said. "I can't pay you now."

"Another one of those," he said in disgust, following her into the station.

The desk sergeant listened for a moment and then raised a hand. "Let's take things in order. Your name, please."

"Howard — Charlene Howard." She faced the cabbie. "I work downtown. I have an apartment. I wouldn't cheat anybody."

"Sure, sure," said the man. "But when do I get my money?"

The sergeant growled. "Hold it. We'll get to that later. Now, about this bleeding man."

She told the story, conscious of the disbelief in the sergeant's gaze. "In the *store* window?" he said. "That would be Leland's. Oh, I see." He sat back and grinned. "I guess it's scared lots of people. We've had complaints about it. Just a display advertising a crime novel, the one that's a big seller. Did you see the book covers in the window?"

"Of course it was a display. Anybody would know that." She swallowed her irritation. "But I've told you. On the piano bench—it was not a dummy. I saw a man." She shuddered. "His eyes . . . I think he was dead."

The sergeant was studying her. "It's late," he said. "About one a.m. You've been out, right? Maybe you had one too many . . . or . . ."

"I haven't been drinking. Or anything else." The moment after she said it she felt confused and bewildered. The sidewalk and store wavered before her. She remembered—they had appeared suddenly, as though she had just awakened from a dream. Both her mind and vision were fogged. She struggled to force some clue out of the blankness, to find some memory of the night. *Had* she been drinking? How else to account for the dizziness?

"Miss." The sergeant had been talking. His voice came from far away. "Are you all right? Maybe you'd better sit down."

Broken details of the night were returning. First there was a bright room, with twirling, flashing colors. Then she was in an enormous gloomy place and around her mocking faces appeared . . . one man . . . or was it two? . . . and a woman. She stared at the sergeant and at the cabbie, aware of the derision in his eyes. "All right," she cried. "You don't believe me. A man may be injured or dead. Why don't you send a policeman to the store? That would settle matters, wouldn't it?"

The sergeant nodded. "Exactly what I was planning." He had lifted a phone and given an order. The policeman who entered was introduced as Officer Foster. She gave her office address to the cabbie, promised to pay him extra for his trouble.

In the car she felt the officer's quick, curious glances. "At Leland's," he finally said. "You think there's something wrong there."

"Yes, I do." She sounded defiant.

"People have been upset over the display," he said. "The mayor was even annoyed. He asked the store to remove it—or at least get rid of that moving knife."

As they parked and walked toward the glowing window, a couple appeared from a side street. Several men and another woman came from the opposite direction. Strange, she noted, how all these people showed up now and at this time of the night. When she needed help, she thought bitterly, she could find nobody.

She stood close to the window, hearing the officer's voice over her shoulder. "What was it you—uh—saw? A bleeding man?"

She stared, incredulous. The scene was changed, different. The piano bench—it didn't seem possible. The mannequin was a woman. She sat there, a smile on her face, her fingers curled above the keys. Behind her, from the drapery, the arm still moved, rising with its knife to plunge downward toward her back. She turned to the officer. "The man—*he* was on the bench. What happened to him?" She examined the rest of the scene. The older couple occupied the divan and a woman was in the club chair. She saw the flashy book covers arranged in a row with a sign in front of them. Meeting the officer's gaze, she felt foolish and ashamed. "There *was* a man," she announced. "And I watched him fall forward onto the keys." A dozen people had

gathered around and were gaping at her; it was almost as though she were defending herself before an audience.

"I don't know if you've read the book," the officer said. "It's actually a woman at the piano. She's the one who's murdered." He added hastily, "In the story, that is."

They returned to the car, the officer attempting to be sympathetic. "Don't let it bother you," he said. "The imagination can play tricks, especially late at night. And with a scary scene, like the one in the window—well." She remained silent, speaking only to thank him when he accompanied her to the door of her apartment.

Through the darkness that enclosed her, Charlene could catch the faint gleam of a light far ahead. She was in an enormous room that stretched forward and upward beyond her vision. She walked hesitantly, afraid of falling, one arm reaching out into the gloom. She neared the light and could detect shapes, odd, rigid figures with blank faces. A whirring sound drew her attention. The escalator was moving, sliding downward from high above. Her eyes were pulled unwillingly to the top. She waited, gripped by fear, as the shining metal descended. There was nothing, they were empty stairs. Why was she afraid? Then a figure appeared on high, began its descent. It lurched downward, seated askew on the metal. Midway, it grinned at her, and at the bottom it tumbled to sprawl at her feet. She shrank back. Another figure was journeying down. Dummies, she thought, no cause for terror. The escalator moved faster. The figure, its head abnormally large, seemed to soar toward her. The eyes were glazed and blood seeped in a thick stream from the forehead. She screamed.

Charlene, awake, blinked at the sunshine. It was morning and the nightmare at once thinned and began to vanish in the light of reality. She slid to the edge of the bed and sat up, trying to overcome the odd, foggy sensation that gripped her. The sound of a bell echoed in her ears several times before she realized that the phone was ringing. The voice at the other end was unfamiliar.

"It's Dana—Dana Hoffman. Don't you remember? We used to go to high school together. We met at the party last night, recognized each other at once." Dana was chuckling. "Lord, I don't know what happened to you. Have you looked for your car this morning?"

She had no recollection of the girl, but vague memories of the party began to return. She put down the phone and walked to the window to gaze at the car

port. The empty slot gaped before her. Her heart sank. The car was gone.

"My . . . my car," she stuttered over the phone.

"You left it at the party. I'm sure it's O.K. You don't remember anything, do you? Wowie, what did you drink?" While Charlene mumbled, Dana went on, "Look, I'd like to come over. I've been worried about you. Just for a little while, all right?" Charlene had hardly murmured agreement before the girl hung up.

When the bell rang and Charlene opened the door, she stared at the tall, slim girl. The two seemed like foils, Charlene's light brown hair and creamy complexion contrasted by Dana's olive skin and glowing black hair.

"Of course," said Charlene. "You *are* Dana—you haven't changed at all in six years.

"But you don't remember the party, right?" Dana squeezed her arm. "Just touching you to see if you're safe and sound."

"I'm beginning to." Charlene nodded. The happenings of the night were taking shape. She groped for the missing pieces of the puzzle.

"Well," said Dana, sitting at the breakfast table. "How many drinks *did* you have?"

"Only two." Charlene reflected. "But they were something crazy . . called *Devil's Dew*. I never tasted anything like it."

"Where did you *go*—that's the question. One minute I saw you and the next, you were gone. Aren't you going to tell me?"

Charlene hesitated. "First I want to hear about the party. I can't seem to recall much of it."

Dana stared. "You're actually serious. You don't remember all that stupid business, a 'Sojourn with Satan', the corny psychedelic lights—that stuff was out of style five years ago—and the guys that were nothing, the kind you wouldn't date unless you were desperate."

"The guys. Who was I with?"

"Who weren't you with. Boy, you were popular."

Charlene tried to summon the floating faces. "I seem to remember a fellow . . . kind of wobbly . . . I guess he was half-drunk . . . talked in a loud voice. Attached himself to me. Did you see him?"

"What a description. That could be anybody. *Most* of them were stoned." Dana twisted impatiently. "Are you going to tell me where you went? When I couldn't find you, and I saw your car, I was thinking of calling the police."

The picture was getting clearer. "I was feeling funny, kind of sick. I went outside to get air. I think that fellow was there. And some other people . . . I don't know . . . another fellow . . or a girl? I'm not sure.

Anyhow, I got into a car with them and we drove someplace."

"*Someplace?* What are you talking about?"

"You won't believe it when I tell you. Things are coming back to me." Charlene paused, probing at the gaps in her memory. "We drove downtown and parked. Then we went to a big department store—Leland's. And get this—we were *inside* the store."

Dana was incredulous. "At that time of the night? You must have dreamt it. You know the store would be closed."

Charlene threw up her hands. "That's what I've been telling myself—the drinks or a crazy dream. But it's too real. How can I be imagining? I see the inside of the store, a huge dimly lit room. There was a lot of noise and laughing. Something wild was going on." Part of the scene returned. "Of course . . . they were fooling around with the dummies. But then . . ." She felt a sudden chill. "I got frightened. And suddenly, I was outside the store. It isn't clear." She told Dana about the store window and the man on the piano bench.

"You idiot." Dana began to laugh. "It's all in your mind. You mean you don't remember? At the party there was a big poster on the wall. You were looking right at it. A copy of a Dali painting or some weird scene. Doesn't it come back? A man with three eyes, an extra mouth and blood dripping down his face?"

Charlene stared. "I seem to recall a poster."

"Of course." Dana patted her, grinning. "Take my advice. Give up liquor. Two drinks, colored lights, and what do you do? You climb into anybody's car, dream up a wild trip, and then—" Dana was all disbelief. "A department store at midnight? Come on, now. Just imagination gone berserk."

"No." Charlene was firm. "That was not dreamt up. I know I was there."

At the Great American Insurance Company, Charlene, as a secretary to Mr. Hunt, worked in the middle of an expanse of desks and partitioned offices that covered an entire floor of a downtown building. Any suspicion that the department store may have been a dream was dispelled when the taxi driver stood in front of her.

"You remember me," he said. The sarcasm in his voice was evidence of his annoyance over the time he was wasting, but when she apologized profusely and paid him more than double the fare, he turned friendly and curious.

"I guess you had a kind of wild night," he said, with a grin. "Did you ever find your purse?"

She shook her head and merely admitted that things were a "little confused." She evaded his other questions, and after he had left, sat in a reverie, the events of the night drifting through her mind. She recalled being helped into the back of the car; then, a man slid next to her. At the party he was the one who had talked most to her. He had laughed loudly and foolishly, even in the car, and she had an impression of his features—a rounded face, somewhat feminine, large eyes and long, ragged hair. But who else was in the car? Evidently another man, one who sat in front. She tried to force a picture of him, but nothing would appear. Someone else was in front, a woman, perhaps. Or was she imagining? She had talked to several women at the party. Did she remember a thin, high voice in the car—and later on?

A woman's voice broke into her thoughts. "Are you floating off into space?"

Charlene, pulled abruptly into awareness, looked up in confusion.

"You *are* a million miles away." Lisa, who worked in an adjoining office, stood next to her, smiling. "How about coming down to earth?"

Charlene nodded, fingering the papers on her desk. "I guess I'd better, with all these letters waiting."

"You've had some strange visitors," said Lisa. "Since when do taxi drivers come to the office?"

Charlene laughed. "You really notice things, don't you?" She saw the girl's eyes narrow and added quickly, "Not that I object. I appreciate your bringing me back to reality." She had only spoken to Lisa a few times and had an impression of her as rather aloof and cool. Now, the girl's expression was pleasant, but Charlene detected the same coldness and even a touch of resentment in her face. As Charlene gazed, noting the girl's features, the high cheek bones, thin lips and firm chin, she felt an odd sensation. She groaned inwardly. It couldn't be a sense of familiarity. Was her imagination out of control again? Unable to repress the words, she blurted them. "Did I see you at a party last night?" She continued awkwardly. "It was one of those affairs . . . you know . . . people coming and going all the time. I thought . . ."

"Me—at a party?" Lisa acted as though the idea were absurd. "Last night I was at school. I'm taking a course in French."

Charlene watched the girl turn and leave. She shook her head ruefully. She really must forget about last night and settle down to work. She was typing determinedly when Mr. Hunt appeared

at her elbow. "There's a man who wants to speak to you," he said. She thought his glance was odd. He waved a hand. "You can use my office. He's waiting there."

Actually, she found two men waiting. She sensed at once that they were policemen. The younger one introduced himself as Lieutenant Corey and his companion as Officer Gerber. Corey pulled out Mr. Hunt's chair for her, and she found herself sitting behind the desk, facing the two men. She looked at them in disbelief. "This can't be about last night."

Corey, slim and boyish, had an earnest gaze, and when he spoke in a soft voice he seemed more like a student than a policeman. "Why couldn't it be?" he asked.

"The officer at the station thought I was imagining or that I'd had too many drinks."

"Well, how many did you have?"

"Two very strange drinks," she said. "They were called *Devil's Dew* and I have no idea what was in them." She smiled. "Except that they were very potent."

Under his questioning she told him about the man on the piano bench and how, when she returned later with the policeman, the display was normal, with a woman at the piano. She watched him as she finished.

"Like a crazy nightmare," she said. "Go on—tell me you don't believe a word of it. I won't mind. I'm about ready to admit that none of it happened."

He avoided answering. "The man on the bench. Can you describe him?"

"I don't know. My mind was fuzzy. All I can remember is the staring eyes . . . and the face, in agony. And the blood dripping down the side of the face."

Gerber and Corey exchanged glances. "The knife," said Gerber. "One would think that if a man was killed, well, he'd be stabbed in the back. But the blood on his face . . . ?"

"I told you," she said. "When I looked through the window, I could see that the knife would miss his back. At the time I was thinking—the window dresser had been very careless in placing the dummy on the bench."

Corey, obviously puzzled, made no comment but asked her to describe the party and what followed. Prompted by his questions, she supplied the details and told of the drive downtown. "I know it sounds impossible," she said. "It was after midnight, but they went *inside* that department store, and I was with them." She looked challengingly at Corey.

He was grinning. "It's not impossible. In fact, I'm sure you were inside the store." He met her astonished gaze and bent

down to reach under his chair. He offered her the black bag. "I presume this is yours? We found it in the store, behind the window."

She took the bag, recognizing it at once as hers. She inspected him coldly. "You kept this hidden all the time and never told me about it."

He flushed. "I'm sorry. It was important to hear your story first; there was no attempt to trick you. We're trying to fit things together. And now, as you can see, we've checked out one part of your story."

His concern and his attempt to soothe her seemed so sincere, that she found herself liking this sensitive young man. "And the rest of my—story?"

He was cautious, explaining that more information was needed; to begin with, one question must be answered: how did she and the others get into the store?

She had no idea, and although she had thought of a watchman before he mentioned one, her mind could produce no image of anybody. "Was there a watchman on duty?" she asked.

Corey nodded. "He's probably sleeping now. We're going to his house. I don't imagine he'll be in a happy mood when we wake him up." His eyes gleamed with amusement. "How'd you like to come along? Your boss has given permission."

Charlene was surprised. "Why would you want me?"

"The faces are all blanks to you, right now. The watchman's face might stir some memories. Perhaps you'll recall him or his actions. And that might bring back some of the others—and what they did."

As they left the floor, Charlene could glimpse Lisa staring at them through the glass partition of a nearby office. The girl's probably dying of curiosity, she thought, resisting a momentary impulse to smile and wave.

The watchman, a stocky gray-haired man named Lawrence, reacted with even more impatience and irritation than Charlene had expected. Awakened by his wife, he stalked into the room, glaring at the two men. "Police?" he said. "What's this all about?"

Corey's most tactful approach did little to change the man's attitude. Lawrence made it plain that the questions were ridiculous. "I've been working for Leland's for thirty years," he announced. "And I've been night watchman for ten. I check all the doors as soon as I go on duty, and I make sure everything's locked." His angry gaze shifted to Charlene. "What's this girl got to do with it? Is she claiming somebody was in the store? Well she's lying. She—"

"Let's hold that," said Corey

"We just want some simple answers. You're telling us that nobody was in the store. You *let* no one in, is that right?"

"Of course I let no one in. Why would I do that in the middle of the night?"

"Could someone have gotten in, without you knowing it?" Gerber asked. "Perhaps you were on another floor and didn't hear."

"Or maybe . . ." Corey started to say and hesitated. He was thinking that the man, alone during the long night hours, might do some drowsing.

"Nobody could get in," Lawrence said positively. "Anyone trying to force one of those doors would make a lot of noise. And besides—you probably checked it yourself—there's no sign that one of the doors was forced, is there?"

Corey shook his head. At the same moment he had detected the impatient look on Charlene's face. He was aware of the question she could barely suppress. "That's exactly the point," he told Lawrence. "Nobody broke in. Yet, we know that some people were in the store." He gestured toward Charlene. "We're certain she was there—we found her handbag in the store." He watched Lawrence intently. "Are you still saying you didn't open the door for someone?"

Lawrence reddened and stared in confusion. "I'm telling you I didn't," he said, his voice rising. "What kind of proof is that? Why couldn't she have been in the store during the day—and left her handbag at that time?"

"But I *wasn't* in the store," said Charlene. "I spent all day at the office building, even eating lunch there."

Further questions led only to repeated statements by Lawrence that he had admitted no one to the store. As they drove away, Corey remained silent, apparently meditating over the watchman's account. "Well, aren't you going to tell me what you think?" Charlene demanded.

Corey smiled. "I think he was lying." He looked at Gerber who nodded in agreement and said, "That brings up the next question."

"Yes." Corey rubbed his forehead. "Why? What is he hiding? Obviously, someone was admitted to the store; that means that Lawrence, the only one inside opened the door."

When they dropped Charlene off at her apartment, she asked "What will you do now?"

"Well, we have some leads to follow," said Corey.

Charlene laughed. "You're not going to tell me. All right, but remember, I'm involved."

Corey grinned back. "We'll be in touch—if there's anything important."

At the station later, the two men sat discussing the matter. To

Charlene, Corey had not explained *why* an investigation had been launched. Her report of the man on the piano bench was too incredible to get beyond the sergeant's desk. After all, an officer had accompanied Charlene back to the store and discovered nothing more than the familiar window display. The incident might have been forgotten, except for something more tangible and significant: in the morning an exasperated policeman had found a car parked in a forbidden zone on a downtown street. The flashy foreign car, jutting out into the street, seemed almost to have been abandoned. The door on the driver's side was half-open.

A check of the license number produced a man's name, one that made the desk sergeant straighten up. He telephoned and learned from the landlady of an apartment building that the man hadn't returned home the night before. At that point the sergeant, remembering the girl's story, called the detective division. Corey and Gerber checked at the store and talked to a saleswoman who told of coming on duty at 9:30 to find a handbag on the floor near the window. Corey had considered all incidents and decided that they formed a pattern. Something odd, perhaps serious, had occurred in or near the store.

It was this pattern that he and Gerber were discussing. Corey sighed and reached for his jacket. "You know where we're going."

"Sure," Gerber replied. "Back to the store."

At Leland's they stood behind the crowd that watched the window. People, gaping at the woman on the piano bench, murmured and pointed as the arm rose to plunge down with the knife. "Nothing like a quiet musical evening at home," said Gerber.

An elderly woman glared at them. "Disgusting. The police should stop it."

Inside, while they examined the carpeting behind the window, a man named Raymond hurried up. Obviously agitated, he introduced himself as the window dresser. "I set up that display," he said, waving a hand. "Is there something wrong? I've heard some—uh-rumors."

"We don't know," said Corey. "The display—does it appear the same, no changes?"

"Changes?" Raymond's voice lifted in shrill surprise. "Nobody touches it except me." He pulled the drapery back to gaze at the woman on the bench. "I don't see anything different. Wait a minute. It seems to me that the woman is not exactly as I placed her. I have a good memory for details." He bustled out, saying, "I must see this from the street." When he returned, his agitation had increased and his eyes bulged with excitement. "The mannequin

on the bench," he said. "It's not the one I posed there. I had chosen a black-haired one, you know, to be absolutely faithful to the story. Well, it's unbelievable. This one has light brown hair and the clothes aren't the same. She's been brought from some department in the store. Who would dare to do this?" He clucked indignantly. "I'm going to see the manager, right away."

"Hold it," said Corey. He leaned inside the window to study the mannequin and then bent down to inspect the piano keys closely. "Don't let anybody touch these keys," he said. They must be dusted for prints." He nodded significantly at Gerber. "Come here and take a look."

Gerber stared at the dark brown stains on the edges of several keys. He made a whistling sound.

"Blood," said Corey. He was thinking of the girl. Her story had been too wild to swallow—like something out of an acid trip. Now, it seemed she had reported what had actually happened. He felt guilty. The girl deserved an apology.

Raymond shrank back from the window. "Blood. It's horrible. What do you suppose. . . ?"

Corey fixed him with a stern look. "You're to say nothing. Is that clear?" Raymond's head bobbed and Corey said, "Now I think *I'll* see the manager, if you'll take me to him." He left Gerber behind to summon a lab man and an officer to stand guard.

The gold-lettered sign on the glass partition read *Martin King, General Manager,* and at a desk near the door a woman glanced up to appraise him. Her cool expression showed no change when he mentioned the word "police."

"Perhaps I can help you," she said with a faint smile. "I'm Ann Loret, Mr. King's secretary."

Unmistakable, Corey thought. Even on the street she'd be identified as the secretary to some top executive. She looked thirty but was probably closer to forty. When she stood up he noticed the trim suit with its subdued pattern. I'l bet everything here is organization and efficiency, he reflected.

"If you don't mind," he said "I'd like to see Mr. King." He wondered if she'd frown, but her face remained blank as she pressed a buzzer and ushered him into the office. A stocky man, round-faced, extended a hand and then returned to drop into the chair behind the desk. He offered a picture of ease, body tilted back and hands clasped behind his head.

King motioned him to a chair. "A police lieutenant," he said with a genial gaze. "I'm sure our usual shoplifting problems haven't brought you here."

Corey described the events of

the night before and then explained what he wished to do. King, his relaxed attitude gone, straightened in his chair. He was plainly shocked. "You mean you actually expect to find. . . ?"

Corey nodded. "We'll do it quietly. Your customers won't be disturbed."

"But Leland's has eight floors. Do you realize what kind of job you've got?"

"We won't have to search the whole store," said Corey. "If we find anything, it'll be on the first floor or basement, in some storage room or out of the way place."

Some twenty minutes later Corey entered a small room in a corner of the main floor. Through a narrow window a beam of light focused downward like a spotlight. Two white faces offered a startling reflection. Corey drew in his breath. He leaned out the door and called to Gerber. "Come here and take a look." His hand lifted toward the switch and stopped. "Don't touch anything."

"My God," said Gerber. "Are there two of them?" He moved nearer and then spoke in relief. "One's a dummy. Weird . . . how lifelike it seems in the shadows."

They inspected the body huddled against the wall. It's him all right," said Corey. "I'd recognize him in any condition. I've seen his picture in the papers often enough. He's been in about every escapade under the sun."

Death had been caused by a blow on the left temple. They noted the dried blood on the forehead. "Hard to believe," said Corey, "but that's what the girl saw—trickling down."

Gerber rubbed his chin. "The window. What the devil was he doing there—and on a piano bench?"

"Notice his pants and shoes," said Corey. "He was dragged or half-carried some distance along the floor." He turned to study the female mannequin sprawled nearby. The two men exchanged glances, their eyes lighting up. "I'll bet . . ." said Gerber. "Of course," said Corey. "Black hair—Raymond's missing mannequin. This is our original pianist." He felt as though the eyes, filled with urgent appeal, were seeking his. She'd witnessed everything, he thought. Shame she couldn't talk. What a story she could tell!

Young Arthur Leland, whose antics had created numerous headlines when he was alive, produced the biggest and boldest type with his bizarre death. The papers blared the story: the grandson and heir of old curmudgeon Walter Leland, who at seventy-eight still held an iron grasp on all his enterprises, had been murdered, his body discovered in a back room of the

family department store. Most of the scandalous episodes in young Leland's past were referred to again.

At the detective bureau Corey meditated over the available information. "No answers here," he told Gerber. The weapon, obviously a heavy one, had not been found. Although they had a puzzle with no clues, the next steps were apparent. Three persons must be prodded and probed until they supplied some real answers. Corey jotted down names: 1. Charlene 2. Leland's landlady 3. Lawrence, the watchman. Corey was aware also of new questions that had arisen, but these might lead to lengthy investigation. He would concentrate on them later.

Charlene had finished dinner when he arrived, and they sat in the living room, sipping coffee. He made small talk at first, careful to avoid the case, but he knew by the amusement in her gaze that she understood his stratagem and was waiting for the probe to begin. After an awkward silence they laughed simultaneously, and then he said, "All right. First, I'll offer you an apology—on behalf of the department. You *did* see what you described and it wasn't wild imagination or . . ."

"Liquor?" she inserted. "But I did have two drinks."

He mentioned the idea that he'd considered for some time. "Your actions were strange. You felt so funny. Could it be that your drinks were drugged?"

She was astonished. "I never thought of that. Do you mean—deliberately?"

"I'm only speculating. I was thinking of what has happened before. You know, some crazy prank. A person puts LSD or some other drug into a drink."

The idea still amazed her; she could offer no reason why she might have been chosen. Corey turned to the questions that were plaguing him most. First, he wanted more details of the party.

She knew the host, who gave the kind of parties where dozens of people were invited. They milled about, came and went, and one recalled familiar faces but never remembered names. Oh yes, there was a girl whom she had known in her high school days; she told him about Dana Hoffman.

His disappointment over her vague descriptions of the people in the car was quite evident. She believed that the man who sat in the back with her was the same one who had hung around at the party. Who else was in the car? Possibly two people in front. She had an impression of a dark-haired woman but could recall nothing about the man.

Corey's persistent questions could produce no real information about happenings inside the store. No, she didn't know how

they got in. She was certain about the loud laughing and the fooling around with dummies. "I'm afraid I'm unable to draw the line between fantasy and reality," she confessed. She told him about her dream with the descending escalator and the mannequins riding grotesquely down. "Would you believe . . . I think it really happened?" She watched his face. "All right, I'm cracking up. But I can see that escalator gliding down with the dummies perched on the stairs." What had frightened her? Had she seen a man being struck? She couldn't reply. She remembered a sudden panic and believed she ran out the door. Perhaps the damp night air shocked her into awareness.

"You've seen young Leland's pictures in the papers," he said. "Does his face seem familiar?"

She hesitated. "In a way—yes. Something about the wide eyes and the smile. You're wondering if he was with me in the car. Or . . . the man in the window." She shuddered. "I've thought about it. I believe he was."

At the door their glances met, both understanding that there was something more than official about their relationship. "I'd like to know," she said. "You'll keep me informed?" It was taken for granted.

Gerber's task had been to interview Mrs. Weiss, the landlady who occupied an apartment adjacent to Leland's. She had cried and insisted he was not a bad boy, just careless and wild. She mothered him and he confided in her. Leland was reforming, especially since the last incident. "It was time he reformed," said Gerber. "Did you know he was thirty-one?"

Corey listened and waited, knowing from Gerber's manner that important information was forthcoming. The "last incident" was a car smash-up, with Leland, obviously drunk, responsible for the death of the other driver. There had been earlier citations for drunken driving, and this time his license was cancelled. Gerber paused significantly. "Mrs. Weiss said that Leland hadn't driven his car at all. She knows—the car just sat in front of the building. He was taking no chances on anymore trouble. In fact, he asked her to drive it around the block to keep the battery up."

Corey's mind raced over the possibilities. "The question is, what to believe? Let's say that Leland took a few drinks. Then, forgetting his resolution, he decided to drive the car."

Gerber shook his head. "Not according to Mrs. Weiss. She insists he was absolutely sober—said goodbye to him in the hallway."

Corey stared. "Well, what did she see? Who *was* driving?"

Gerber threw up his hands. "It was too dark to see anything except some shadowy figures in front of the building. She heard a car drive off but didn't know it was Leland's. The next morning she discovered his car was missing, and then she was really worried. There is one thing. She thought she heard a woman's voice."

"She *thought*." Corey's voice was edged with impatience. "Not very helpful. Is that all?"

"No, it isn't." Gerber grinned. "This'll cheer you. Leland was an impulsive young man. He had a habit of telling other people how *he* would do things. You might call him the voice of inexperience. Well, anyhow, several days earlier he got into a quarrel with King, the department store manager."

"A quarrel? What about?"

"Mrs. Weiss' story is that Leland said the store needed modernizing. It catered to stuffy old people. When he told this to King, you can imagine what followed. There was a hot argument and King ordered him to get out of the office and stay out. Mrs. Weiss said there had been some previous disagreements and that this was a kind of climax. What do you think?"

"Don't know." Corey weighed the information. "If Leland was given to sounding-off, he might annoy or anger a lot of people." The two detectives were still discussing the situation when a most astonishing report came in. Two newspapers had received the same call on the night of the murder. The voice on the phone, evidently a woman's, had been brief: there was a great chance for a story. Leland was involved in another of his escapades, this time, of all places, at the family department store. It was significant that at both papers, *The Mirror* and *The News*, the woman asked first for the gossip columnist, who, of course, was not there. But the calls produced an even more surprising outcome. Carroll, the *News* columnist, contacted at a night club, rushed down to the department store. He told his story at the station. He arrived at about one a.m. to discover exactly nothing. The door was locked, and gazing through the glass he could see a gleaming light in the center of the floor. But there wasn't a soul around. He circled the store, peering in, and finally gave up in disgust, convinced it had been a crank call or a hoax.

Corey, baffled, tried to conjure up some motive for the calls. Clearly, there was an attempt to splash Leland's name in the papers, an effort to create another scandal. But why? Corey straightened abruptly. "A change of plans," he announced to Gerber. "Do you think we can get to see the old tycoon himself?"

"Walter Leland?" Gerber was incredulous. "*He* never talks to anybody."

Corey was already thrusting an arm into a coat. "Too many blanks," he said. "Don't forget there's a lot of money lying around, money that would have passed down to young Leland. Let's *fill in* the blanks.'

Beyond the girl who sat in an elegant reception room, and who was very pleasant and impressed by their credentials, the two de tectives got as far as Ronald Eliot, an aggressive young man who identified himself as Mr. Leland's personal secretary. "We don't grant any interviews," he snapped.

"We're not requesting an inter view," said Corey. "This is police business."

Eliot displayed both indifference and insolence. "It wouldn't matter to us if one of you were Chief of Police. First of all, Mr. Leland isn't here." He waved an impatient hand. "You're aware of the tragic—ah—circumstances. Mr. Leland, above all, wants to be let alone."

"It's just general information, about the estate," said Corey. "Perhaps you—"

"That's lawyer's business." Eliot had bent down to scribble on a slip of paper. He handed it to Corey. "Contact Mr. Isner, our legal adviser. I've written the address." He turned away, making it quite clear that the conversation was finished.

"Pleasant character," Gerber murmured as they walked to the reception room The girl's friendly smile encouraged Corey to linger for a while. "Terrible thing . . . about young Leland," he said.

She agreed and noted that Walter Leland was deeply upset. Corey drew her out, and she went on to explain that the old man had plans for his grandson to take a responsible position in one of his enterprises. "He hoped the boy would straighten up," she said. "And lately he felt optimistic. Arthur seemed to have a new attitude—as though he were maturing." She glanced nervously toward the inner office. "I shouldn't be talking to you. Mr. Eliot wouldn't like it."

The offices of Sidney Isner on the sixth floor of the Guarantee Trust Building, seemed as solid and respectable as the thirty-year old walls that enclosed them. The detectives were ushered in at once and Isner, gray-haired, distinguished, almost the stereotype of a corporation lawyer, greeted them cordially. Corey's question brought a measured response. "Some things are—ah—general knowledge. I handle Mr. Leland's personal affairs and I'm also administrator of the Leland Foundation." He murmured his regrets over the "distressing situation." He had known Arthur for many years, had watched

the boy grow up. At Corey's next question he appeared taken aback.

"What you're really asking about," Isner said slowly, "is Mr. Leland's will. I don't know—ah—that he'd approve of my giving any information." He meditated. "Well . . . it's been a matter of public record for years. Young Arthur, of course, was the main heir. With his death there is no individual who inherits. By arrangement, the—ah—funds will be transferred to the Foundation, to be used for medical research." He seemed amused at Corey's persistent queries on the same subject. "I know what you're after, of course." He chuckled. "We lawyers are detectives, too. You want a motive for the—ah—dreadful murder. The most likely suspect would be someone who could benefit, right? A person who would now be the new heir, in the event Mr. Leland died? Well, *no other heir* is mentioned in the will, and I can assure you that the document is drawn so that future claimants would have no chance of success."

Leaving the office, the detectives shared the same feeling of frustration. "I guess he punctured *that* idea," said Gerber. "What do we have left?"

"A very important gentleman—name of Lawrence. I'm sure you remember our evasive watchman?" Corey was grim. "We may have to throw a scare into him, but he's got to open up."

Lawrence, if anything, was in a more surly mood than the previous time. "You, again," he growled. "Why don't you let me alone? I've got my rights. I've committed no crime."

"But a crime *has* been committed," said Corey. "A man was murdered—and in the store where you were on duty. Some people were there, after midnight. Now suppose you tell us how they got in."

"I've told you. Nobody got into the store."

"Yet young Lelands body was found there." Corey faced him sternly. "I'm placing you under arrest as accessory to a murder. Officer Gerber will read your rights to you."

"Murder?" Lawrence cried in dismay. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were the only one with a key to the door. You let someone in—deliberately." Corey nodded at Gerber. "Go ahead."

"Wait a minute.'" Lawrence gazed about like a trapped man. "All I did was let him in. What else could I do? How could I even imagine . . . a murder . . ."

"It's time you told everything," said Corey. "Remember—no more lies."

The story emerged under questioning. Young Leland had rung the night bell. Lawrence,

who had seen him before, peered through the glass and recognized him at once. "I wasn't going to let him in," said Lawrence. "In fact, I turned around and walked away. But he kept pounding on the glass and shouting. I couldn't call the police, could I? After all, he was the grandson of the big boss. And I'd heard about his past record. If the police came, he'd be in trouble again. I was thinking, one day *he* might be my boss. I didn't want—"

"Never mind that," said Corey. "What I want to know, is who was with him?"

Lawrence considered. "I'm not sure. When I opened the door, there was someone behind him, in the shadows. A man, maybe."

"What about a girl?" asked Gerber.

Lawrence stared. "Maybe. Later on, I heard voices. One could have been a woman's."

"Are you telling me," Corey demanded in disgust, "that you didn't even see their faces?"

"How could I?" Lawrence was aggrieved. "Leland told me to go about my business and let them alone. He—"

" 'Them'." Corey pounced on the word. "He spoke of others?"

"That's right. I can remember. He said, 'Let *us* alone'. He was half-drunk—I could tell from his voice."

When Lawrence asked him what he intended to do, Leland laughed and said he'd show them how a department store should be arranged. Lawrence tried to protest but was ordered to go back to his office. Watching from the doorway, he soon discovered what was happening. He could see Leland lifting mannequins and moved them about. Later, Lawrence knew that somebody had started the escalator, but he had no idea why.

Some time afterward, when he could hear no sounds at all, Lawrence walked toward the front of the store. To his surprise, nobody was there. The door was partly open and the escalator still running. He locked the door, stopped the escalator and then checked the floor to see if anything had been damaged. Some dummies had been moved and several had been knocked over. Lawrence rearranged the dummies as best he could.

Corey listened, aware that the real puzzle was unexplained. What about the window display, he wanted to know? Had Lawrence checked that? The watchman never even looked at it. "Why should I?" he asked. "Who'd think that anybody would crawl into the window?"

Corey studied the man, uncertain what to believe. "You concealed all this and lied to us. Why?"

"At first I was afraid I'd lose my job. I'd made a mistake by letting Leland in. Also, I didn't

want to make more trouble for him. It was all petty stuff and I thought it best to forget it. Then I heard about the murder. I was really scared—figures I might be accused. I decided to say nothing."

On their return to the station, Gerber remarked gloomily, "The more we hear, the less we know." Corey, however, had been nagged for some time by a bit of information that remained in a corner of his mind. He grinned. Investigation might lead nowhere, but it would give Gerber something to do and cheer him up. An hour later Gerber, clutching a slip of paper, entered Corey's office. "I got it," he said.

"Let me guess," said Corey. "I could be way off base—but is the man's name *Hoffman?*"

"All right." Gerber's eyes glinted. "I won't ask how you knew. Happened five months ago. Leland, drunk as a lord, ran a red light. Bad smash-up. *Joel Hoffman*—killed instantly. That's when Leland's license was revoked." Gerber became cynical. "He should have gone to jail, but the old man pulled a lot of strings."

Corey stood up. "There's a girl who may have some answers." As they walked to the car, he said, "I've been toying with a crazy idea. Try this one: Leland's little trip to the store at midnight—what if it was *arranged?*"

Gerber looked startled. "Why . . . and who. . . ?"

"Exactly. Why and who? Mull this over. Phone calls were made to the papers. The whole situation seemed contrived. The plan was to involve Leland in another scandal—young heir drunk and causing disturbance at his own store."

"If that's so, why was he murdered?"

"I don't know. But it's evident that something went wrong."

At the apartment building Corey pointed to the name printed above the button. "Does that jog your memory?"

Gerber stared. "I don't see . . ." His eyes suddenly lit up. "Of course. The girl Charlene met at the party—*Dana Hoffman.*"

In the living room the detectives sat facing the girl who met their gaze with annoyance. "I don't know why you're questioning me," she said. "Sure, I was at a party. Charlene must have told you. I knew her years ago, recognized her when we were parking our cars. Later that evening she began acting goofy. I think she drank too much. All of a sudden she disappeared. But her *car* was still there. That really had me worried and I called her. She told me some weird story—I couldn't believe it." She became impatient. "And really, that's all I can tell you. Now if—"

"I think you can tell us *much* more, Miss *Hoffman.*" Corey

emphasized the name. "I'm sorry, but I believe you had a brother named Joel. And there was an unfortunate accident."

She paled and sat silent.

Corey waited and finally spoke. "Leland was responsible for his death. Because of that, you devised a plan for revenge."

"I don't know what you're talking about,'" she said, defiantly.

Corey shrugged. "Deny anything you wish. You were the woman in the car with Charlene. I think you're involved in the murder of Arthur Leland. We intend to charge you—"

"No." Her voice rose in panic. "I had nothing to do with it. I don't even know how it happened."

The story poured out. She had brooded for months over her brother's death and the fact that Leland, through money and influence, was able to avoid punishment. One day she received a strange phone call. A man who apparently knew all about the death asked her if she'd like to get even with Leland. A meeting was arranged. The man, who called himself Edwards, proposed a scheme. She was to become acquainted with Leland; this first step was easily accomplished when she flirted with him outside of his apartment. Edwards then instructed her to bring Leland to the party. There, the plan was to get him drunk, or, if necessary, to drug him.

"It wasn't easy," she said. "He had sworn off drinking and had to be coaxed."

Some unexpected obstacles developed. Leland wandered about, talked to various people and showed a special interest in Charlene. Edwards, doubting that the liquor was affecting him strongly enough, gave Dana a pill to drop in one of his drinks. Although the two didn't realize it at the time, it became evident later that Leland had passed the drink to Charlene.

Corey interrupted the account. "I think I know what the scheme was. But suppose *you* explain it. Why all this effort to get Leland drunk?"

That was the very question she had asked Edwards at the start. It seemed that Leland was being given one last chance by his grandfather. If there were another scandal or escapade, he would be disinherited. Frightened by this ultimatum, he had quit drinking, had avoided trouble for the past months and was showing an interest in the business. The old man, highly pleased, was ready to give his grandson a responsible position.

Edwards told her it was a perfect scheme for revenge, and she had to agree with him. What better way than to cause Leland to lose his inheritance? Edwards explained the rest of the plan. The

old man was extremely sensitive about the reputation of his store. Why not create a disturbance down there, invite the press and even get young Leland arrested? His grandfather would never forgive him.

"Let's backtrack a little," Corey said. "What about *getting* to the party and then to the store? Leland's car was found there, but I can't picture him driving."

Dana flushed. "He didn't." Her tone became defiant. "All right, that was my idea. I knew his license had been revoked. I wanted to get him into as much trouble as possible. We had been going out in my car. This time I parked it a block from his apartment and told him the car had broken down. Then I drove his car to the party and the store, where I left it. I figured the police would find it and think he'd driven there, and well . . ."

"I see," Corey said, dryly. "Just a little extra trouble—driving without a license."

Her eyes blazed in anger. "He had it coming." She told what happened after they persuaded Leland to leave the party. Outside, he encountered Charlene and insisted that she come along. They couldn't talk him out of it. "We were playing it by ear," Dana said. "Nothing definite, we just thought we'd start some kind of rumpus at the store. But all we had to do was encourage Leland. He pounded on the door until the watchman let us in, and then he began playing around with the dummies. He started the escalator and ordered us to send some mannequins down from the second floor."

After a while Dana slipped away to a phone booth in a corner of the store and called the newspapers. When she returned, Leland was still laughing and shouting as he shifted the dummies about. Edwards, nervous, said, "Let's get out of here. The reporters will soon arrive." When she looked around for Charlene, he grabbed her arm and said, "She's wandered off some place. Come on—there's no time to search for her."

"We sneaked away," Dana said, "and Leland never noticed. He was busy climbing in and out of the window." She was astonished the next day when she saw nothing about the escapade in the papers. Later, the murder came as a terrible shock to her.

Gerber looked puzzled. "You left Leland's car. How did you get home?"

"We walked about a block from the store. Then Edwards hailed a cab."

"Oh, yes," said Corey, "the so-called 'Mr. Edwards'. Can you tell us more about him?" He exchanged grins with Gerber. "I believe the same name has popped into our minds."

"He was a man that Leland

had mentioned several times before, always with a kind of contempt," she said. "I only heard his first name. He was called Ronnie." She reflected. "At the party, when Leland saw him, he said, 'Well, dear old Ronnie,' in a sneering tone." Her description brought nods from the detectives.

"Mr. Nasty, himself," said Gerber.

"Yes," Corey agreed, "old Leland's friendly secretary—Ronald Eliot."

Gerber considered. "The motive fairly shouts. There's a lot of money involved."

"Eliot wanted to disgrace Leland, to keep him from inheriting. But why?" Corey sighed. "Sounds like financial hanky-panky. I think we'll need an audit of all the funds." He turned to Dana. "Did our friend Ronnie mention his motive to you?"

She shook her head. "All I know is that he was eager to have his scheme succeed."

Corey probed for other information. The girl had spent time with Leland; they'd had conversations. What names were mentioned? She couldn't recall any, but wait—he did refer to a lawyer, claimed the man had influenced old Leland, making him think that his grandson was too immature for any responsibility. "When I talked to him," Leland had said, "he put on an act—you know, the old friend of the family. But I knew what he was up to. I told him he was two-faced, and that if I had a chance, I'd pay him back for his conniving."

Dana gazed at Corey. "I've told you everything. And I swear it's the truth. Do you believe me?"

He hesitated. "It's not important whether I believe you. I think I do. But I must discuss this matter with the district attorney. After all, you did help lure Leland to the store—where he was murdered. I'd suggest that you *keep* your present address. And perhaps you should consult a lawyer."

She appeared white and shaken. "I didn't want him killed, even though *he was a murderer,* guilty of my brother's death." She challenged the detectives, her voice bitter. "I was entitled to some kind of revenge, wasn't I? What would *you* have done?"

Neither Corey nor Gerber answered.

Within a few days one of the puzzling aspects of the case was cleared up. Through the mayor's office Corey was granted a conference with Walter Leland. The old man, immediately suspicious, ordered an audit of the company and Foundation books. The figures revealed that Eliot and the lawyer Isner had collaborated in diverting funds to their own accounts. With old Leland's reign almost at end, and the

prospect that control might pass to his grandson, Eliot had evidently devised the scheme to have young Arthur disinherited. With him out of the way, the two men could continue to juggle the money without any danger of discovery.

"I'm sorry to say," Corey told Gerber, "that we've succeeded in giving Eliot an air-tight alibi. He was the man in the car, but he and Dana left in the same cab. She can testify to that. And Leland was alive when they left. So where are we?"

Gerber threw up his hands. "Nowhere."

"Well, there *has* been a process of elimination. The question now is *what* or rather *who* do we have left? Our suspects might be listed as *A* and *B*: Lawrence, the watchman, or some unknown person. Not much help, right?" Corey leaned forward. "Three people accompanied young Leland to the store, and all three are innocent of murder. That forces an obvious conclusion, doesn't it?"

Gerber looked blank. He could find nothing obvious.

Corey and Charlene spent that evening in a small, cosy restaurant, returning late to her apartment. He had avoided any discussion of the case, even though he knew she was curious. But now, sitting across from her, he noted the question in her eyes and grinned. "All right, I might as well confess. We're hopelessly lost. I doubt that we have a *real* suspect. Lawrence is about the closest."

She shook her head ruefully. "If only I could remember more." He probed again. What had frightened her in the store? Had she seen someone or been near at the moment when Leland was struck? She couldn't answer. She could see herself, alone in the dark store, terribly afraid, and somehow groping through the blackness toward the front door—and escape.

He explained his theory to her. Leland, clowning around, removed the dummy from the bench and sat there himself, hands above the keys, pretending to play piano. At that moment he was struck on the temple with a heavy instrument.

"I believe you either saw the arm striking him or you heard a cry of pain," said Corey. "You were still dazed by the drug, but it was beginning to wear off. Then, only sensing that something terrible had happened, you moved to the door, found it open and went out. There, you became aware of the store window, realized you were alone downtown, but had no memory of events."

When Cory returned to his apartment, close to midnight, he could hear the sharp ring of the phone as he inserted his key. Listening, he recognized the

voice as that of Lawrence. The watchman was almost incoherent, his words tumbling out. ". . . must see you . . . right away . . . something important I've got to tell you . . ."

Lawrence, waiting at the door when Cory arrived, let the detective in. Before Corey could ask any questions, the watchman said nervously, "Not here." He moved out of the stream of light from the window into the dim shadows that covered the floor. "I think we'd better go to my office," he said.

Corey followed him across the floor, feeling his way around the counters and circling the displays and racks. At a corner of the floor Lawrence stopped at a small room, flicked on the switch and gazed around carefully before entering. Once the detective had come in, Lawrence moved quickly to close the door.

"All right," said Corey. "Suppose you tell me what this is about. What are you afraid of?"

Lawrence stood tense and silent, his head tilted as though listening for sounds. He finally spoke. "I made a mistake—a bad mistake. I should have told you the last time."

"I had an idea you were holding out," said Corey.

Lawrence's voice rose shrilly. "I had nothing to do with the murder—nothing. I didn't know about it until later. He—" Lawrence stopped abruptly.

"Go on," said Corey. "Let's hear the murderer's name. Or, would you like me to tell you? While Leland and the others were fooling around in front, somebody entered the store by a side or back door. Now who could that be? Obviously, a person *who had a key*. There would be only one, right?"

Lawrence was nodding, his body rigid.

"But why would he come to the store at midnight? That question had a ready answer—and a clue. He came because somebody phoned him." Corey pointed a finger. "Of course, you did. Your story bothered me for quite a while. As a watchman, now, what would you naturally do when Leland entered with all his friends? To avoid trouble, or a chance of losing your job, you'd call a person who was in charge."

"Yes, yes," said Lawrence, "I phoned him. And he said he'd be right down. But I never dreamed—"

Corey was shocked by the loud explosion before he saw Lawrence stagger and tumble to the floor. He tugged at his gun and whirled about, his first thought to get away from the open door and the light. He must get out of the small room where he was like a sitting duck. Crouching, he moved through the door toward the safety of the semi-darkness, but at that mo-

ment he heard a shot and felt a sharp pain in his arm. His revolver slipped out of his grasp, sliding across the floor. He groped for it without success. Creaking sounds made him aware that he must move away; the murderer knew exactly where he was.

He remained crouched, twisting into the deeper gloom. His shoulder bumped some sort of rack. It fell with a clatter and was followed by the piercing whine of a bullet and the spattering sound of glass. Corey slipped behind a counter and peered about. He was startled for a moment by the figure of a mannequin, poised ahead and above him, one arm extended. He listened again and detected soft footsteps. He kneeled and flattened against a corner of the counter, trying to gaze across the floor. Where was he? His eyes had adjusted to the darkness. He noted the other mannequins, the slim figures and gleaming buttons. He was in the women's clothing section. Now there were no sounds, but Corey knew that the man waited, alert to the slightest movement.

Once more Corey inspected the dummies, their white faces reflecting beams of light. He stiffened. One figure was incongruous. He thought, with a grim humor, that it were almost as though the mannequins, staring anxiously at him, were on his side. They were exposing the thick, heavy figure, obviously masculine. Corey crawled slowly between the mannequins and then leaped. The man grunted and tried to raise the gun, but Corey had clutched him, pinning his arm. The man jerked violently, and locked together they sprawled on the floor. Corey tore the gun loose, and then, with his free hand, struck hard, once and twice. The man collapsed. Seizing the gun, Corey got to his feet. He stared down at the man and shook his head. The search for the murderer had led to so many blind alleys, that now, he could hardly believe it was over.

Corey, his flesh wound bandaged, sat in his office the next day talking to Gerber. Lawrence, shot in the chest, was in serious condition but expected to pull through. His statement about the murder was finally complete and truthful. Feeling he had made a mistake in admitting Leland to the store, and worried about possible damage, he had called his boss—Martin King, the General Manager. King, instructing him not to interfere with Leland, said he would come there to handle matters.

"Lawrence was playing a dangerous game," said Corey. "He knew that King had murdered Leland and so he decided that a little blackmail was in order. King made one payment, but he

was not the kind of man who would feed a blackmailer. He lay in wait for Lawrence near his home, shot at him and missed. Lawrence had a change of heart; he was scared stiff and now anxious to tell all. The store late at night was an ideal place to eliminate Lawrence and of course, me, since I happened to be there."

Corey explained what the police had learned from King's confession. Leland was scheduled to take over the job of general manager. He had taunted King, whom he never liked, jeered at him and promised he would be out on the street. On the night that King came to the store, he had hidden, watching Leland and the others playing with the mannequins. When Eliot and Dana left, he walked to the drapery in back of the window and pulled it aside. He had picked up a heavy statue from a counter. King had not intended to strike at that moment, but Leland, recognizing him, laughed contemptuously. King, losing his temper, swung the statue as Leland was turned toward him.

"King didn't know that Charlene was still in the store," Corey said. "He learned a few seconds later when he saw someone walk out and stand in front of the window. Her life might have been in danger, but he soon realized that she couldn't identify him. His first impulse was to conceal the murder. After waiting until she left, he carried Leland out of the window, placed a dummy on the piano bench, and then removed Leland's body to a back storeroom. He returned to check, found the original black-haired mannequin on the floor near the window where Leland had left it, and carried that away to the same storeroom. Then he slipped out the back door.

"This time," said Gerber, "I believe we have no more surprises coming." He chuckled. "But I thought there was a bit of news that would interest you. Because of public protest, a new window display has been arranged at the store. It's a scene from the same murder mystery. A real homey setting, nothing that the people can object to. A woman is playing the piano and a man is standing next to her, turning the pages."

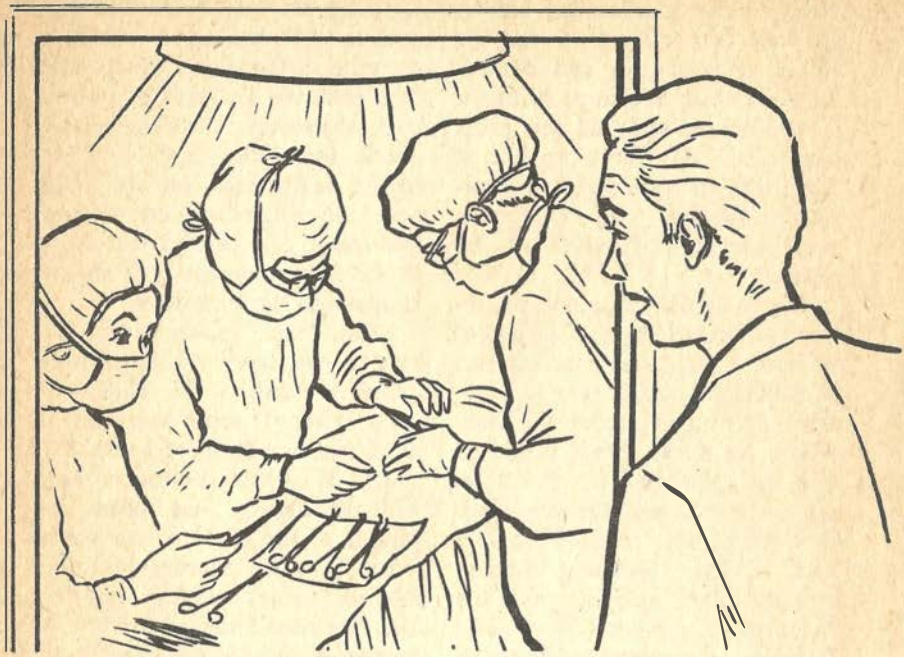
"Great," said Corey. He stood up. "I'm invited to Charlene's tonight and I think I'll take her down there to watch a pleasant, relaxing scene."

"You should hear the rest," said Gerber. "Those who haven't read the book, don't know what *actually* happens. You see, the man turns the page, moistens his finger with his tongue touches a page again moistens his finger . . ."

Corey groaned. "Poison! Tonight we'll stay home and watch TV."

PIT OF DESPAIR

by Arthur Porges



Doctor Waring should have been dead ten seconds after being pushed into the old mine shaft. He expected to die, and wondered why it was taking so long. He could even sense the gradual waning of the light as the blackness below drifted up to meet him.

Oddly, he didn't think of screaming; instead he told himself calmly, as if speaking of somebody else: I'm done for; this is it.

It was the heavy rains of the last week that saved him. They caused a deep deposit of semi-liquid mud to form at the foot of the shaft; he struck it with a smack that drove all the breath from his body, but the soft mass received his rangy form without breaking a single bone. But he nearly strangled on the ooze before clawing several pounds from his face.

His first thought then was to yell; to call to Rankin for help. He tried it, but produced only a faint wheeze from his battered chest; obviously, his lungs and diaphragm were still briefly out of whack from the fall.

Waring sucked in half a dozen deep breaths, and the dead feeling in his middle diminished. But he didn't yell, because his brain was working, too. He was

now conscious again of the overwhelming fact: Rankin had pushed him. His own colleague, a fellow-surgeon, had tried to kill him. Led him, in fact, like a lamb to the butcher. It had been Rankin's suggestion that along with a bit of hunting they explore the abandoned mine. He knew very well that Waring couldn't resist a chance to check out some geology; a mine was a great place for examining strata and hunting fossils.

But why? Why? Why should Dr. Rankin want to kill him?

At that moment, death passed him by for a second time, and just barely. A heavy object hurtled past him, brushing one shoulder, and spanked into the muck at his feet. He could see a little now, even in the gloom, as his pupils expanded, and recognized the shape. It was his gun, a sporterized 30-'06, now stock-deep in the mud. Clearly, Rankin believing him dead or dying, had tossed the thing after him. It was to be a disappearance, or possibly an accident, and the killer didn't want the gun up there in plain sight.

Well, Rankin was wrong; he wasn't dead or even hurt. When he got out of this place there would be an accounting. Rankin would be damned surprised. He'd never dream his victim had survived the fall. Unable to see the bottom, he wouldn't know about the mud. Even as it was, there were jagged fangs of rotten wood and rusty iron all around the soft patch. If Waring had hit one of them . . .

He looked up at the distant circle of light far above his head. The shaft was a hundred and fifty feet deep; that's why they'd decided to bring the rope—the rope! Waring pawed around in the mud. He'd had the coil over one shoulder, and now the rope was vital. Ah! Here it was, right on the edge. The worse for Rankin; he should have carried it himself, to play safe.

Waring peered up at the opening again, and a sudden chill drove into his bones. What good was a rope to a man already on the bottom of a hole? He needed the thing up on top, with a husky friend to lower it, not down here.

Waring's elation at his miraculous survival began to subside. Unless he could climb out of here, Rankin would still win the game. Quick death or slow, what was the difference? Either his body would not be found for years, if ever; or the murderer would pass the killing off as an accident. He could even claim they separated, one to go after deer. the other to explore the shaft; and that Rankin had no way of knowing what did happen to his colleague. It was all too easy; people respected a reputable doctor, and didn't think of

him as a criminal. Rankin could charm a deaf bird out of a tall tree; talk about a bedside manner. He was good, all right; how else did the man acquire a new Lincoln every year—and that estate in Bel Air—and the big cruiser berthed at Newport?

Waring stopped this line of thought; no time for such reflections. He had to get out of here before it got dark. There were difficulties enough in the light, such as it was.

He examined the walls of the shaft, using his cigarette lighter, but as sparingly as possible. What he saw was not encouraging. The sides were sheer rock, damp and slimy. Undoubtedly the miners had gone up and down in some kind of bucket, but there was no sign of whatever vertical rails it had run on; very likely they had been made of wood, and had long since rotted away. Here and there, at different heights, a few snags of wood or corroded metal could be seen, but as for any feasible way to the top, there just wasn't one.

Waring felt his heartbeat quicken, and knew that panic was not far away. He mustn't allow that; it was more deadly than the trap itself. With hands that shook, he lit a cigarette, and sat down, his back against the chill wall, to take stock.

What do I have to work with? he asked himself, beginning to search his pockets. He piled the contents on a fairly dry block of wood that rose above the mud. Coins, cigarettes, lighter, handkerchief, pen-knife, a dozen rifle shells; wallet, and in the largest pocket the gun-cleaning kit. And, of course, the coil of rope and the gun.

He studied the heap with growing dismay. There wasn't a damned thing there of any use. What good was a wallet, for example? You couldn't buy your way out of a spot like this. As he riffled through the contents, a pencil-stub fell out. He picked it up absently, then his eyes narrowed. At least he could fix Rankin—send him to the gas chamber. He'd leave a note, telling just how his colleague had planned the murder. That would do it—or would it? How about motive?

Waring knew he was frittering away valuable time with all this introspection, but couldn't help himself. The air was none too good down here; full of carbon dioxide, probably; and he didn't seem to have much energy. Yet the puzzle of why Rankin wanted him dead seemed more important than the trap itself.

A vagrant memory came to him then. That magnificent scene in "Monte Cristo" where the Abbe Faria explains, using facts from Dantes' own lips, all the dark motives behind the boy's burial in the Chateau d'If. Surely

Waring could apply a similar technique.

There was only one clue, if it could be called that. Two weeks ago Waring had returned early from a week-end, made an unexpected stop at the office late at night, and found Rankin busy in one room of the suite. Quietly Waring had paused at the door, assuming his partner had been called down for some emergency, and opened it just a crack for a quick peek. He had glimpsed Rankin, surgical mask on his face, working over a sheeted figure on the operating table, and assisted by a nurse Waring didn't recognize. Immediately he withdrew; it wasn't tactful to intrude on a fellow surgeon at such a time; besides, Rankin might ask him to assist, and Waring was tired. But just before he closed the door, two things happened: the nurse saw him, and gasped; and the woman on the table cried out, "Dr. Waring, that hurts so bad . . ."

Thinking about it now, he wondered about his own blindness. By mentioning the matter to Rankin, he had confirmed the nurse's testimony about his presence at so awkward a moment. His collague had come up casually with a plausible explanation, and Waring had accepted it without suspicion. Now, after the murderous shove at the mouth of the shaft, he saw the facts in a new light. Clearly, Rankin had been performing an illegal operation—and not the first, to judge from the sequence of Lincolns and the other expensive toys the man owned. Even worse, he kept his face covered, working through a trusted confederate—the nurse—and called himself Waring. No wonder he had to get rid of his partner after being caught in the act. Hell, the man might even claim that Waring had run off to avoid prison; the women would all say they had been treated by him and not Rankin. The doctor boiled with fury at the thought.

Once more he pawed through the pile of stuff from his pockets. There had to be some way out of this trap. After all, he had enough rope to reach the top; he only had to get it there.

He searched the few dry spots beyond the pool of mud, and found a rusty iron bolt that weighed at least four ounces. He tied one end of the rope to it, and made a few tentative upward tosses. Much too light; by the time the bolt had lifted a few feet of the cord—slender though it was—all the velocity was lost.

He found another hunk of corroded metal, bound the two into one mass of half a pound or more, and tried again. But the rope tangled before the weight rose more than twenty feet. This wasn't going to work.

Waring thought for a few minutes, and hoped he'd found the

flaw. The rope had to be coiled in such a way that the rising weight of metal could lift it without causing any tangles. He invented several arrangements, and came up with one of alternate coils—a figure eight pile—that didn't knot up. But when he took a mighty heave towards the shining circle far overhead, the results were ludicrously inadequate. It is one thing to throw a ball several hundred feet in an arc, but another one altogether to project it straight up from the bottom of a narrow shaft. Not even the best outfielder in both major leagues could have managed it; of that Waring was certain.

Filled with despair, the doctor sat down again. He looked at his watch. About three more hours of daylight. After that, only the cigarette lighter for illumination, and it wouldn't last long. More sun tomorrow—if the promised storm didn't move in, maybe drowning him down here like a rat—but also a day without food. A man needed all his strength to climb a rope one hundred and fifty feet high. No, it had to be now, in these three hours, or never. Of course, he could yell, now that Rankin was gone, but visitors to the old mine were bound to be scarce, especially at this time of year.

Gloomily, Waring pulled his rifle out of the mud, and used his handkerchief to clean the stock. The action, he noted, was still clean and bright with oil.

Suddenly he felt a surge of hope. The gun was power. Could that power be used to save him?

He thought of stuffing a foot of rope into the muzzle, and then winced at his own folly. Fill the barrel and fire a bullet; sure; blow up the gun and your own silly face. A billet was out. How the devil did they use rifles to launch grenades, and why didn't those guns blow up? He racked his brain trying to remember. Korea, but that was a long way back, and he hadn't been a combat soldier; a medico didn't become an arms expert. Still, he'd always been curious and observant.

One idea came back. A hole in the middle of the grenade to let the bullet through; then the blast did the actual tossing. Or was that the old, obsolete method?

Waring groaned at his own fallible memory. Hell, he should be able to figure it out for himself, anyhow. You couldn't fire a slug, not with anything in the barrel, but maybe in the last quarter inch . . . But he knew that wouldn't work. No way to get enough weight from that small a bit of rope, or from anything else. You had to have something sticking well down the muzzle—those rifle grenades had a shaft several inches long; yes, they did; he remembered, now.

Then the solution came, like a

flashbulb in the brain. A blank. A good, strong blank—that's what it took. He snatched a shell from the wooden block where he had piled them, took the penknife, and got busy. It was easy to remove the soft-nosed bullet, and replace it with a small wad of paper—a torn credit card from his wallet.

But that was only part of the answer. What did you tie the rope to? He searched the ground again. A few rusty bolts, but much too thick for the muzzle. Surely he wasn't going to fail now, with so much figured out.

Then his eyes fell on the little cleaning kit. Of course, The jointed brass rod: a perfect fit, naturally. He took out the sections, joining just the first two, to make a shaft seven inches long. He tied one end firmly to the rope, arranged the figure eight piles again, and chambered his blank.

Waring pressed the stock firmly against the wooden block, pointed the muzzle towards the mouth of the shaft, and with a silent prayer, fired.

The sound was ear-splitting in that confined space. He saw the bit of rod sail up perhaps thirty feet, pulling the cord with it, then the thing wobbled, hesitated, and fell back.

Waring swore grittily, biting the words off between his teeth with a viciousness that would have startled his patients. What the devil was wrong now? Time was getting short. He tried to make a calm analysis. First of all, the rod probably wasn't heavy enough. To carry that much rope, a heavier weight was needed. All right; I'll tie a couple of bolts to it, he thought. And maybe—just maybe—the blank wasn't powerful enough, either. How should that be remedied?

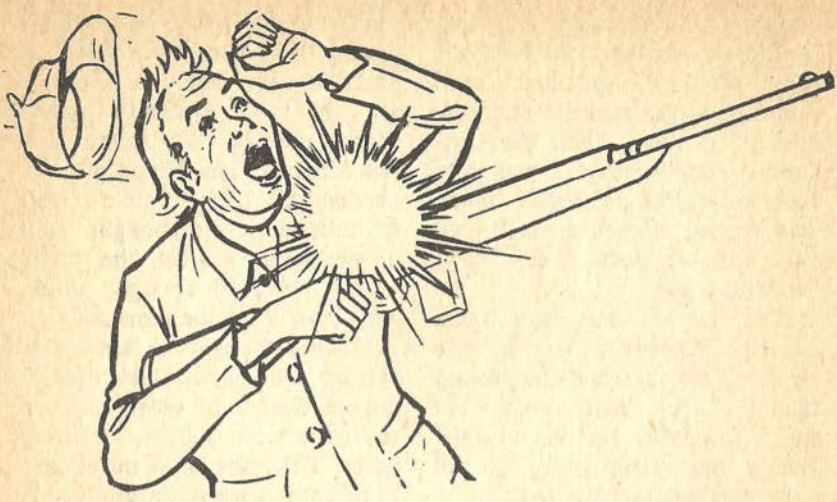
Waring thought he knew. He opened two shells, and used a double charge of powder. Then with the new weight, he tried again. This time he almost made it; the rope soared gracefully to a point just below the mouth of the pit. Waring knew that victory was near.

Assuming the weight was about right, that meant more powder. This time he used three loads. The roar was incredibly loud, and he realized that even the marvelous 30-'06 action had its limit of strength, and would never fire again.

But then he saw with joy that it wouldn't have to. The weighted rod had sailed far over the rim, and when he tugged at the foot of the rope, it slid down only a few yards before tightening. Somewhere, outside the mouth of the shaft, the mass of metal was safely snagged. All that was left now was the climb itself. And then the reckoning with Rankin. Waring began the long, tiring ascent. He topped the rim just as the sun sank.

BACKFIRE

by Tom Godwin



I knew that Jack Browder was planning to murder either me or Doris when he wanted me to go with them on their hunting trip.

I couldn't have proved it but I didn't need any proof. I knew Jack for what he actually was.

Women liked him. He was tall and handsome, with long lashes over dark eyes and the kind of curly brown hair that made a woman want to run her fingers through it. When he spoke in his deep, melodious voice and flashed that engaging smile of his, you could practically see them melt at his feet.

Yeah, women liked him and nobody knew better than Jack Browder how charming he could be. But I had long ago seen what actually lurked behind that handsome, smiling front of his.

It was something heartless and cold and calculating, like a coiled rattlesnake waiting for its prey.

And Doris had married him.

Two months before she had been Doris Reynolds—the prettiest girl in Phoenix, nineteen years old, with red-gold curls the color of an Arizona sunrise, lips as sweet as the petals of a wild rose, and big, trusting blue eyes that made you want to go out and fight a lion or something to protect her.

Also, she was rich. I guess that was one of the reasons I lost when handsome Jack Browder became the competing suitor against me and my busted-down nose.

Not that she was accustomed to wealth. It had been only the year before that her father had accidently found a rich gold vein out in the hills and the Reynolds family suddenly had lots of money.

A few months later both of Doris's parents had been killed in a traffic accident and Doris was left all alone in the world—all alone and lonesome, with no one to care what became of her and nothing for company but a big bank account.

That was Jack's cue to enter the scene.

For my part, her money worried me. I was afraid she would think I really wanted it instead of her. I had a fair income but not along the order of new Cadillacs every year, annual trips to Europe, and things like that.

Jack didn't have any money at all but he managed to wear expensive clothes and give the impression of being well off. He turned on all his charm with her, and he could turn on a lot. It wasn't long until I was sure I saw the handwriting on the wall—I didn't stand a chance.

I told her good-by one evening, knowing that it would be for the last time. She smiled up at me, the sweet radiance of her youth and beauty like a light on her face, and I told myself, *She smiles at Jack the same way—except more often.*

"Good-by, Bill," she said. "Until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow," I answered.

I didn't sleep that night. When morning came I knew I wouldn't be able to forget her if I stayed in Phoenix. So I left, and didn't come back for six weeks.

I was told, the day I returned, that Jack and Doris had left that morning to get married in Las Vegas. I moped around like a fool for a few hours, feeling miserably lonesome, then I went to a bar, wondering if I was an even bigger fool to try to drown my sorrows in whiskey.

When I woke up in jail the next morning with a bad hangover I had the answer to *that* question.

I heard that—at Jack's suggestion—they spent their honeymoon in Las Vegas and that he had a gay time in the casinos and show places there. They had been married seven weeks when I saw Doris again.

She was standing before a fall bargain display of dresses and for a moment I didn't recognize her. All the radiance was gone from her and she had aged ten years.

She saw me and exclaimed, *"Bill!"* her face lighting up for an instant. Then the light was gone as she said in a tone that I would have thought held sombre accusation if I hadn't known better, "You walked out one evening and left town and never even wrote to me. Why did you do that?"

"Because I had sense enough to recognize superior competition, Doris," I said. "But what happened to you—have you been sick?"

"Sick?" For a moment she

looked puzzled. "Oh—no, not sick. I . . . feel fine."

"Where's Jack?"

"He's . . . in Las Vegas again, right now."

"About your marriage, Doris—felicitations, best wishes, and a lifetime of happiness with Jack."

I saw the cloud of something hurt and bitter pass across her face. When she spoke it was in a tone that had no life:

"Thank you, Bill."

We talked a minute—those pointless things people will say to each other when they suddenly find themselves in two different worlds—then I went on my way.

But even after I was home I kept seeing that look on her face and I knew that her marriage with Jack was already turning into a disillusionment.

Jack came to my place a week later. We had always disliked each other but this time he was bubbling over with fake friendliness.

"Doris and I are going deer hunting," he said, "and we want you to go with us."

"Deer hunting?" I asked. "Since when did you become the outdoor type?"

He forced a laugh. "Never too late to change. Come on and be our guide, Bill—the three of us will have a lot of fun together."

Yeah, I thought. The third wheel will have a ball—no doubt about it . . .

"What do you say, Bill?" he prompted. "Will you go with us?"

I looked at him, at the way the eagerness was showing through, and I knew beyond any doubt that he intended for someone to die on that hunting trip.

"I'll go," I said. "When do you want to start?"

I could almost hear him let out a big sigh of relief. "In the morning," he said. "Early."

Jack and Doris were at my place early the next morning in their shiny new open-top jeep, the back of it piled with brand-new camping gear.

"I'm glad you agreed to go with us, Bill," Doris said. She was smiling and didn't look tired and disillusioned the way she had the last time I saw her. I wondered if Jack hadn't been putting on a little pretense of still loving her to account for the change. And she was as cute as a kitten in her new denims, cowboy boots and shirt, and a cowboy hat cocked over her red-gold curls. "Jack said he knew you would pick us out a good hunting area and—"

"I see you're ready, Bill," Jack interrupted, "so let's get to moving—only three days of hunting season left."

I got in my old four-wheel-drive pickup to lead the way, thinking, Yeah—let's hurry. Only three days left for legal murder. After that the law would ask too many questions . . .

By mid-afternoon we were at the little Reese ranch which set near the top of the gentle western slope of Granite Mountain. Old Joe Reese—who was also the deputy sheriff in that area—was gone, but Mom Reese made us all welcome.

Mom was big and fat and jolly, with a heart of gold and a tongue that was never still so long as there was someone to talk to.

One of the first things she did, though, was to warn Jack and me about the danger of fire.

"We've had a very dry fall," she said. "So you two be careful about smoking while hunting—Joe and I don't want our cattle barbecued just yet." Then, in almost the same breath, she turned to Doris and said, "You're going to sleep in the house, honey—the nights are too chilly now for a little city girl to rough it."

We sat around and talked with Mom until after dark. Or, rather, Jack and Mom talked while Doris and I listened. Jack sat near Doris and he made it a point to show her affectionate attention quite often. I saw her face light up every time he touched her or called her "darling."

He was playing his new role well—this time that of the clean-cut, all-American-boy-type who worshipped his young bride and had a special place in his heart for motherly old ladies named Mom Reese.

I left shortly after dark. Jack had already set up his cot on the back porch so I put mine out near where we had parked the pickup and jeep.

I stretched out on my cot and listened to the bits of conversation that the night breeze brought to me. Jack was working hard to make a good impression on Mom. I knew why. A deputy named Joe Reese would do the investigating if anyone got killed and having Mrs. Joe Reese to attest to the integrity of his character could be very helpful to Jack.

Doris had gone to bed and I was almost asleep when I heard Jack mention my name. I raised up, wide awake and both ears fanned out.

" . . good old Bill," he was saying to Mom. ". . . best friend I ever had . . . worried about him now, though . . . notice how he kept staring at Doris? . . . won't forgive her for marrying me instead of him . . . we're trying to show him we're still his best friends . . . snap him out of that brooding . . . afraid he might do something desperate . . ."

The night wind freshened, drowning out the rest, and I considered what I had heard.

So I was brooding, about to do something desperate? Which would be what—despondently commit suicide? No—even if Jack did murder me and make it

look like suicide, he would have gained nothing . . .

Then I saw the obvious and felt the first stab of fear. He had said of me, ". . . *won't forgive Doris for marrying me instead of him . . .*"

Doris was the one he intended to kill.

Little hurt, hopeful, trusting Doris, who would do anything he asked her to do . . .

And, of course, he had already laid the groundwork so that I, not he, would be suspected as her murderer.

Jack was ready to go right after breakfast the next morning, his and Doris's rifles in their twin scabbards in the jeep.

Mom beamed with approval as Jack helped Doris to the seat and gave her a kiss. He was certainly missing no opportunity to publicly display his affection for the girl he intended to kill . . .

In accordance with Jack's request, I stopped once at a good vantage point to let him see the lay of the country and point out the various places—Pine Basin, Sandy Wash, Spur Canyon, Box Canyon . . .

We drove on toward Pine Basin and I saw why Mom was worried about fire. The grass was high and thick and dry as tinder, just waiting for a spark to touch it off.

When we stopped at the lower end of Pine Basin Jack jumped out of his jeep with a smile and a suggestion:

"Suppose we split up here? You take the middle of the basin, Doris the left side and I'll go up the right. Like that, if there are any dear here, one of us will get a shot."

"Fine with me," I said, wondering how he was going to kill Doris when he would be too far away to even see her through the trees.

When we met back at the vehicles at noon—Pine Basin was not large—I still hadn't figured it out.

And there had been no sign of deer.

I said to him, as the three of us stood beside his jeep, "It looks like the hunters before us have pretty well driven the deer up into the high country. We'll have to go there."

He scowled at the high ridges and peaks above us, a sour look on his face. Apparently his murder plans hadn't included such physical exertion as mountain climbing . . .

Doris was busy taking some small rocks out of her pockets—quartz specimens—and laying them out on the fender of the jeep. Jack became aware of what she was doing when she reached into the glove compartment for a reading glass and began hopefully examining the specimens with it.

He turned his scowl on her and said, "So that's why you brought that glass along? So you could waste your time looking for rocks instead of deer!"

"I *did* look for deer, Jack," she protested. "But since we would be in mountain country I was hoping—I thought it would be fun—to see if I could find some rich ore like Daddy found."

He opened his mouth to say something more to her, then the scowl faded away and a thoughtful expression replaced it. He turned to me, his tone again one of good-natured friendliness.

"It's too late to get into the high country today, Bill. Suppose I pick some canyons on the way back home. Might have the luck on a beginner, you know."

"O.K.," I said. "Lead the way."

He drove back the way we had come and stopped near the mouth of Box Canyon. "More grass here than any other canyon," he said, watching it ripple in the wind like a field of grain. "Should be deer up it and if it's really a box canyon, they can't get away."

"It's a box canyon," I said. "The upper end is a high, sheer wall."

He looked pleased. "Then I'm going to try my luck in it, as soon as I get this wrinkle pulled out of my sock." He began unlacing his boot. "In case I'm wrong, why don't you and Doris try those other two canyons for deer sign?"

"I'm on my way," I said.

Which I was, until I got out of sight. Then I circled back to a place where I could see without being seen.

Doris was well on her way to the mouth of a canyon to the north. Jack was just leaving the jeep, looking in all directions.

When he came to the mouth of Box canyon he turned aside a little to go into a thicket of tall, dry brush. When he came out five minutes later he lifted his hand, as though looking at his watch, then continued on up the canyon.

I looked at my own watch and saw that it was 12:30.

I patiently waited and watched. At 3:00 he came walking down the canyon. He went into the same brush thicket and came out a minute later. With a long look in all directions he went over to his jeep and sat down.

He was still sitting there when I saw Doris coming an hour later. I made my own appearance then and got to the jeep shortly after she did.

"I was right, Bill," Jack said as soon as I walked up. "I saw the tracks of a big buck up there."

"But no buck?" I asked.

"I didn't go all the way—an

old stomach ailment suddenly hit me. But one of us can get him tomorrow."

Mom had driven to Mesquite Junction for the mail when we got back so Doris fixed us something to eat, concern in her eyes every time she looked at Jack. I wondered how she could think he was sick when he looked so perfectly normal.

Jack ate part of the meal that Doris had fixed for him, his glance flicking often to her. They were glances in which the satisfaction was not quite hidden; in which the cold anticipation was shining like a rattler's scales after a rain.

I knew what it meant. Tomorrow Doris was to die.

He went to the back porch and sprawled out on his cot after he ate. Doris following him, to get him an extra pillow. I heard her talking to him and heard him give her short answers, when he answered at all. When she asked him for the second time if they shouldn't go on back to Phoenix where he could see a doctor, I heard him sit up on the cot and say with the pseudo-politeness that can cut like a little whip:

"I don't want to seem rude, Doris, but I'm *trying* to concentrate on certain things I have in mind. I'm sure I will feel much better after I rest a while."

There was a silence, then I heard her walk away from him. I lit a cigarette and went outside, hoping I would finally get the chance to talk to her alone.

She was standing near their jeep, looking out across the wide desert to the west, all the lines of sadness and disillusionment back on her face.

She looked up at me and tried to smile, as though nothing had happened. "The desert is beautiful at sunset, isn't it?"

"So I've heard," I said. "How much do you love Jack?"

She recoiled a little, as though I had unexpectedly slapped an old wound. She looked out across the desert again.

"As much as he will let me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I—so much of the time I don't understand him. He will act like he's already tired of me."

"I've noticed that."

"But at other times"—her eyes lighted up and the life came back into her voice—"at other times he will show he loves me by doing special things for me. Like the rifle he bought for me."

"Is it a good rifle?" I asked.

"He bought me the best rifle he could find in Phoenix after you promised to go with us—he looked for hours to find just the kind of brand-new, special-made foreign rifle that he wanted me to have."

So he had bought her a special kind of rifle *after* he knew I was going along?"

"Let's see those rifles," I said, turning to the jeep.

I looked at Jack's rifle first. It was an expensive American-made 30:06.

"Jack just bought an ordinary rifle for himself," Doris said. "But look at the one he got for me."

She handed it to me. At first glance—or to anyone who did not know guns—it was a beautiful thing; an identical twin to Jack's rifle except for being even more polished and fancy.

But that was all there was to it—its appearance. It was the very cheapest kind of imitation of the American rifle—it was deadly dangerous gilded gingerbread.

I pulled back the breech bolt and saw that the bolt locking mechanism was a flimsy improvization; made of thin, brittle, cast metal, so weak that any shot might cause the breech bolt to be blown back in the shooter's face, seriously injuring him if not killing him.

But Jack would want no if's

I ejected the cartridges and saw that two of the bullets had a tiny smear of something gray. It looked like cement. I turned the rifle to try to blow down the barrel. It was very, very solidly plugged.

That, then, was the way he had tried to kill her. He had plugged the barrel with cement, just in front of the firing chamber, so that the bullet could not possibly escape and the entire force of the cartridge would go backward, to rip off the breech-bolt and drive it deep into her brain.

"—don't you think so, Bill?" Doris was asking. "Didn't he give me something exceptional?"

"Yes," I said. It was hard to make my voice sound normal while my throat was tight and hot with the surge of hatred for him and the desire to kill him—with the knowing that I *was* going to kill him, somehow, for what he had tried to do to her. "Yes, it's an exceptional gun, Doris."

I turned my back to her and dropped all the cartridges into my shirt pocket as I pretended to reload the rifle.

My own role in Jack's scheme was obvious, of course. He had already played me up to Mom as psychotically resentful toward Doris and moodily brooding.

Who else but Bill Jones could the law suspect as her murderer?

Mom came driving up then and we went into the house. Jack came in, to bravely belittle his illness. "It's just something I used to get quite often in Viet Nam," he said. "I'm usually better the next day."

I found this explanation interesting since I knew the closest he

ever got to Viet Nam was when he was blowing Doris's money in Las Vegas.

Mom started relating the latest gossip from Mesquite Junction while Jack pretended to listen. Doris went to sit beside him and he laid his hand on her shoulder; a gesture of affection that was not reflected by the musing, coldly-satisfied expression on his face.

At dark I went back out to my cot. I wanted to do some thinking. My mind isn't very sharp but it can sometimes blunder onto the right answers when I strain it long enough.

I was sure that Jack had already abandoned his former method of killing Doris. The absence of deer would give her no reason to fire the rifle. He now had some other plan, one which he was certain could not fail.

What?

The desert stars were long since bright overhead when I finally found the answer and knew how he had arranged for her to die.

It would be a death far more horrible than the other one.

I thought about it, hearing in my mind her sobbing cries for the help that would never come, hearing her screams of pain as she died.

That was the way he wanted the world to end for her . . .

Later that night, when I was sure that everyone was asleep, I got up and went to the jeep. I made a check that showed, very definitely, that I was right. Then I took her rifle and put all the cartridges back in it.

This made me feel much better and I was asleep, myself, a few minutes later.

Jack was still pretending to be sick the next morning. "We'll wait a little while," he said, "in case I get better."

I went outside, to wander around restlessly in the bright sunshine. I knew why he was waiting—if Doris and I left too soon it might upset his murder schedule.

At 11:30 I went back in the house. Jack gave me the wan smile of a martyr—Mom was watching—and said, "I'll be O. K. in a couple of hours but I've already caused enough delay. So you and Doris go on. I want Doris to get that big buck I told you about—I want her to get the best trophy of any of us."

He stepped over to put his arm around Doris and hug her while Mom beamed from the kitchen doorway with the usual approval. "And nothing, Doris, could make me more proud of you."

Mom turned back to her cooking and Jack's arm dropped away from Doris. "All right, Bill," he said, "you'd better get a move on—it's almost noon."

I went out and got in my pickup. Doris came out a few

seconds later, the expression on her face telling me that Jack had continued to ignore her after Mom was no longer watching. She got her rifle out of the jeep and sat down beside me, looking back to see if Jack was going to come to the door and tell her good-by. I waited.

He came to the door, impatient question on his face.

"Won't that thing start?" he asked.

"We're just going," Doris said. She lifted her hand in a gesture of farewell. "Good-by, Jack."

He glanced at her as one might glance at a passing stranger. And to him she was a stranger—or far less than a stranger. To him she was a woman already dead. He didn't even reply to her.

Instead, he looked at me with a thin smile and said, "Good hunting, Bill—I have a feeling this is going to be a day you'll remember."

Then he turned and went back inside.

Doris sat moodily silent beside me for the first mile. I knew why and I said, "Why do you keep trying so hard?"

"Because—" She hesitated, as though trying to find the right words. "Because I loved him, and I thought he loved me—because, so many times, he still seems to love me."

"When someone is watching."

"Yes . . . I know. But there are things to show he cares—like the time when I was so hurt I told him I was going to get a divorce and give him his freedom. He hugged me and told me he was sorry he had hurt me and that if I got a divorce he wouldn't have anything to live for."

Well . . . that was understandable. A divorce would forever put her money beyond his reach.

"So I want to try a little longer," she said. "I'm a coward, I guess—the world can be such an empty place when you have no one to love you or care what happens to you. I don't want to call quits to our marriage until I'm sure there's nothing there."

I felt the bitterness of still loving the girl who had not been able to see me for the handsome face of Jack and I said, "But Doris—a girl with lots of money should never find the world an empty place."

"Money!" She spit out the word, the sparks of sudden anger in her eyes and something that seemed close to tears. "Money solves everything, doesn't it? But did you ever actually try to find out how much happiness money can buy for you?"

"I was never rich enough to try," I said. "But did you ever lose something you wanted very much—something that neither love nor money could get for you?"

She looked away from me, down at her hands in her lap. When she answered it was in a strange, small little voice, so low I could hardly hear it:

"Yes."

Neither of us said anything more until we stopped below the mouth of Box Canyon. Doris picked up her rifle but did not get out at once. I knew that in the darkness of her dejection she had no interest whatever in hunting a deer—she was only doing it in the forlorn hope that it might cause Jack to think more of her.

The Reese place was in plain view up the mountain's slope behind us and I knew that Jack would be watching us with his binoculars. He would want to know for certain that Doris walked alone up that canyon of death.

And her time of grace was now growing dangerously short

"Forget the deer," I said. I heard the harshness of tension in my voice. "Listen to what I say—your life depends on it."

Her eyes widened with surprise and question.

"You'll have to go up that canyon—you'll die later on if you don't. You'll have to trust me, and do exactly as I say."

"But Bill—" she protested. question and incomprehension and a touch of alarm mingling on her face. "How could I be in danger? What is—"

"There are things you wouldn't believe if I told you now. Later, you will understand everything. Will you trust me and do as I say?"

She answered without hesitation, "Whatever it is, you should know I trust you, Bill. But—"

"Then head on up that canyon. As soon as you get around the first bend go into a fast trot . . ." I told her how to find the hidden crevice up the canyon, which so few people knew about, that led up to the top of the canyon's south rim. "Get to this crevice and up on top as fast as you can," I finished. "Stop for nothing on the way—absolutely nothing."

She hesitated and I gave her a little shove. "Out—on your way," I said. "Wait for me on top if I don't meet you before then."

She slid out of the pickup. "All right, Bill," she said, and walked swiftly away.

I put the pickup in gear and started for the mouth of the adjoining canyon, Spur Canyon. Some distance up it was a place where I could drive up out of it and cut back to Box Canyon and the upper end of the crevice.

I kept turning my head to watch her, feeling a cold apprehension. I wanted to go with her, to make sure no harm came to

her, but there was absolutely no way I could do so without being seen by Jack. It was imperative to my own plan that Jack, in the very near future, should think she had died.

I could, within two minutes, completely wreck his murder scheme. But he would see me do so and he would promptly devise another murder plan; one to be carried out in Phoenix or some other place where I could not be near her to watch over her.

If I did not interfere with his plan—and if I had not erred in my own counter-plan—he would never again try to harm her. He would be dead.

I resisted the urge to hurry, not wanting to arouse Jack's suspicions, until I was out of his sight up in Spur Canyon. Then I romped on the accelerator. According to my calculations I would have no time to spare in getting up and around to the crevice, then down it and on down Box Canyon to meet Doris and make sure she made it safely the rest of the way.

But, fifteen minutes later, the bright sunlight suddenly faded. I looked back and felt the chill of near-panic as I saw the reason.

Rolling high into the sky from what would be the lower end of Box Canyon was a great, black column of smoke.

The fire had started more than twenty minutes sooner than I had expected. Already it would be a solid sheet of flame, ten feet high and reaching from wall to wall of the canyon as it rushed toward Doris. Once around the bend, with the west wind behind it, it would go roaring up the canyon faster than a horse could run . . .

As I look back, I have only a hazy memory of the rest of that ride. Mainly I remember the frantic urgency to get to Doris before the fire caught her and I remember shoving the accelerator to the floor and holding it there. I remember my prayer that the old pickup would not fail me and I remember the answer; the way it went smashing through brush and young trees, careening through boulders and across ditches, hurling rocks behind as it scrambled up steep banks, pawing and bellowing like a wild bull all the way and never once faltering.

But the wind-pushed fire had a shorter distance to go. When I finally slewed to a stop near the top of the crevice the smoke was a black pall that darkened the mountainside and the fire was in the canyon below; a raging, savage thing that made a noise like the roaring of a river as it swept on up the canyon. It was already past the crevice. Nothing but black, smouldering desolation lay in its wake and a bright tongue of flame was racing up the crevice, itself.

For a long moment I stood motionless and frozen, not breathing. It seemed to me that the entire world stood still, even that raging wall of flame. I felt a sense of loss that no words could ever describe and in my mind I heard the grim and terrible accusation:

You fool—you let her die!

Then I heard the panting cry from below me; from under the overhand on which I stood:

"Bill—where are you?"

I dropped down into the crevice and put my arm around her. She was shaking, almost helpless with exhaustion, the crevice's brushfire only yards behind her. I half carried her to the top and lifted her onto the seat of the pickup.

"The fire—" she said in her labored panting. "I ran—but it ran faster—"

"It's all over, now," I said. I kept my arm around her shaking shoulders and brushed the tangled hair back from her little face that was now so grimy with ashes and smoke and perspiration. "It's all over and nothing is ever going to harm you again, Doris. I promise—not ever again . . ."

We reached the head of Box Canyon a few minutes after the fire had died in one last billow of smoke against the barren cliffs. The fire in the crevice had died out the same way and Sandy Wash had stopped the fire below the mouth of the canyon.

Everything was over but for the rendezvous, the revelation, and the execution.

I had the pickup hidden behind a high outcropping of granite. The head of Box Canyon was only two miles from the Reese place and I could see Jack's jeep already coming. I had known that he would want to make sure that the fire had made a clean sweep to the head of the canyon and that Doris was definitely dead.

Doris stood beside me, question burning on her face.

"I'll tell you now," I said. "Jack started the fire. He wanted to kill you. You probably still won't believe it."

Her face paled under stains of ashes and smoke. "But—but he *couldn't* have, miles away—and why should he?"

"I knew you wouldn't believe me. Listen when he gets here, to what he and I say to each other. And don't—in the name of God—*don't* let him see you."

I was standing near the rim of the canyon, looking down at the black, smouldering things that had been green life a few minutes before, when I heard his jeep stop behind me. I turned around.

He was staring at me with a glare of suspicious question. I

saw that one hand was near the rifle which was still in its scabbard.

"What in hell are you doing *here?*" he demanded.

"I tried to get up along the rim of the canyon fast enough to save Doris," I said. "Your burning glass set the fire quicker than I thought it would."

His mouth dropped open. Then it snapped shut and he was suddenly out of the seat, the rifle held waist high and a deadly look in his eyes.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Why, Jack," I said, "I knew last night that you had hoped to murder Doris by plugging the barrel of the cheapest, most dangerous rifle you could find in Phoenix. But there were no deer to cause her to fire it—so you took her magnifying glass yesterday afternoon and set it up as a burning glass in that brush thicket. Later, when the sun had moved enough for it to no longer be in focus, you came back and put dry grass—and probably match heads—under it so that at noon today it would set the canyon on fire.

"And Doris, at your request, would be up the canyon where she would burn to death with no chance for escape."

He stared at me, gripping the rifle, the hatred shining in his eyes, no longer the least bit handsome.

"Do you think the law would believe a wild story like that?" he asked.

"That suicide rifle you bought for her, with that cement plug, is enough, alone, to show the law you tried to murder her. When they look at the place you set up the burning glass"—I implied seeing something that I had not seen—"and find the lens with part of that bright red plastic handle still not melted to show that it was the glass of Doris's that disappeared out of the glove compartment when you were pretending to be getting a wrinkle out of your sock . . ."

"All right, fool," Jack said. He smiled at me; a smile that was thin and vicious with hatred and anticipation. "You have just blabbered your way into hell."

He lifted the rifle chest high and I said, "Do you think you can get away with a double murder today?"

He laughed. "You're going to be the victim of an innocent hunting accident. I'll go back and sadly report to that old woman, 'I went out to look at the fire, thought I saw a deer through the trees, and shot it. It was Bill—poor Bill—best friend I ever had . . .' Then I'll get worried about my wife, drive down and dispose of the remains of that glass, then go back, shocked and grief-stricken, to tell the old woman that my wife is dead."

I saw a movement thirty feet

behind Jack. It was Doris, who had walked up silently on the carpet of pine needles. But now she was stopped, one hand on the tree for support, her blue eyes enormous in her white face, her hand to her mouth, as she heard the cold, brutal words.

"Then you'll have her money, to live in the style that you would like to be accustomed to living in?" I said.

"It's my money now and there won't be anyone to try to keep me from having fun with it, the way she has been doing." He laughed again and I saw that in his triumph he was not quite sane. "I'll even use part of *my* money to give her a big, showy funeral."

I flicked another quick glance at Doris. She was still frozen by the tree and even at the distance I could see the horror in her eyes as she listened to the thing that she had once loved as a man.

"And then you'll be on your way to hit all the gay spots between Las Vegas and Paris, I suppose?" I asked.

"And then I'll be on my way," he said. He raised the rifle higher. "And this will be the first step. I'd like to gut shoot you a few times, just for kicks, but this is supposed to be a hunting accident. So how about a good, clean shot in the forehead?"

He swung the rifle up and the muzzle of it was a big, black hole that suddenly seemed to be large enough for me to shove my fist into. His finger was on the trigger as the sights swung in line with my forehead.

I was aware of Doris being away from the tree, of her running toward Jack with protest on her face and her mouth open with the beginning of a scream.

He never heard her. He was already pressing the trigger and her scream was drowned by the shattering blast of the rifle.

He was hurled backward to the ground, the rifle flying from his hands. He kicked spasmodically, the breech bolt buried almost all the way in what had been his eye socket.

I caught Doris and swung her away from him, not wanting her to see any more of the ugly sight. I hurried her to the pickup and circled wide of Jack's body as we started for the Reese place.

She was shaking like a leaf and I said, "You've had a terrible day, Doris. I'm sorry."

"He died the way he wanted—wanted me to die," she said. "You switched rifles last night, didn't you?"

"Yes. It had to be that way or he would have killed you later on in Phoenix. But it's all over now, Doris—it's a nightmare that never happened and now you're safe, and free, and your life is ahead of you."

"Yes." She straightened a little in the seat. "And where I was blind, now I can see "

There was no reason to cause Doris further unpleasantness by telling anyone of Jack's murder attempts so we let everyone thing we had heard a shot and then found his body.

The reaction of the law was best expressed by old Joe Reese, who said, "Anybody that would hunt with such a cheap rifle ought to have sense enough to know that the first shot would blow his head off."

I knew that Doris was more upset and alone than she had ever been so I hitched her jeep behind my pickup and we rode together on the trip back to Phoenix. And I wanted this last chance to have her beside me before we had to go our seperate ways.

More than ever, now, her money would be a barrier between us. After her experience with Jack how could I ever expect her to fully believe that I cared not in the slightest for her wealth?

The sun was down, the western sky glowing with gold, when we stopped in front of her house. The ride together was over and I could feel my own loneliness already setting in.

"Well, here we are," I said. "It was nice of you to ride with me."

"Are you going home now?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's time to resume our roles of Poor Boy and Rich Girl. But if anything should ever happen that you need me, let me know."

She looked at me, a strange, tender smile on her face. "Bill, you fool—didn't I tell you that I once wanted something that my money couldn't buy for me?"

For a moment I had the wild impression that she meant she had wanted me instead of Jack. Then I jerked my mind back into sanity. "What did you have your heart set on?" I asked. "The Koh-i-noor diamond?"

She shook her head, that little smile still on her face.

"As for being a rich girl," she said, "I was afraid to tell him but there was a reason why I didn't want Jack to throw money away. That's why I brought the magnifying glass along—why I was trying so desperately to find rich ore like Daddy found.

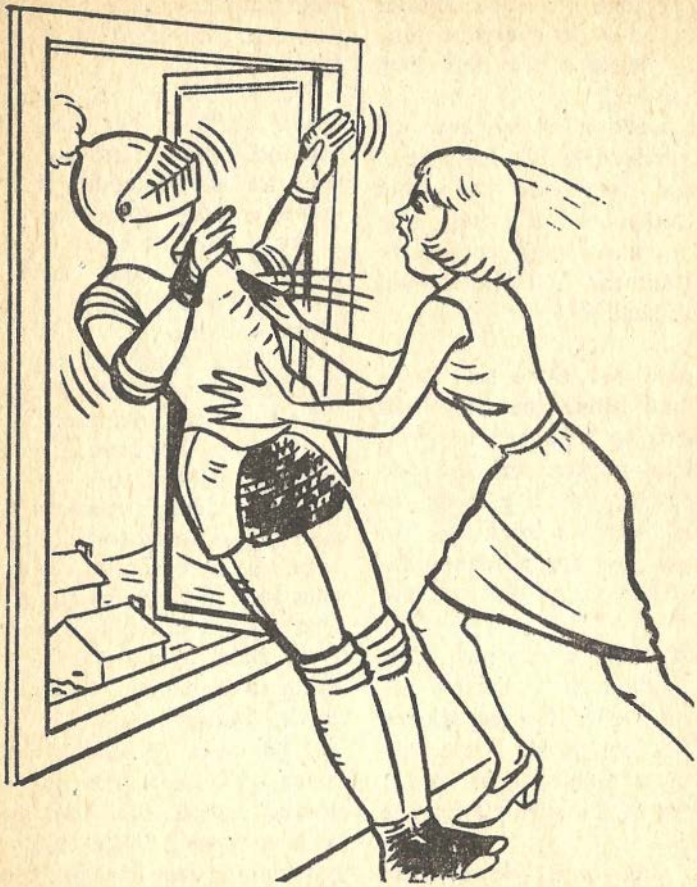
"The vein pinched out a month ago and the mine is closed—worked out. The last of my money went to get ready for that hunting trip. I'm flat broke, Bill."

The sunset was suddenly about twenty times brighter than ever and I knew I had been right the first time about what money couldn't buy for her.

I put my arms around her and I couldn't feel the faintest sign of a barrier anymore.

THREE FOR THE HOUNDS

by Theodore Mathieson



Bert Hunking, hearing his Siberian huskies begin to howl, came out of his wheel-less trailer house to see Corinne running up the path from her red convertible. In her arms she held a large brown paper sack, and as she reached him, pressing herself against his body and kissing him, she held the bundle over his head like a forfeit in a children's game.

"You got some stuff he wore *lately?*" Hunking asked, grabbing the sack, and peering into it like a kid eyeing some goodies.

"Those are his pajamas, and he wore them last night."

"*All* night?" Hunking's heavily handsome face had a leer on it.

She slapped him playfully on the cheek. "If I didn't love you so much, Bert, I'd take that to heart. Show me what you're going to do, show me!"

"Can't wait to get rid of him, huh?"

This time she turned away angrily, her movement setting the dogs in the nearest kennel to howling again.

Quickly Hunking reached for her. It wasn't every day that he snagged himself a girl who lived in a rich house on a hill, married to an old geezer twice her age.

"Now you know I didn't mean that, Doodles," he said. "Sure, I'll show you what's on the program-y."

Arm in arm, he guided her over to a large kennel where four Siberian huskies growled with the ominous promise of a canine apocalypse.

"I imagine right now they might even go for me, if I gave them half a chance. But they'll sure as hell go for *him*. For three days they've had nothing to eat . . ."

"That must account for the howling we hear on the hill. It sets old Francis just about crazy."

"It won't bother old Francis much longer."

Hunking took a pair of flamingo colored pajamas out of the bag, and tying them into a firm knot on a forked stick, he thrust the stick through the kennel bars and jabbed at the dogs. They went crazy, shredding the garments in seconds.

"How are you going to do it?" she asked presently.

"Well, your old guy will come in through the gate there. He'll break a trip thread which will lower the drop gate I've fixed on this kennel, and the dogs will have at him."

"But won't it look odd, their getting out of a kennel like that?"

"Nope." Hunking looked smug. "See, even though they're in the kennel, they've got a three-way free chain on their collars, all linked to a single heavier chain. The final link on that heavier chain has been sprung, so when the dogs are found after the—er—accident, it will look like they broke loose—not from the kennel—but from this metal post outside it."

He pointed to the post at his feet, where a chain fragment of four or five links was attached.

"I'll be up the hill in the woods," he continued, "apparently hunting quail with my shot gun, and when I hear the ruckus,

I simply come down and shoot the dogs. The police can't hold me. I looked into it; I got my whole ten acres posted with dog warning signs."

"One thing's missing," Corinne said. "How are you going to get Francis to come down here in the first place?"

"That, Doodles, will be your job. And here is what you tell him . . ."

From the rooftop of his three-story mansion, "Old Francis" Stoddard III crouched in a flapping bathrobe, with a telescope screwed into his good eye.

Every day for the past week, after Corinne had left for town, he'd come up here to study the clearing where the private road to Hunking's place curved past, and had seen her red convertible go by.

Reluctantly he had realized she was having an affair with the dog man.

Ever since the day, two months before, when Hunking had called at the mansion, at Stoddard's request, to help doctor an ailing Doberman pinscher, Corinne had started being away a lot. But he'd only become aware of it recently.

At first, in spite of his imperious curiosity, he had found it troublesome to climb out on the roof with his telescope—his asthma always gave him trouble afterwards. But then, as he experimented with angles of vision, and found he was able, from a kind of widow's walk, to see a segment of Hunking's yard where he kept his dogs, it became a bitter kind of fun.

For the past few days he'd seen the dog man poking at a kennel with a stick to which was attached some kind of colored material, and wondered what he was up to. But it wasn't until he'd missed a favorite blue shirt and then, the following day, saw a blue material being shoved at the brutes, that he began to have his suspicions. Only this morning, for instance, when he'd seen Corinne eyeing his flamingo pajamas, he'd waited until she'd "gone to town," then checked and found his nightwear was gone, too.

And now he'd just seen Hunking—with Corinne standing beside him—poke a flamingo piece of material at the dogs.

Thoughtfully, Old Francis climbed back through his bedroom window, and went for a stroll through his collection rooms. Visual contact with his artifacts always helped him meditate; gathered over a life time, they included everything from a slab smuggled from Stonehenge, to a *crux ansata* from Hatshepsut's tomb.

Stopping amid his medieval English collection, where Hurk, his silent, Hungarian factotum was busy polishing the glass of a display case, Stoddard stared at a crossbow on the wall and thought of murder.

But he knew that before he could start to plan, *they* would have to make the first move . . .

Corinne made it that evening at dinner.

"Oh, guess what, darling," she said over dessert, "I met Mr Hunking in town this morning. He's the dog man, who came about poor Howitzer, remember? He told me he'd been digging in his yard for a new kennel spot, and he came across a big rock with pictographs on it—actual writing, he seems to think. And yet the Digger Indians, who used to live in these hills, were supposed to have no written means of communication. Of course, he knows about your interest in all those *old* things, and he wondered if you'd come down and take a look at it."

"Of course, I'd be glad to," Old Francis said as Hurk poured him a second demi-tasse. "Any particular time?"

"He said he'd be there around nine tomorrow morning."

"Nine it is. I'm most interested in old pictographs."

So while Corinne still slept, early next morning, Old Francis got up, as he sometimes did, to go for a constitutional in the woods. This time he went down the hill towards the dog man's place, and hid in a clump of bushes near the trailer, in which electric light still burned.

After a while, Hunking came out, busied himself with his dogs, and went back inside again. Stoddard stretched his rheumatic limbs, and looked at his watch. Seven forty-five. At eight, Hunking reappeared and seemed to be stretching some kind of line, invisible from where Stoddard crouched, across the gate opening. Then he went to the kennel and fussed around the trap door there.

At which Stoddard saw the light. But he waited.

At eight-thirty, Hunking went into his trailer and emerged presently with a rifle, stuffing shells into his pockets. He climbed a side fence opposite Stoddard and disappeared into the woods. Shortly afterwards, Stoddard retreated up the hill under cover of the underbrush, and returned home . . .

"Oh, darling, it's late," Corinne said, as Old Francis crept back, puffing, into bed beside her.

"I went for a walk," Stoddard said, "but I'm not feeling well, and I think I'll spend the day in bed."

"But what about Mr Hunking and the rock!" Corinne cried.

"It's been there a good many generations, apparently, and it'll wait a day longer. Tell Mr Hunking I'll be there tomorrow at nine, will you? And I won't disappoint him this time."

Hunking's gory death made quite a splash in the neighborhood. According to the newspapers, Mr Francis Stoddard III, the retired steel magnate on Vernal Hill, had come down to pay a visit to the dog man and found four of his huskies bloodily muzzling what was left of him. Commendably level-headed, Mr Stoddard had not fled, leaving the dogs to roam the countryside to jeopardize others; he had slipped quietly back to his car, seized a pistol from the glove compartment, and had shot the hounds one by one.

The fact the dogs had not attacked Mr Stoddard himself was accounted for by the fact their hunger and rage had been sated by their unfortunate owner. Indeed, many people weren't at all surprised that Hunking's own dogs had finally turned on him. He had been known as a hard kennel master.

But when Corinne learned the news, she'd run hysterically to Old Francis, who sat in his library reading a vellum-bound copy of Machiavelli's *Principle*.

"You did it," she cried. "You killed Bert Hunking. His own dogs would never have killed him!"

"But they did, my dear," Stoddard said graciously, and rose to set a chair near his. He looked taller, younger. The challenge which Hunking's threat has presented, and his success in meeting it, had obviously done more towards rejuvenation than living two years with Corinne had.

"Sit down, Corinne, and let's have a talk."

Caught in the spell of her husband's transformation, his wife sat down silently and stared at him.

"The dogs did it, although you might say I maneuvered it. And of course you could go to the police and tell them, but that wouldn't be wise. I know that you and the dog man had been intimate. In Hunking's trailer, I found some notes of yours, signed with the obnoxious name of Doodles, which make it quite clear that you, as well as he, had planned to make *me* the victim of his dogs. Which disappointed me very much, my dear, but I'm not going to hold it against you."

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Nothing, except what I've already done. I saw my lawyer this afternoon, after the unfortu-

nate—accident, and changed my will. You get nothing—I repeat, nothing—if you are guilty of a single disloyal act against me from this moment on, until the time I die—of a natural death, of course. I've also made that stipulation. So you see, if you tried testifying against your husband . . ."

Corinne's eyes narrowed, and Stoddard sensed the struggle of her will against his. Outwardly flighty, he suspected his wife was steel inside, and wasn't likely to forgive him for what he'd done.

"You hate me that much?" she asked.

"Not at all. Curious as it may seem, I want to keep you with me. Shall we shake on it?"

Her hand was as cold as death . . .

But within a week after Bert Hunking's demise, Corinne had decided to relocate her maid, who like a duenna had occupied a nearby room, to another part of the house. And in bed, whenever Stoddard laid a tentative hand upon her shoulder, she no longer turned away and pretended to be asleep.

Breakfast together became a cheerful event, instead of a sullen hangover from the night before, and Stoddard, who already looked younger as the result of his punitive action against the dog man, began to act like a boy, going so far as to make paper airplanes out of the morning newspaper and launching them at Hurk as he served them.

Corinne and "Young Francis" as she now called him, began to take walks together, hand in hand, along woodland paths. Then one day as they sat at the top of the hills, near the edge of the reservoir, she said casually:

"I can't understand how everything has changed between us, Francis. It must be because you *fought* for me."

"Oh, I didn't exactly fight," he said modestly.

"What did you do? You know, I can't imagine how you managed it. That man—I really can't think of him as having meant anything to me—wasn't easy to fool. He was strong. And those dogs could have torn you apart . . ."

"I know."

"It was clever of you to gain the advantage the way you did."

"A combination of desperation and imagination, I suppose."

"No jealousy?"

"That too, of course." He looked at her shrewdly. "You'd really like to know how I did it?"

She lifted his hand and kissed it. "Very much," she said.

"All right. I went down the first morning early and acquainted myself with the set-up, and I know I don't have to tell you the details of that."

"That's cruel," she said, and pulled her hand away.

"Perhaps. Then, the following day I drove down even earlier and parked my car a ways off. With me I had my .44 revolver, an unwashed pair of trousers and shirt that I do my gardening in, and a suit of medieval armour from my collection."

"My God," Corinne said.

"I put on the armor, leaving one gauntlet off, so I could handle the revolver, and walked up to the trailer. The dogs heard me clanking, of course, and set up a howl, so by the time I reached the gate, Hunking was already out of his trailer and looking at me with his mouth open. The trap was not yet set, so I ambled in and pointed the gun at him, and told him to undress and put on my garden clothes. He didn't argue. I had calculated that my appearance would give me a psychological superiority and it did. Once he was in my clothes, I kept the gun on him, and went over to set the dogs loose. They leapt at me, but slid off, and I think were scared of me too, because right away they turned around and went right for him. I watched, and after a while, I shot them, one by one . . ."

After he'd finished, Corinne sat for a long time without speaking. Then she rose and walked alone back down the hill.

Dinner that night was strained, so that Stoddard was forced to make comments about the weather to Hurk as he served, to relieve the tension. But later when they went to their room, Corinne said: "I didn't mean to make you feel like a criminal, Francis. After all, you did fight for me, in your way."

"I'd rather have you think so, my dear."

"You trust me now, don't you?"

"Not for a moment."

"Then why did you—"

"I like to please you, if I can. And you wanted to hear."

She kissed him at that, and trust or no trust, he kissed her back.

In the morning they had a pillow fight in bed, and he was like a boy again, laughing and shouting. Suddenly she said: "Young Francis, you say you like to please me. Would you do something for me now?"

"I'd love to, my dear."

"Not every girl has a knight to fight for her. I'd like to see you as one."

"You mean you want me to put on the suit of armor?" he asked surprised.

"I imagine you looked very chivalrous!"

"Why, I suppose I did, at that!" The idea suddenly appeared to please him, and he got

out of bed. "Wait here, I'll put it on for you."

A few minutes later she heard a rattling in the hall, the door opened, and Francis came creaking in, encased in his metal suit, the helm scraping the lintel and jarring down the visor. They started laughing together, and laughed until they cried.

Then Corinne jumped up and went to the long mirror close to the low-silled window.

"Stand over here, so you can see yourself," she said, so he ambled over and took a warlike pose in front of the glass.

"You do look medieval!" she laughed prettily. "But you know, I think I like you better with your visor down!"

She slapped down the visor with a quick movement, then stepping back, gathered her weight and pushed him—straight at the window. He stumbled heavily, hitting the casement sideways with his epaulier; glass shattered, framework splintered, and, completely out of control, he swiveled so that as he fell backwards he was facing her. For several seconds his gauntleted hand held onto the casement sides, but the weight of the armor was pulling him back.

"Please, Corinne—pull me in!" he gasped behind his visor, and his voice echoed in the helm. "You can have the money, all of it you want."

"You think I want the money!" she spit at him, prying at the fingers of his gauntlets. "You killed Herb, the man I loved! You fooled him, and I fooled you, and now you're going to die!"

"I won't die," he gasped. "I've arranged to come back. You'll see—!"

He lost his hold then, and disappeared. And when the sound, as of a multiple accident on a freeway, came up from the brick courtyard three floors below, Corinne had her eyes closed, and her lips stretched into a smile.

She found the note on the bed two nights later, on the eve of the inquest.

Corinne: (it read, and it was in Stoddard's handwriting!)

I told you I did not trust you. You think you are rid of me, but think again. I had the last laugh on your dog man, and I shall have the last laugh on you, too. Wait and see.

Young Francis

With a cry of horror, Corinne hurried out into the hallway and downstairs to her maid's room. But the girl was gone, her clothes and luggage, too.

"Hurk! Hurk!" She was screaming now, and running through the big house. But the factotum was gone, and so was the cook. She was alone.

She grabbed at a phone then to call a taxi to take her to a hotel in town. The line was dead.

Going to the front door, she flung it open and stared into the moonlit woods. Then she fled upstairs to her bedroom and locked herself in.

Quickly she searched the bathroom and closet to see that nobody had hidden there while she was gone, and she even looked under the bed. With trembling hands she poured a glass of brandy from Stoddard's decanter to steady herself, and stood panting as the liquid burned down her throat.

She was pouring a second drink when she heard it—the clank of armor from down the hall. With an animal cry, she moved her dresser against the door, spilling bottles every which way, and then added chairs to the barricade.

The lights went off.

Like a wild thing, now, she pulled aside the drapes that covered the broken window, and the moonlight streamed in. She leaned out seeking a ledge on which she might step, but the height made her dizzy and she quickly withdrew.

Once again the clanking sounded, followed by a terrific blow, as from a mailed fist, upon the door.

"Go away—go away!" she sobbed.

But the blows came again and again, and then the splintering of wood. The lock snapped, and the barracade began moving into the room.

Muttering incoherently, she climbed backwards across the low sill.

Now it was in the room with her. She heard the heavy steps approach the window, and straightening up in panic, lost her balance.

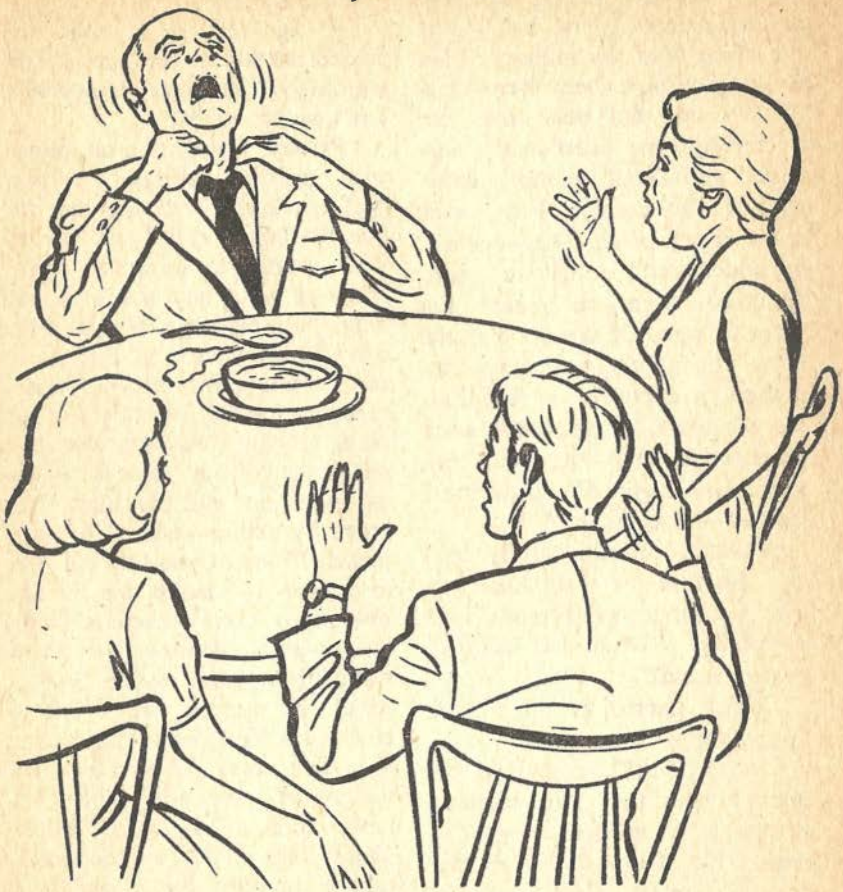
She screamed once more, falling as the face came into the moonlight—Hurk's heavy Hungarian face, and just before her head struck the bricks in the courtyard below, a seemingly vagrant thought wisped through her brain . . .

Of course a knight doesn't get into his armor unassisted.

The End

A HONEY OF A HOMICIDE

by John Land



"Buzzards," Hiram Talbott said, his voice dripping contempt. "All gathered around waiting—or is it hoping?—for me to die." He let his arrogant gaze sweep along the line of dinner guests; most of them flushed or turned pale; a few stared back with frank hatred—these last were the ones who felt they had nothing to lose.

His wife, a thin, raddled woman who kept her hands fluttering breast high as if to ward off expected blows, made a feeble protest.

"Really, dear," she twittered. "I know you don't mean a word of it, but—"

He cut her short with a barking laugh.

"Oh, don't I? Ask them—they know. All my loving relatives and prospective heirs, drooling at the thought of my millions. This is going to hurt them more than it does me, but hear this: the doctor says my heart attack was slight, and didn't do much damage. If I'm careful, I can still make eighty or so. That means," he added, with a tigerish smile, "another twenty-six years for them to wait. Of course, I could cross you all up, and leave my money to a college or hospital, but it's more fun to watch your tongues hang out for good, long spell. And maybe I'll spend it all by then—who can tell?"

A second cousin, wildly daring, because he estimated his take at approximately zero, said cheerfully: "What's a cousin's share, Hiram?"

Talbott peered at him almost approvingly.

"Shares, hell!" he snorted. "It doesn't work that way. Nothing automatic or mathematical. The ones I like best—or rather, the ones I detest least—get the most." His bulging blue eyes twinkled with malice. "So keep on buttering me up; I know it's opportunism and hypocrisy, but at least I admire competence and intelligent slyness. The best phony may bet the biggest slice in the end." He paused, then added ambiguously. "In the end!"

"Really, dear," his wife said. "Not at dinner."

He ignored her, and she smiled weakly at the guests, still warding off imaginary blows with her weaving hands.

"Perhaps I ought to announce your present ratings," Talbott said, obviously relishing the notion. "Then you'll have twenty odd years to improve them. Some of you may not live that long, but there are always children—a fresh crop of little buzzards waiting for the old man's carcass. Not that I blame you for being greedy; I was that way myself, and still am. Only I fought my way up and satisfied that greed by action—not by being a jackal. If one of you had the guts to go out and make one measly million by some judicious bluffing, lying, cheating, or even wangling it from Uncle Sam—which is shooting at a sitting bird!—I'd have some respect for him. I've never believed in dirty money; it's the only stuff that never soils to the point where people turn it down. You could take a thousand dollar bill from any sewer, and fifty jokers would be glad to snap at it with their teeth, if you gave 'em the chance." He eyed his relatives again, and shook his big head in disgust. "Bah! I'm wasting my time. If one of you found a million dropped by mistake from a Brink's truck, like that clown a while back, you'd return it, too.

Not out of simple-minded honesty, but fear that somebody might've seen you pick it up, and cause trouble."

He cut a large piece of fillet, popped it into his mouth, and chewed it vigorously, his heavy jaw-muscles working like cables under a load.

After swallowing, he gulped some wine, and without warning pointed a finger at the couple to his right.

"You, two!" Talbott snapped. "My oldest son and his missus. Ready for your rating?"

"For Heaven's sake, Dad," the man said. He was short and thick, with heavy jowls; his forehead was beaded with perspiration, and he reaised a soft, well-manicured hand in a gesture reminiscent of his mother. His, wife, plump and dowdy, in spite of her expensive clothes, muttered something in his ear. Their host laughed.

"Telling you to take it, hey Malcolm? Don't cross the old man. Wait him out; get your cut of the loot. Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm Talbott," he added jeeringly. "Respectable attorney; not about petty chiseling, but too gutless to go after the real loot among politicos and crooks. Rating? About third from the bottom, I'd say. Nowhere to go but up—that's a comforting thought, yes, Malcolm?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned to another couple at his left, just beyond Mrs. Talbott, who immediately blocked a whole series of jabs, even though she held a knife and fork.

"My youngest son," Talbott said. "And *his* wife." He examined her inch by shrinking inch. True, she looked like a B-girl, and had on enough of the wrong perfume to suggest an aroused civet cat, but actually Julie Talbott—Mrs. Morton Talbott—was a virtuous and kindly girl, even if she didn't have enough brains to equip a sparrow.

Her husband paled with anger, and put his hand over hers.

"Morton Talbott," Hiram said. "Would-be artist. Makes junk from old iron, broken dishes, and dried soupbones. When he's through, they look exactly like old iron, broken dishes, and dried soupbones. Luckily his mother—my generous wife—subsidizes him from the household money." His wife redoubled her fluttery guard motions, and her eyes showed anxiety. "I've always known about it," Hiram continued relentlessly. "I find it amusing that a grown man will fritter away his life on such stuff while living on crumbs from my table, even though I offered him a chance to do something worthwhile."

"Like building cheap houses that fall down in a year?" Julie snapped, her brown eyes full of fire.

"Is that what I wanted you to do, Morton?" Talbott asked, his voice wickedly soft.

"Julie didn't mean that," Morton said. "She doesn't understand business. I'd be glad to try—"

"Sure, *now* you would!" his father said coldly. "But I warned you there would be no second chance. You chose soupbones and Art; now you can wait like the others to pick my bones in twenty-six years. Your rating is just about Malcolm's, mainly because your wife, even if she's a little nicompoop, has some guts—even to snap at me. Probably she picked you, instead of the reverse—God knows why—so she belongs in your credit column, I figure."

He studied his guests again, and said: "Who's left? A nephew; still a bachelor; and one second cousin on his second wife, I believe. You two have the advantage," he added, "that I don't know you too well. I know that you haven't done anything of importance, considering your ages, which means you probably never will. My nephew, William Davis," he told the others, "is almost thirty, and still drives all over California trying to sell ladies' underwear: that's a career for you! But I'll rate him a little above Morton at that, because he's had sense enough to stay single. That way," he said, giving his wife a crooked smile, "he can't get the kind of sons—and daughter—like mine."

At this mention of a daughter, all the company came to attention. It was obviously a slip, and they were curious about the cover-up to follow. But their hostess managed to draw the lightning.

"If you *are* serious about all this inheritance talk," she broke in eagerly, "you really ought to do something about poor Cyrus; after all he's so badly crippled, and June did love—"

"I told you not to mention either of them in this house ever again!" her husband said. all the playful malice gone from his voice, to be replaced by a kind of pathological anger.

"But you brought it up," she countered weakly. "You did say 'daughter,' and I thought—"

"You did not think; you never have, and you don't now!" was the brutal reply. "You don't have the equipment, Martha, so please be quiet."

"That's a terrible way to talk," Julie Talbott said, her voice shrill. "If I were you, Martha—stop it!" she added fiercely, as Morton tugged at her arm. "I'm not afraid of the old tyrant!"

"Of course, you're not," Hiram said, playfully malicious again.

"As I said, you have nerve, but not much brains or imagination. You can't understand what Morton knows so well—that a million dollars is worth any kind of insult—that you can lick boots for it, and then wash the polish off your tongue with champagne. With enough champagne, you can rinse the taste of anything at all off your tongue. Right, Morton?"

There was no reply. Julie glared at him; but Morton squeezed her arm until it hurt, and she settled back in her chair, flushed and breathing heavily.

"Now we come to Cousin Jerry," Talbott said. "And his second wife, Lucy. His first one left him for greener pastures—a very sensible woman, that—and this one, I suspect, married him for me. In other words, she smelled money in the family, and even though Jerry is a clod—a beer-drinking, baseball-happy, TV-addicted clot—who'll never make more than a hundred dollard a week—she hoped he might inherit a bundle in the not-too-distant future. I give this much to Jerry; he's almost too much of a clod even to ponder that angle. Rather, he was; now she has him convinced."

Jerry Simmons, a thin man with an enormous nose, reddened angrily, and started to get up, fists clenched; but his wife held him down. She was bigger and heavier than he, and had stronger features. Her eyes were grey, cold, and seemed able to pierce flesh like daggers. They met Talbott's large blue ones in a clash of stares, and the old man gave her a wry twist of his lips by way of a left-handed compliment.

"You're the best man in this whole bunch," he said. "If you were of my own blood, damned if I wouldn't leave all the money to you."

"You can do that anyhow," she said levelly. "Anything Jerry gets I'll have to manage; you know that, and so does my husband."

"Ah, knock it off, Lucy!" Jerry said uneasily. "I don't get any of this jazz tonight. Just a lot of crazy talk."

"So," Hiram said, watching them, "again I have to credit a husband with his wife's merits, so to speak. I should think you two come second."

"Who's first?" Lucy asked promptly.

"My wife," Talbott answered without hesitation. "And that's so not on her sterling qualities, but merely because I picked her. You others were wished on me. I picked her," he added, brutally frank, "as a stepping-stone. Her father was President of National Electronics, and the marriage gave me a leg-up. None of you had as much sense, I'm afraid." He let his eyes pass over the

group again, and said: "That concludes the ratings. Now you will be free to change my mind, if you can." He looked down at the table, and frowned. "Where the devil's my comb-honey?"

"Oh, dear," his wife twittered. "I forgot to have it brought in from the hive." She jumped up. "I'll go get it now."

"You will not," her husband said. "Since the servants have gone for this evening, I'll just call on some of these 'waiters'! Since they are waiting for my money, let them wait on us. Any volunteers? It might help somebody's rating," he added cynically.

"I'll go," Malcolm said. "Not that I'm trying to curry favor."

"Ingenious," his father said. "You figure that so obvious an attempt to curry favor will be taken as a frank disavowal of such an intention. Or did I lose you."

"I'll go, too; I haven't seen the hives for a long time," Davis said.

"Two will be enough," Talbott said. "One comb isn't very heavy. Put on the yard-lights. You know which hive, Malcolm—the one farthest from the patio. Matter of turn," he explained.

It was hardly necessary to explain; they all knew of his fondness for fresh honey from the comb. There were a dozen hives on the estate, much to the annoyance of the help and Talbott's visitors.

While Malcolm and William Davis were gone, Talbott drank more wine, and tried to stir up some general conversation, but his previous comments had not left his guests in a good mood. They fiddled with their dessert, and waited for the ordeal to end. The unexpected invitation, a few weeks after Talbott's illness, had brought their hopes to new heights. Surely it was time for the old man to tell them where they stood. Maybe he might even relent and distribute some money now; after all, he had about fifteen million bucks, and didn't live very high himself. Power, not money, was his staff of life.

Malcolm and Davis came in with a comb-of honey; Mrs. Talbott took it from them, put it on a saucer, and laid the dish before her husband. With an oddly greedy look, he began to gobble the golden sweet. After several large spoonfuls, he sighed with pleasure, and seemed about to say something. Then, they saw his face turn beet-red, and the cords of his neck swell monstrously. With bulging eyes he clawed at his throat, breath sterterous as he fought for air. He thrashed about like a wounded animal, finally rolling to the floor.

Mrs. Talbott screamed; the others milled about helplessly.

"Call a doctor!" Julie shrieked, and Lucy Simmons, grey eyes luminously steady, bent over the stricken man, and attempted to breathe into his mouth. But it was all over too fast; Hiram Talbott, his face blue and congested, coughed spasmodically for a few seconds, and was still.

"I think he's dead," Lucy announced, her voice flat and dull.

"No!" Mrs. Talbott whimpered. "God, no!" Morton just managed to catch her as she crumpled.

"It was his heart," Julie said in a hushed voice.

"I doubt that," Malcolm said. "That last attack was quite different. This is more like—" he hesitated.

"Like what?" Lucy demanded.

"Allergy—real bad allergy. He looked like this that time Doctor Wilson gave him penicillin. If the doctor hadn't been right with him, he said Dad would've died for sure. They have a name for it—some kind of shock."

"Shouldn't we be calling a doctor, instead of jabbering?" Jerry Simmons asked querulously.

"It's all happening so fast," Julie said.

"I'll call Dr. Wilson," Malcolm said.

Lucy was standing very straight, a half smile on her face. "Now we can stop worrying about his money," she said coolly. "The pie will be cut up, and each of us will know his share—if any."

"This is no time—" Malcolm began; and Morton, horrified, said: "Money? At a time like this. Really, Lucy."

But Julie giggled.

"Twenty-six years he said we'd wait. It was nearer twenty-six minutes."

The expressions of disapproval and shock faded; they looked at each other, faces suitably grave; but eyes were feverishly bright. A multi-million pie was about to be cut up and distributed to the hungry. Nobody remembered that Talbott's death was still unexplained, and that society would not leave the matter like that.

"You gonna call a doctor or not?" Simmons demanded, looking at Malcolm. Maybe the old guy's not even dead."

For a moment Malcolm seemed bewildered; then he went slowly to the phone and began to dial.

"How convenient that Talbott should die like this," Lucy said cruptically. "It's pretty clear he's left a will, and that all of us will get something. I can use mine now a lot better than in twenty-six years. None of us is getting any younger. Very convenient," she repeated.

"What're you getting at?" Morton asked. "Dad must've worked himself into a apoplexy, he had such a hate on against us. As ye sow," he added, "so shall ye reap."

"Look who's getting pious!" Julie said. "He hated all his relatives, but they hated him back. And he *was* your father, Morton."

"He was their master—and jailer," Lucy said, battering the younger woman with her grey eyes. On the couch, where she had been dumped rather unceremoniously, Martha Talbott stirred and moaned. Julie went to her, and murmured soothingly. Soon Martha was sobbing.

"When you said 'convenient'," Jerry said, "I got your drift, Lucy. You figure the cops might think he was killed—by one of us, maybe."

"That's what they'll think," Lucy said, "until they know different. Me, I'm betting it was no accident."

"It looked just like a stroke to me," Morton objected. "What do you think, Mal? The doctor coming?"

"Be right over," Malcolm said. "He wouldn't give any opinion on the phone—you know Wilson—but he seems pretty sure it was Dad's heart. That bothers him, too, I could tell, because he told him the attack was mild and needn't happen again. Still, Dad was pretty excited with all that rating stuff. He liked to see us squirm, all right," Malcolm added bitterly.

"I wonder," Lucy said in a sly voice, "if we hadn't better clear the table—and give all the dishes a good washing."

They stared at her blankly.

"Now?" Julie demanded. "The help will be back tomorrow? Since when are we supposed to do their work?"

"I was just thinking that the police may want to examine all that stuff," Lucy said. She paused meaningly. "In case of poison."

There was a pregnant silence for several seconds, then Martha gave a whimpering cry of portest: "Oh, Lucy—no! Not poison! They couldn't think that."

"They could—if Dr. Wilson isn't a hundred per cent sure it's a heart attack."

Just then the bell rang.

"Too late," Lucy sighed. "That must be the doctor now. He won't let us touch a thing, and anyhow it wouldn't be smart with him as a witness." She shook her head. "I've a feeling this place will be crawling with the gendarms by tomorrow."

Sheriff Pete Denton didn't believe in murder. This was true in two senses. He didn't believe in it as a solution to anybody's problem; and he didn't believe in

it until all possibility of accident or suicide had been ruled out.

Unlike many lawmen, he hated the crime far more than the criminal, considering the latter to be either foolish, panicky, or—as an anti-climax—badly brought up.

He was tall and wire thin, and, to a casual observer, melancholy of temperament. He was never known to laugh, and seldom to grin, but his eyes smiled often; and he had a soft chuckle that was more contagious than any bellow of glee.

In eighteen years as sheriff, he had dealt with only six murders, all of them simple, brutal affairs requiring little skill as a detective. On the other hand, he had done well with lesser crimes of a more subtle nature, including the ubiquitous poison pen writer endemic to smaller communities. Ordinarily he was highly laconic, never using two words where one—or a semaphoric eyebrow—might do. But when working on a difficult case, he changed completely, becoming quite garrulous, and using one of his two young deputies as a sounding-board. The other was kept busy with leg-work, since Denton favored for himself reasoning over bird-dogging.

Although he had little formal education, the sheriff knew people, and loved the area itself, which was oppressively hot in season, chillingly damp at night, dry as an old law library, and had the kind of flora and fauna—skunks, lizards, opossoms, cacti, snakes, sage, iceplant, crows, and coyotes—that only a self-deluded native could approve. But he loved it all, from the gaunt, messy eucalyptus trees fighting hopelessly against the drought to the buccaneer ravens croaking in the foothills.

Right now he stood in the Talbott home, where Dr. Wilson had summoned him.

"I just don't like the look of this," the doctor said bluffly. "It's not heart, and not an ordinary stroke. It looks like anphyllatic shock."

Denton raised an eyebrow; it wasn't yet time for garrulity to set in.

"A very strong allergic reaction," Wilson explained. "It can be a killer, and fast; awful fast if the victim's sensitive enough."

"Cause?" Denton asked gently.

"Can't say, yet." He looked squarely into the sheriff's eyes. "The only think *I* know that affected him this way was penicillin; I almost killed him with it myself a couple of years ago."

"Fast," Denton said, half to himself. "Not by injection, obviously; not at the table." He turned to Dave Hicks, the young deputy who had come with him to the house. "Get samples of all

the food on the table. Coroner's away," he told Dr. Wilson. "Will you take over again?" The doctor often acted as a substitute for the offical Medical Examiner, who liked special courses and conventions of fellow professionals.

"We all ate the same food," Lucy said loudly.

"Except for the honey," Julie corrected her. "He was hogging that."

"Irrelevant," Denton said, and then looked embarrassed. He never felt at ease with words having more than three syllables. "Penicillin wouldn't hurt anybody ordinarily, would it Doc?"

"Of course not. These others—as far as I know—could eat a pound of it and never get more than a bellyache."

While Hicks was gathering his samples, the sheriff began to question the family.

"I have no indication yet, except for Dr. Wilson's opinion, that any crime has been committed; and you don't have to answer my questions, but it might help later, if there was foul play."

"We have nothing to hide," Malcolm said stiffly. It was coming home to him, not unhappily, that he was now head of the house. Besides, as a lawyer, even if a mediocre one, he had a certain flair for words, and didn't mind holding the center of the stage. He suspected that his brother and the other relations had no better opinion of him than his father. If so, maybe he could change that a little now, or at least make a start at it.

"If the rest of you don't mind," he said in a bland voice, "I'll tell the sheriff what went on here tonight." He coughed. "Without going too far into personalities," he reassured them.

Denton listed in silence to Malcolm's account of Hiram's sadistic harangue. As a loving father and devoted husband, it pained him to hear of such relations among members of a family; but intellectually, if not emotionally, he was shockproof. Nobody involved with law enforcement can ever have any illusions about human perfection—nothing, from motherhood to warm puppies, is above suspicion to an experienced cop.

There was one point he asked about.

"This matter of Talbott's daughter," he said. "Naturally, I know something about it, but not enough. Of course, if you'd rather pass it by for now . . ."

"Not at all," Malcolm said. "It was Dad's taboo, not ours. To put it simply, our sister, Gloria, married a man Dad couldn't stand. There were few he could," Malcolm added sourly. "Anyhow, Dad did have some kind of need for Gloria; she was clever

efficient, and a bit ruthless, like him. I think he hoped to keep her for a long time; but she fell for this fellow, a young scientist of sorts, poor as a churchmouse, and Dad, in his usual direct, brutal way disowned her. He even used his influence to mess up the kid's career. And when Gloria broke down, and got sick, Dad wouldn't even help her then. She needed help, because Dan—her husband—was horribly wounded in a lab explosion; he can just barely hobble. That's why mother suggested tonight that Dan ought to get some money—for Gloria June's sake; she loved him. She's dead," he added, as Denton looked blank. "Cancer. Dad blamed Don instead of himself; no sense to it, but that's the way he was. Wouldn't let us mention either of them after that."

The ambulance Dr. Wilson had phoned for came, and when the body had been removed, the sheriff and Hicks left with their samples. They would be sent to the crime lab in Los Angeles, which was the nearest city big enough to have one.

The next day, having sent one deputy—Bill Alvarez this time—to gather more information about the Talbotts, Denton put his feet on the scarred desk, and began to talk "at" Hicks. The young deputy knew his part in this procedure: to nod, look wise, and at rare intervals, comment.

"We don't know yet that it's murder," the sheriff said. "If Talbott was killed by penicillin in the food, maybe it was an accident. Sometimes, I've heard, feeders give cattle drugs. Could be that steak had natural penicillin."

Hicks cocked his head, started to nod, and then frowned. Clearly he didn't find this a convincing theory. Denton sighed. Much as he hated the idea, accident probably was not the explanation, and murder was.

"On motive," the sheriff continued, "there's all we need. Talbott was a lousy father, and both sons hated him. So did their wives. We know that the sons were weak but kinda stubborn. Talbott wanted them to work with him, but they had to get free, and tried to go it alone. When they gooffed off, and came crawling back, it was too late. He wouldn't forgive them. All they ever got was a few handouts from the mother, and a dinner now and then so the old guy could insult them for the hell of it.

"They all knew he was allergic to penicillin. Anybody could spike his food without the chance of hurting the others. Much better than arsenic or cyanide; vou don't have to be allergic to that. '

Hicks coughed. That meant Denton was getting obvious.

"Well," the sheriff said. "We both got other work to do, at least until we hear from Los Angeles." He sank back, and closed his eyes. Hicks got the message, stood up with a groan, and went to his own cubby-hole, where a million papers awaited his attention. The sheriff, perhaps because he couldn't spell, hated paperwork.

The news from Los Angeles came at three; it confirmed the sheriff's worst fears. Hiram Talbott had been killed by penicillin—in his comb honey.

"In a way that makes it easier," he told Hicks, summoned back to provide a pair of captive ears. "And in a way, worse. First thing, though, is to get Bill over to the house to check the rest of that comb, if it's still there. I goofed not taking it last night."

Hicks looked puzzled, so the sheriff said: "Either that one comb was spiked, or all of them—or some of the others, let's say. Question is, how? You can't just rub penicillin into a honeycomb; it's fragile stuff." He thought for a moment. "Injected, maybe." He squirmed uneasily. "Alvarez is out to hell-and-gone; you better go get that comb—no, bring the whole hive, too; take the station wagon. That'll leave me with walls to talk to. Can't solve cases that way. Cussed if I don't need a third deputy, but just try to get one from that cheap Council of ours. What're you waiting for—scat, boy!"

When the deputy had left, Denton looked around guiltily for a moment, then went to a file case. Groping far in back, he came out with a battered figurine, one of those comic dolls that represent certain human foibles. This one was female, bent over a phone, and displayed an enormous rear. The caption at the base read: "I'm all ears, Darling."

With a watchful eye on the door, in case anybody came in, Denton addressed himself to the figurine. He had to have a listener, and this was better than none.

"Okay, Hilda," he began. "Where was I? Penicillin in the honey; probably injected. If so, needle marks. I'll have Hicks check that; his eyes are a mite younger and sharper than mine. Besides, I think the whlp even keeps a microscope at home. I don't knock it," he added hastily. "I'm all for science in crime detection; just ain't my style, and I'm too old to change, now. Anyhow, Malcolm and that cousin, Davis, went out to the hive. It didn't seem premeditated; my guess is the stuff was spiked before they got there. Who in the

house had penicillin lately; Bill is working on that; he'd better be."

The sheriff kept on in this vein until Hicks returned with the remaining combs.

"You knew damned well I couldn't bring a hive," he growled accusingly. "I'm no beekeeper. I had the gardener pull out just the combs, and didn't stay to watch how he did it, neither! He knows about the criters; I don't."

"I'm surprised," Denton said mildly. "I thought a local boy like you understood bees. When I was your age, at home on my folks' little ranch, we always kept bees."

"That was fifty years ago," Hicks said extravagantly. "I kept a hot-rod, a surf-board, and cute blonde who—never mind. What am I supposed to do with these combs? Got the one the old man was gobbling, too. That Lucy—she's a sharp one—told Martha Talbott not to throw anything out yet."

"Well," the sheriff said. "We know there's penicillin in the honey. Question is, how did it get there. Only way I can think of is by injection. So get busy with the magnifyer you fuss with, and look for needle marks in the wax."

Hicks flushed; he was a little self-conscious about his expensive doublet lens. And it was unfortunately true that up to now he'd never had the slightest use for it. So with the old man watching benignantly, he took the combs to a brighter corner of the office, and made a careful examination.

After half an hour of this, he got up, lips pursed, and shook his head.

"Nary a needle mark," he announced. "Not in the hive-combs, and not in what's left of the one Talbott was eating. Maybe only the part he ate had been injected."

"Get samples from the untouched combs, and send 'em off to L.A. again," Denton ordered him. "We gotta know if the whole hive was doctored. If it was," he added darkly, "it musta been through that there Fourth Dimension you and Bill were arguing about last week. How the hell else can you put penicillin into a wax cell without leaving a mark?"

"Hot needle, maybe?" Hicks suggested.

"Not unless you're blind with that lens. See any sign of tampering?"

"Absolutely not," was the firm reply.

Bill Alvarez, dark and volatile came in. He patted his notebook.

"Got the life histories of all the Talbotts right here," he said cheerfully. Ready for a run-down, boss?"

"Okay, Hicks; you're relieved,'" Denton drawled. "Get

those samples off to L. A. while Bill and I talk about the Talbotts."

"Where do I begin?" Alvarez asked.

"Any of 'em use penicillin lately?"

"Three. Martha—for a chest infection; Malcolm, for a carbuncle; and Julie Morton for sinus trouble."

"Pill or injection?"

"All injection. Wilson doesn't care much for oral doses, it seems."

"That tears it," Denton said gloomily. "We just decided penicillin couldn't have been injected into the honeycomb cells to begin with. But there wouldn't be any around to be injected anyhow; it's not like pills, where the patient might have several left. No chance to jab old Hiram at the table; he wasn't the kind to hold still for that. He'd've swore, or yelped, or clouted somebody for sure. Besides, nobody went near him until the attack started. It's clear at this point that only that one comb was poisoned, and Talbott gobbled the evidence of how it was done. He musta eaten all the cells that were doctored; Hicks couldn't find a mark on the others. Well," he concluded, "we'll see what L.A. comes up with, even if I know already." He closed his eyes. Then, dreamily, he said: "Kinda like to know about that crippled fella; he's one more with a motive. Tomorrow you look him up, Bill."

"Gracias, Patron," was the ironical reply.

"For now, quitting time," the sheriff said. "Both of you go on home. He folded his hands on his lap.

When the second report from Los Angeles arrived, Sheriff Denton studied it in amazement.

"It can't be!" he exclaimed to Hicks. "You and that damned magnifyer. Every cell in every comb is loaded with penicillin. What good's a lens if you can't see any signs on all that wax. Hell, he might get into one cell without much of a trace, but nobody's good enough to inject all of 'em without leaving marks."

"I tell you," Hicks said indignantly, "they haven't been touched. I'll stake my life on that."

"Hmmph," the sheriff said. "If you're really sure . . ."

"I am. Damned sure."

Alvarez came in, late and unrepentant. Again he produced the notebook.

"Data on Daniel Cummings, husband of the late Gloria June Talbott—the family, except for Martha—called her Gloria, by the way. To her mother, the girl was always June; I don't know why."

"Cummings," Denton said gently.

"Huh?"

"Your stuff on Cummings, boy; let's have it."

"Right. Interesting; he lives just a couple of miles from the Talbott place; has a shack and a half-acre of scrub-brush. Gets by on some kind of disability insurance; just about enoughth live on, I guess. Crippled to hell; can barely hobble. Hated the old man; no hesitation about admitting it, either." He gave Denton a sly glance. "Oddly enough, he had penicillin—pills—a few weeks ago. I spotted some in a bottle, and he told me about having an infected tooth."

Denton stiffened in his chair.

"Forget it," Alvarez said, grinning. "He's across the creek, a mile from the nearest bridge. A loner. He couldn't possibly have got to that hive. Besides, somebody would have spotted him limping along. It would take him hours."

"Hardly the point," Hicks objected. "Neither he nor anybody else fooled with those cells, I guarantee you that."

"I believe you," Denton said, his eyes shining. "Lemme see that honey, boy. I been a fool, using other people's eyes in this business. My mistake."

They gaped at him, and Hicks gingerly picked up a sticky comb.

"Be my guest."

The sheriff sniffed at it; one eyebrow rose. He jabbed a finger into the wax, extracted a smear of honey, and put it on the tip of his tongue. He held the comb out to Hicks.

"Smell that."

The deputy complied, a puzzled look on his face.

"Smells like honey to me. Penicillin has no smell, you know."

Denton was disgusted. He held the comb out to Alvarez.

"You smell it."

Wonderingly, the deputy did so.

"What's it supposed to smell like?" he demanded, reasonably enough.

"Couple of idiots," Denton said mildly. "Stuff reeks of orange."

"So?" Hicks said.

"Twenty years ago, so nothing. Now, after all the subdivision, you know how far it is to an orange grove in this county? I'll tell you—thirty miles!"

"I didn't think a bee ever went thirty miles for nectar," Alvarez said. "Or do they have freeways, too?"

"They don't, and that's the point. Don't you *know* what happened?"

The two deputies looked at each other, exchanged shrugs, and held up their hands in surrender. It wasn't the first time. They did all the work, and this old—— came up with the solution. It was damned frustrating. Hell of it was, he was a great guy, so you couldn't even get mad at him.

"This honey—the orange part—must have come from another part of the state, say San Diego County. That means it came here in a jar. The murderer, knowing about Talbott's allergy, and his bee-keeping, was only two miles away; less, much less, by air across the creek. So he spikes this commercial honey from the market with penicillin from his bottle, and sets it out on his windowsill every day for a few weeks in season. Talbott's bees, like all bees, don't miss anything sweet. Like people, they prefer an easier way. Readymade honey is their dream. They sop it up—penicillin won't hurt a bee—take it to their hive, and mix it with other stuff brought in by the gang. That's why there were no marks on the cells. The spiking was done at Talbott's end by the real experts—the bees themselves."

"Holy jumping horned toads!" Hicks said. "Dan Cummings!"

"Beautiful!" Alvarez breathed. "Almost a shame to nail him."

"Just how we gonna do that?" Hicks asked skeptically.

"First we find some of the honey at Cummings' place," Bill said. "If it's made from orange blossoms—"

"Not enough," Denton said. "Plenty of people have honey like that."

"But it is," Hicks said. Here was one point he could score against the old man. "With a spectroscope we can prove not just that it's orange honey, but that it's the same batch the stuff in Talbott's hive came from. That should make our case."

"Okay,'" Denton said gently. "Don't shout. You two get the evidence. I'm gonna get some sleep." He lay back in the chair, eyes closed. Almost at once, his breath came wheezily.

Hicks looked at Alvarez, shaking his head in wonder.

"Damned if the old so-and-so isn't asleep already!"

They tiptoed out. Denton opened one eye, gave his soft, melodious chuckle, and closed it again.

by Bob Swain

Police Lieutenant Wilson looked from his office window, through which he'd been enviously watching the spring sun bathers in the park across the street, to see a pale, wispy looking guy in a blue serge suit standing in the doorway.

"My name is Ronald Quilt," the little man said in a weepy contralto. "The sergeant said you'd see me?"

"Yes, sit down Mr Quilt. You reported that you had something to tell me about Jack Dicer."

"Yes, sir. I've been following the case in the papers, and I think I know who killed Mr Dicer."

Crackpot, clicked the categorizer in Wilson's mental file.

"I see. And just who are you, Mr Quilt?"

"I'm a free-lance public accountant—fully licensed, you understand, and in my spare time I write detective stories." He giggled. "None of them have been published, but I'm getting close. Naturally, I'm what you might call an armchair detective."

Wilson smiled grimly. "And what makes you think you know who murdered Jack Dicer?"

"Well, Dicer was a blackmailer, wasn't he? And the society doctor, Doctor Nader, was the last person to see him alive. Twenty-four hours later Dicer's body was found in an alley behind the headquarters of the 32nd precinct—*this* building. Right?"

"So far," Wilson said, glancing at his watch.

"Jack Dicer had been dead of arsenic poisoning for twenty-four hours, so the time of death might have been established around the time that Dicer visited Dr Nader."

"So?"

Mr Quilt held up a bony forefinger.

"It is my belief that Dr Nader poisoned Jack Dicer during the latter's visit."

"If Dr Nader heard your accusation, he could sue you for slander."

"Not if I could show how he did it! I happened to have handled some tax business for Dr Nader—last Christmas it was, and I know his secretary, Miss Adams, very well. She told me exactly what happened in his office the last time Jack Dicer was seen alive!"

"Then you should know Dr Nader couldn't possibly have done it," Wilson said, standing up. His heavy but not unhandsome face looked slightly congested. "I'm afraid I haven't time for your theories, Mr Quilt. Perhaps you'd better stick to your writing, and let the police do their own work!"

He escorted the little man to his door amid the latter's protestations.

"But don't you understand, lieutenant? Dicer was poisoned. *Poisoned*, do you hear?"

"Goodbye, Mr Quilt . . ."

But the little armchair detective had put his finger on a point that had bothered Lieutenant Wilson from the first. There were traces of Scotch in Dicer's stomach, to which arsenic had obviously been added. And there was that bottle of Haig and Haig in Nader's office.

He put on his hat and lumbered across town to Queen's Hill, purposely on foot to enjoy the warm spring sunshine. Nader's plush office occupied the suite on the second floor of a palatial old home. Downstairs,

the doctor lived alone in bachelor splendor.

Miss Adams the receptionist was just putting a plasticine cover on her typewriter, for it was close to lunchtime.

"Dr Nader isn't seeing any patients today," she told him. A tall girl, somewhat inclined to sharpness, but with a good figure, Miss Adams obviously hadn't recognized him.

"I'm Lieutenant Wilson," he said, "and I wonder if you'd have lunch with me, Miss Adams. There are a few more questions I'd like to ask you."

"Oh, yes, lieutenant. Forgive me. I'd be happy to."

They took a taxi to an Italian restaurant near the bay, and the lieutenant waited until they'd toasted with the Chianti.

"You are acquainted with a public accountant by the name of Ronald Quilt?"

Her laugh was condescending.

"Oh, yes, I know Ronald. He did some work for Dr Nader around last Christmas, and he still calls me now and then. He's a nice little man, and is so interested in his writing."

"He claims that Dr Nader actually did kill Dicer."

"But that's ridiculous, as you know. He couldn't have!"

"So we believe, Miss Adams."

"Please call me Connie."

"Connie, how many times had Dicer called on Dr Nader before the last visit?"

"Oh, perhaps five or six. Since last fall. But he was just—a patient. Doctor Nader is no murderer!"

"I'm sure he appreciates your loyalty. But would you tell me again exactly what happened the last time Dicer called?"

Miss Adams sighed, then smiled apologetically.

"Well, I sent him in to see the doctor. After about ten minutes, he came out again."

"But wasn't Dr Thayer in the waiting room with you?"

"Dr Thayer came in about five minutes after Mr Dicer arrived, and we were talking when Mr Dicer came out. Mr Dicer was a very loud man, you know, and he called something back into the doctor's office."

"Can you remember his exact words?"

"Something like: 'You'll see me again!' "

"Did it sound like a threat?"

"I think I told you before it didn't. I'm not sure, now."

"How was Dicer dressed?"

"In a yellow slouch hat and checked sports coat."

"When he went out of the office, did he look at either you or Dr Thayer?"

"No, he didn't. He had his shoulders kind of hunched, and then he was gone."

"Now this is important. After Dicer left, did Dr Thayer go immediately into Doctor Nader's office, or was there a time lapse?"

"Oh, he went right in . . . No, wait. There was a crash in the hall. I'd forgotten about that. Mr Quilt asked me the same thing. Dr Thayer and I went out to see what it was."

"What was it?"

"A flower vase had been knocked off a console table at the head of the stairs. Fortunately, the fall merely cracked the edge, and I set the vase back in place and rearranged the flowers. They were artificial."

"Did Doctor Nader appear while you were doing this?"

"No. We went back and Doctor Thayer knocked on his door, and he told him to come in."

"So that there was perhaps a gap of one or two minutes while you and Doctor Thayer were out in the hall?"

"Not more than that."

"There is a means of access to the doctor's inner office from downstairs, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes, there's a staircase from what used to be the kitchen downstairs to an alcove behind the doctor's desk, but the door is . . ." She stopped suddenly and looked at Wilson with frightened eyes. "What are you asking *that* for?"

"I'm afraid out little armchair detective has piqued my curiosity," he said gloomily. "I shall have to go over the field again, asking some different questions. Now about that door. . . ?"

Doctor Thayer, a stoutish man with an impassive face, was breathing heavily from his exertions on the hand ball court of his athletic club as he sat down beside Wilson in the locker room.

"When you went into Doctor Nader's office after Dicer had left," Wilson said after some quick preliminaries, "what was he doing?"

"Doing? He was looking over his file box and making notes. I told you that."

"But I didn't press you for *how* he looked. Was he calm? Pale? Redfaced? Breathing heavily? This is important, Doctor Thayer."

Thayer glowered at him, and then said with perhaps too much emphasis:

"He was just making entries on his patient cards. Cool as a cucumber."

"Then you and he left at once for the mountains."

"My car was waiting. He came right with me, and we drove for the next eight hours up to my cabin at Sierra Butte."

"Was he out of your sight for any length of time for the remainder of your stay there?"

"Time to go to the john, maybe. No, I stick by what I said, lieutenant. Frank and I were together the whole time. He couldn't have killed this Dicer fellow, no matter what."

"Once again; did he ever confide to you what kind of business Dicer had with him?"

"No. So far as I know, Dicer was just a patient. You fellows dug up the fact he was a blackmailer, but I guess blackmailers get sick too. Ask for a look at Frank's medical records for Dicer."

"We have. They said Dicer had cancer."

"Then that's it."

Wilson spent that evening alone in his bachelor apartment, turning the pages of a brown-covered address book. It was obviously Dicer's blackmailing account book, found behind a picture in his apartment, and the only trace, besides Dicer's fat bank account, that he was engaged in a lucrative, if illegal, business.

But so far it had yielded no light to Wilson, except that Dicer, the little Cockney loner, had a sense of humor. His list of "customers," nearly fifty, were all coded with phony names, among which were Doctor Lonely Hearts, Doctor Grimm, Miss Chalkdust, and the only set of initials in the book, *C.A.* The key to the names, Wilson surmised, were locked up in Dicer's memory, and had died with him.

Next to each name was the amount and date of payments. From Doctor Lonely Hearts, for instance, five thousand dollars had been collected in ten five-hundred-dollar payments.

Doctor Lonely Hearts could be Nader, of course, a fashionable society doctor. Grimm? Either a hatchet face like Thayer, or, if Dicer had been *that* whimsical, which he doubted, a fairy—a queer. But *C.A.?* It was interesting to note there were no figures opposite the initials, so perhaps no collection had yet been made.

He'd already searched into both Nader's and Thayer's background in the hope of finding, perhaps, an illegal abortion or some other skeleton, but had come up with nothing—which didn't mean the doctors weren't guilty of something which could hurt their careers. Most men were, if they'd lived long enough.

Then, just as an idea occurred to Wilson, his phone rang.

"Mr Wilson? This is Ronald Quilt." The armchair detective sounded scared. "I just had a visit from Doctor Nader. He was very angry to hear I came to you with my story, and threatened me with bodily harm. He even struck me."

"You want to press charges?" Wilson asked, grinning.

"No, no. He made me feel very wretched, because he had been good to me, you know, giving me accounting work, and getting me more with his colleagues."

"So?"

"I want you to forget I ever came to you. I'll stick to my writing for kicks, like you said."

"It's too late for that, Mr Quilt," Wilson said, drawing a heart on his ink blotter. "In your amateur way, you've started me on something I've got to see through. I want to hear your reconstruction of the crime, for what it's worth."

"You'll give me police protection against Doctor Nader?"

"He won't bother you again, I promise," Wilson said, stabbing an arrow through the heart. "You know the Cactus Bar on Broadway? I'll meet you there in a half an hour!"

The following morning at ten o'clock Lieutenant Wilson sat at his desk in the precinct office, making polite if strained conversation with three of the four people he'd called in—Doctor Thayer, Miss Adams, and Mr Quilt. At five minutes past ten, Doctor Nader entered, a tall, handsome blond man in a suit of shiny snythetic.

Nader looked at his receptionist and his friend with a brief smile, then turned his eyes contemptuously on the little armchair detective.

"I had to cancel my morning's appointments," he said.

"It's regrettable," the inspector murmured, and when the doctor had sat down, he turned to the accountant.

"I was inclined to pay no attention to Mr Quilt, when he came here yesterday morning, and told me had a theory of how Mr Dicer was killed. But now I've heard his story, I would like to see how his reconstruction of Dicer's murder strikes the rest of you."

"Ingrate," Doctor Nader murmured.

Quilt started speaking as if he found it painful, but there was a gleam in his eye that betrayed an inner enjoyment. "I believe Mr Dicer was blackmailing Doctor Nader. After all, I was working on the doctor's books last Christmas when Mr Dicer first appeared. It was a day when Miss Adams was ill, and there was a replacement. I heard Doctor Nader arguing with Mr Dicer. I couldn't hear what they were saying."

"We had words, yes," Nader admitted. "I told him he had cancer, and he wouldn't believe me. Called me a liar, and became abusive."

Wilson nodded at Mr Quilt, and the latter continued.

"Anyway, when I read in the papers of Jack Dicer's death, and found he was a blackmailer, I sat at once that Doctor Nader had a *motive!*"

"But Doctor Nader *couldn't* have killed Mr Dicer" Miss Adams said.

"That's what I thought at first, too. But I figured it out!" Quilt looked proud of himself. "What really happened was this. Doctor Nader decided to kill Dicer. When Dicer came in that last morning, he gave him the poisoned Scotch."

"Somebody ought to give *you* some poisoned Scotch," Doctor Thayer said grimly.

But Quilt was not to be intimidated. "After Dicer died, the doctor put him into his office closet, first removing Dicer's yellow hat and checked coat. Then putting them on, he stepped outside his office door, and keeping his back to Doctor Thayer and Miss Adams, he called out to an empty office, using Dicer's gruff voice. Then he went out quickly, knocking over the vase to draw the others out after him. He needed the time, you see, to go downstairs and come back into his office by way of the stairs leading up from the old kitchen! It was only the work of a moment, then, to get rid of the coat and hat, and sit down with his file cards at the desk, where he was when Doctor Thayer entered."

Nader began to object, but the lieutenant cut him short.

"Then according to your theory, Mr Quilt," he said, "the body stayed in the closet until *after* Doctor Nader returned with Doctor Thayer from the trip to the mountains, when he simply bundled Dicer in his car, and left him in the rear of this building to establish his alibi. Now what do you say to that, Doctor Nader?"

"I say it's preposterous. That door from the kitchen which is behind my desk, has been nailed up for months!"

"That's true," Wilson admitted. "I remember the door was nailed, but I got Miss Adams to take me back to your office yesterday to reexamine it. The nails had not been tampered with. But that door was unnailed, wasn't it, at the time Mr Quilt was working on your books at Christmas time?"

"Yes, it was."

"Well, how about your theory now, Mr Quilt?" Wilson asked.

Mr Quilt had his mouth open, but nothing was coming out.

"The trouble with armchair detectives, they're never penalized for being wrong," Wilson said. "So they tend to be careless. You were careless, Mr Quilt. You assumed the door in Dr Nader's office was open as usual."

"Then I guess you have my apology, Doctor Nader," Mr Quilt stammered.

"Unfortunately," Wilson went on, "you were careless in other ways, too. You left your fingerprints on the vase when you toppled it the day of Dicer's last visit. We just found them last evening. Then you hurried downstairs after Dicer—it was really Dicer who left—and invited him to your apartment for a drink, which you spiked with arsenic, taken, I assume, off the doctor's own shelves. My men went over your apartment last night while we were at the Cactus and found the bottle of arsenic in your medicine cabinet."

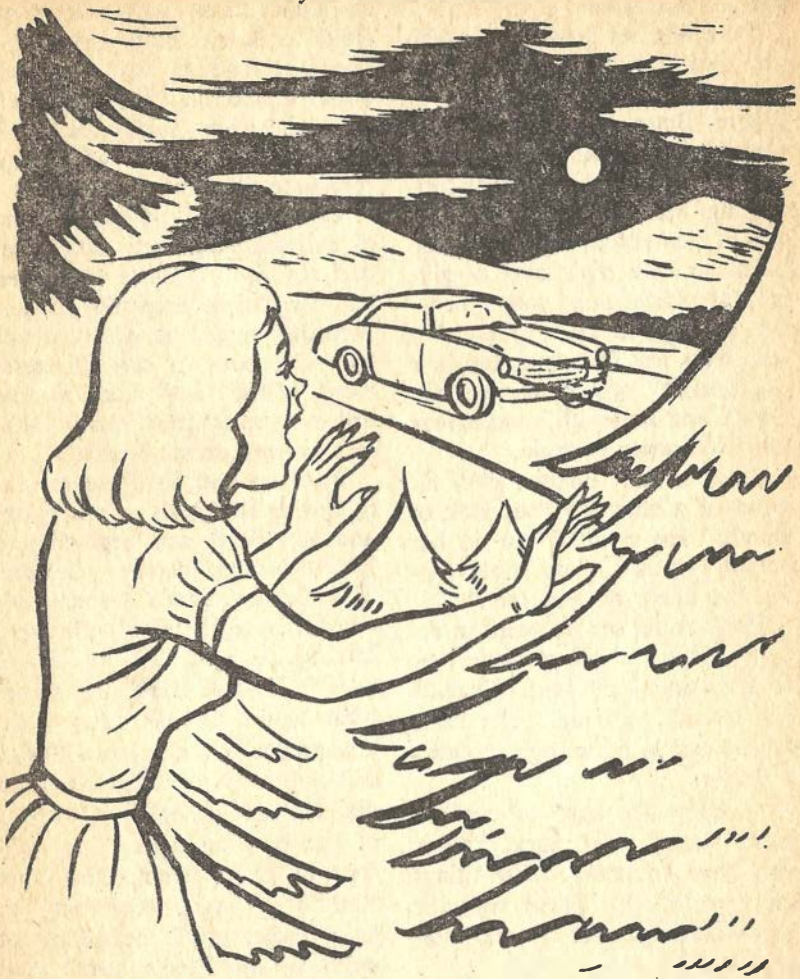
"He did all this just to frame me?" Nader asked incredulously.

"Oh, no. From evidence we found in Mr Quilt's apartment, Dicer was blackmailing *him* for helping some of his customers to cheat internal revenue."

"But how could you have suspected *me?* Mr Quilt asked plaintively.

"Dicer listed his victims in a little brown book, coding them according to their profession, or work. He never used a person's name. Therefore, *C.A.* which were the only initials in the book, could only stand for Certified Accountant."

by Richard O. Lewis



It was Saturday night, and the Four Lonely Hearts Bridge Club was in full, uncertain session.

Betty Emmert, hostess for the evening, had just failed to fulfill a contract of five spades. She was a slim brunette with large, dark eyes and a rather retiring disposition. "Sorry, partner," she said, gathering up the discards.

Although she said she was sorry, she knew deep down that the real fault lay with her partner, Sara Berney. Sara had simply thrown her the wrong clues, and the dummy she had laid

down was certainly not what it should have been.

Sara, like her hostess, was also slim and brunette. But from that point on, all resemblance ceased. Where Betty was retiring and sometimes not quite sure of herself, Sara was quite positive concerning her own attributes and was in the habit of condescending from her own high level to give helpful advice, along with a measure of pity, to those about her who were less fortunate than she —generally accompanying the advice and pity with a venomous barb whenever possible.

"If you had ruffed a club instead of a heart on your jack of trump," she pointed out in her helpful manner, "you could easily have filled your contract."

Betty could see no point in arguing about it. "I'll try to do better next time," she said. "Guess I just wasn't thinking." Her long fingers began fluttering the cards together.

"I know it's hard to concentrate, dear," said Sara, "when you have so many *other* things on your mind." There was the pity—accompanied by the poisonous dart.

Betty knew exactly what Sara meant by "*other* things." Sara never let an opportunity pass to imply to Betty—and to whoever else happened to be present—that Betty's husband, Fred, masculine and handsome as he was, most certainly was stepping out on poor Betty and that poor Betty couldn't help but know about it and be worried sick about it and that she, Sara, felt so very, very sorry for poor Betty because of the whole unfortunate situation.

During her entire seven years of married life, Betty had never had reason to believe that Fred had ever been unfaithful to her. Saturday nights, he played poker with the boys at the Businessmen's Club and had a few drinks—or, at least, that's what he was *supposed* to be doing.

But Sara had finally succeeded in sowing the seeds of suspicion, and now Betty was beginning to feel unsure of herself, insecure. T. J. Berney, Sara's husband, always rode to the club with Fred, leaving his own car for Sara's use. T. J.—tall, dark, and somewhat pious in demeanor—did not indulge in the immoralities of drinking and gambling as Fred did. Instead, he belonged to one of the bowling teams that held forth in the basement of the club. Had T. J. said something to Sara, indicating a possibility of infidelity on Fred's part? And was Sara, in her own way, trying to get the message across . . .

Helen Rhinhart at Betty's left suddenly pushed herself away from the table and began struggling to her feet. "Excuse me one little minute," she said,

picking up her empty beer bottle. "I'll be right back."

Helen could be described only as a soft blonde. Soft hair, soft eyes, soft cheeks, soft lips, and a soft, yielding body. During each meeting of the bridge club, she excused herself periodically from the table, either to go to the bathroom or to the refrigerator or both. She belonged to the bridge club because her husband, "Rhiney"—bald, rotund, and as soft in his own way as Helen—bowled on the same team as T. J. and was therefore occupied every Saturday night.

"If you will kindly deal the cards," said Gloria Hayden at Betty's right, "maybe we can play another hand or two before I fall asleep completely."

Gloria's outward aspect changed with each visit to the beauty salon. At present, she was wearing a tawney, shoulder-length hair piece with facial coloring to match. A golden serpent encircled her throat and a similar one was twined about her left wrist. But in whatever guise Gloria presented herself, her eyes never changed. They were green, gold-flecked, calculating, and almost completely hidden by thick lashes. The eyes of a female predator. She had had two husbands, and been unfaithful to each, was drawing alimony from both, and was looking for a third one—anybody's.

"She's not really carnivcrous," Helen had once said. "Just husbandiverous."

"Sorry," Betty said, and began distributing the cards.

Helen came back to her chair, sat down, filled her glass from the fresh bottle she had brought, emptied it, refilled it, and sat the empty bottle on the floor beside her. "I feel much better now," she announced.

Gloria picked up her cards one at a time, squirming restlessly as if she had a colony of creeping things somewhere in her under garments. She had been invited to substitute for the fourth regular member of the club who had suddenly become ill with the flu. She had accepted, reluctantly, and had spent most of the evening wiggling, smoking incessantly, and looking as if she'd rather be almost anywhere else than where she was.

Betty picked up her cards and began arranging them according to suit. When she had finished, a slow, hot flush rose from her neck to spread across her face. "I'm—I'm sorry," she said. "I've —I've made a misdeal. I have too many cards."

"Dear, dear," said Sara. "My poor dear."

"Jees!" said Gloria. She gave her cards a slight toss in Betty's direction.

"Here," said Helen. "Let me help you." She made a swooping gesture toward the cards with both hands. Her glass of beer, struck by an elbow, went spinning to the center of the table, spewing its foamy contents promiscuously.

"Holy gawd!" sighed Gloria.

Sara leaped to her feet and began brushing suds from the front of her dress.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" cried Betty, hurrying toward the kitchen. She was back seconds later with a towel for Sara and one for the table. The way the cards clung together, it was obvious that they would never again serve their intended purpose. "They're the only ones I have," apologized Betty. "I was going to get a couple of decks this morning, but—well, I forgot."

Sara tossed her used towel to the table. "You shouldn't let yourself worry so much about—about *things*," she said.

Damn the poison darts! And, also, *damn the bridge club!* Betty tightened her jaws and felt that she was rapidly approaching a danger point.

Gloria left the table and began a restless tour of the room. She stopped at one of the windows and stood gazing out into the night, nervously flicking her cigaret.

Helen was staring dejectedly at the empty glass she had hastily retrieved from the table. Finally, she set it down carefully and began making her way slowly and unobtrusively toward the kitchen refrigerator. She returned a moment later, a fresh bottle in hand.

Gloria spun suddenly away from the window. "I know what let's do!" she said. "Let's go bushwhacking!"

"Bushwhacking?" Betty had never heard the term before.

"Sure. You know. Drive around through the bushes and let your lights flash over parked cars. Very interesting. And tonight is certainly a swell night for it!"

Trust Gloria to know about things like that!

Betty piled the limp cards on top of the towels on the table. "Well, I don't know . . ."

"The party has been hovering near death all evening," said Gloria. "If we don't do something pretty soon to revive it, we'll have a corpse on our hands."

"Sounds like fun!" said Helen. She raised her bottle high by its neck and waved it, banner-like. "Let's go whack a bush," she sang. "Let's go whack a bush-a-bush-a-bush . . ."

"No use worrying and brooding all the time," Sara said pointedly.

Gloria started for the door. "We'll take my car."

Banner held high, Helen marched out the door after her and followed her into the front seat of the little sports car.

Betty tagged along reluctantly and climbed into the back seat with Sara. There seemed to be little else she could do concerning the situation.

Six miles out of town, Gloria swung off the main highway and onto a graveled road that led gradually upward. At the top of the knoll, she slowed and entered a rutted lane that led into an unfenced area filled with scrub fir and ground-hugging pines, her bright lights bringing the scene into bold relief.

Dim trails branched from the lane at irregular intervals. She selected one and began slowly following its meandering course. In a moment the headlights swept directly into the front seat of a parked car. The couple there quickly disembraced themselves, and the girl put up an arm to shield her eyes and face.

"Here's to you!" shouted Helen, raising her bottle.

The next car seemed unoccupied, but part of a blanket was plainly visible between two sheltering trees.

"Some fun!" said Helen. "I'll have to bring old Rhiney out here some night. He might pick up an idea or two."

"I doubt it," sniffed Sara.

Gloria swung the car slowly but surely in and out among the trees. *Probably knows the area like a book!* thought Betty.

The lights suddenly swept broadside across a parked red sedan. At sight of the car, a gasp arose in Betty's throat, She felt Sara go rigid beside her and clutch her free hand.

The red sedan had been visible for only a few fleeting seconds, but Betty felt certain that everyone had recognized it. She felt cold and weak, as if her entire body were melting away.

Gloria got back to the rutted lane almost instantly and began jouncing rapidly along it toward the graveled road. "Damn!" she muttered. "Damn! I guess you just can't trust *anybody!*"

Betty walked slowly to the front porch as the other cars drove away. She let herself into the lighted livingroom, closed the door behind her, and leaned against it, feeling as if her brain had ceased all function.

She went to the table, finally, gathered up the towels, Gloria's loaded ash tray, the wilted cards, Helen's empty bottle and glass and carried them to the kitchen where she disposed the entire lot into the refuse can.

She went back into the livingroom, sat down at the table, and stared into space. Her entire world—her being, her very reason for existance—seemed to have evaporated, leaving her with

a great emptiness she had never before experienced.

Then, slowly, her mind began seeking a way out, an excuse, anything that would bring her back from the void. Perhaps the red sedan was not Fred's. After all, she had not seen the license plate, and there could easily be a dozen such cars in the metropolitan area. Or someone could have stolen Fred's car . . .

She had a sudden impulse to call the Businessmen's Club. But she dismissed the idea almost instantly. Fred had told her never to call the club and ask for him because it would be a waste of time. The barman always answered the phone, and if a wife asked to speak with her husband, the barman gave her a stock answer—"Well, I don't see him around just at present."—and hung up. If the wife called again, she got the same answer. The Businessmen's Club was a male sanctum sanctorum, a citidel, the walls of which no mere wife could ever hope to breach.

Betty closed her eyes tightly and clinched her small fists on the table. What if, after all these year, Fred *had* been going out every week with some—some woman! Had Sara known about it all along? Or were her poison darts merely random shots in the dark?

She pounded the table. Oh, the shame of it all! Sara and Gloria—maybe even Helen—pitying her, feeling sorry . . .

She glanced at the clock on the mantle. Nearly midnight. Fred would be home soon. He always arrived home some time before one o'clock.

She stood beside the table, torn with indecision. Should she confront him? Accuse him? No. If he *had* been out with someone, he would simply deny it. Anyway, she was too emotionally upset to face him at present. She would probably crack up, become hysterical, mak a scene, get nowhere.

Minutes later, she was upstairs in bed, curled into a tiny ball, the covers up to her ears.

She heard him come into the drive, put the car into the garage, come into the kitchen, open and close the refrigerator door. Finally, she heard his slow steps upon the stairs, heard him go to the bathroom. Then, without turning on the lights, he came into the bedroom and slid into bed beside her.

"Well, I hope you had fun tonight!"

She could have bit herself. She hadn't intended to say anything. The words had just come tumbling out on their own accord.

"If losing twelve bucks is having fun," he grunted, "then I've had it!" As usual, after a night out and a snack from the re-

frigerator, he fell promptly into a deep sleep.

Betty prepared coffee for herself Sunday morning, poured a cup, and sat down at the kitchen table. After a fitful, sleepless night, she felt haggard and drawn, a floating entity without a goal. Sometime during the night, she had reached a definite decision: she couldn't continue life with Fred, wondering, never knowing. She had to discover the truth, *one way or another!* But, *how!*

It being Sunday, Fred would sleep till noon then spend most of the rest of the day glued to the TV, watching baseball games, sipping a few beers, munching sandwiches she would put on the tray beside him, taking a few cat naps, paying little attention to her, resting up for the week ahead. She could get through the day all right without her mood being noticed. She would have the house to herself Monday. Perhaps by then she could think straight . . .

Pleading a sick headache, Betty didn't get out of bed Monday morning until after she heard Fred leave for work. Then she got dressed, went downsatirs, fixed coffee, and sat down at the table to think.

She had hardly seated herself before a light tapping came from the kitchen door, and then the door itself was pushed open. Sara stuck her head around the edge of the door, then came the rest of the way in. "I ran over with some nice sweet rolls," she said, placing a covered dish on the table. She got a cup and poured herself some coffee.

"I'm—I'm not very hungry just now," said Betty.

"You poor dear," pitied Sara. "But you've got to eat *something,* you know." Her dark eyes searched Betty's face in search of signs of distress.

"I had some toast earlier," Betty lied. Why was it that some people actually groveled in the misfortune of others!

Fred ate most of the sweet rolls that night.

Tuesday morning, Sara was back again, bringing pan rolls along as an excuse to shower down her cloying pity.

Damn her! thought Betty. *Isn't she ever going to give up!*

Betty called a garage that afternoon and made an appointment to have her compact car checked over the following morning.

Fred passed favorable judgement on the pan rolls that night by eating at least half of them.

Betty came downstairs Wednesday morning just before Fred left for work. "I made an appointment at Simms' Garage to have the compact checked over this morning," she said. "But this

head . . ." She passed a hand over her brow. "Would you mind taking the car there this morning—on your way to work?"

Fred nodded. "Sure, I will." At the door, he turned. "And you'd better see Doc Markham about that headache of yours. You've had it several days now."

Doc Markham also belonged to the Businessmen's Club, and the boys at the club never missed a chance to toss whatever business they could to each other.

As soon as she heard Fred drive off, Betty hurried to the kitchen, picked up a newspaper and flashlight, and went out to the garage. She switched on the lights, crossed over to the red sedan, opened a rear door, and with the aid of the dome light and flashlight began to search for tell-tale clues. The seat revealed nothing. She turned the beam of her light to the floor. She picked up a gum wrapper, placed the newspaper on the floor, the gum wrapper on the paper, then emptied the contents of an ash receptacle onto the paper. She went around to the other side of the car, opened the door, and continued her search. A green buttom made of polished plastic. She placed it on the paper and reached for the ash receptacle on that side of the car. She was in the process of emptying the ashes and cigarette butts when a slight shadow fell across the paper. She glanced up. Sara was standing there looking at her through the opposite door.

"I saw the light and thought you'd be here," said Sara. She handed a package through the door. "And I brought you a jelly roll."

Betty took the package and felt a hot flush of anger begin to burn her cheeks.

"Looking for something?"

"Just cleaning out the car," said Betty.

"Well, I guess it pays to keep busy," said Sara, her eyes roving gloatingly over the gum wrapper, the green button, and the cigarette butts, some of which were smeared heavily with lip stick. "Keeps one from thinking about —about *things*."

"Look, Sara." Betty could not keep the anger out of her voice. "I won't have time to sit and chat today. I have many things to do."

Sara looked up quickly, her face suddenly creased with hard lines. She turned and, without a word, stalked out of the garage.

"And I hope she stays mad for a month!" breathed Betty.

Back in the kitchen with the newspaper spread out on the table before her, Betty realized how foolish her search of the car had been. Fred was in the real estate business and whenever a company car was not available he generally used the sedan to show apartments and various proper-

ties to prospective customers. The wife of any of those prospects could have dropped a gum wrapper, lost a green button from her dress, and smoked the smeared cigarettes. She folded the paper and its contents and tossed them into the trash can.

She sat at the kitchen table for a long time, thinking. She could not continue in this half-world of hers—doubting, never knowing, worrying herself sick. She would have to have positive proof, one way or another. Then, finally, she knew what she must do to obtain that proof. It had been lurking in the back of her mind right along, but, up until now, she had been pushing it back.

The next three days dragged slowly by. She did her work in a mechanical manner—her body functioning while her mind hung in a void of suspended animation.

Saturday night, Fred kissed her as usual before leaving for the club.

"Have fun," she said.

"I'll get that twelve bucks back tonight," he promised. "With interest!"

It was Sara's turn to be hostess to the bridge club. Betty had no intention of attending. She was about to call Sara when the telephone started jangling. She picked it up. "Betty speaking," she said.

"I have cancelled the bridge club for tonight," came Sara's terse voice. She hung up without further explanation.

"Still mad," thought Betty, recradling the phone.

She turned on the television and sat staring at it without really seeing it until the small hand of the mantle clock made two complete revolutions. Ten o'clock. Time to go. She shut off the television, went out to the garage, and got into her compact, her jaws set in hard, quivering lines.

She had no trouble in finding the graveled road and the little lane that led from it into the woodland area. But into which one of the numerous little trails had Gloria turned on that eventful night a week ago? She had made a left turn. Yes, and there had been a dead tree there leaning against its neighbors, its bare trunk stark white in the glare of the headlights.

She found the tree, finally, made a left turn and in a moment or two passed the spot where the girl in the front seat had thrown up an arm against the light beams. Then the place where there had been a half-hidden blanket . . .

Betty put the car into low gear and crept slowly along, eyeing each side of the trail. Presently, tire tracks led off to the left. Cautiously, she followed them

into a sheltered clearing, turned the car around so that it would be headed back in the direction from whence she had come, switched off the motor and lights, and got out. A lopsided moon hung low in the eastern sky, filling the little clearing with splotches of pale light surrounded by black shadows. She stood for a moment, getting her bearings. If she entered that screening wall of trees, keeping the moon at her back, she should intersect the lane at the approximate place where the sedan had been parked a week ago. Then, facing the moon, she could easily find her way back to her own car.

She reached the fringe of trees and pushed herself slowly into the darkness that lay beyond. She inched along on trembling legs, feeling her way, parting the branches with hands and arms, certain that a black demon would suddenly leap out of nowhere and pounce upon her. Then, suddenly, there were no more branches, and she found herself standing at the edge of the trail. In the dim light, she saw the wide curve and the parking space. But there was no red sedan there. Nothing.

She let out the breath she had been holding. Had she arrived too late? Too soon? Or was the sedan parked somewhere else? There could be a hundred such parking places . . .

Suddenly, she stiffened. A car was slowly approaching, headlights flashing.

She leaped back among the sheltering trees and crouched down behind a bush to conceal herself. The car glided into the parking place and stopped. Then silence and darkness returned.

Trembling, scarcely able to breathe, she heard the two front doors of the car open and close, one after the other. Then a back door opened—and—finally —closed. Fred's car? Some other car?

She pushed herself to her feet, took faltering steps to the edge of the trees, and peered out. Almost hidden by shadows was a red sedan! She could see one side of the car and part of the back, but she couldn't read the license number. She would have to cross the trail, some how, and slip quietly up behind . . .

She leaped back into the trees again. Another car was approaching. She waited, but the car didn't pass. It had stopped somewhere further up the trail. At the spot where there had been the half-hidden blanket a week ago? She thought she heard the sound of a door being opened and closed. But she wasn't sure.

Once again, she made her way to the edge of trees and looked out. Immediately to her right the trail lay in inky blackness where tall trees cast dense shadows.

Feeling quite certain she could cross at that point without being seen, she began making her way slowly and silently toward it.

Suddenly, she froze in her tracks. She was not alone. Someone—or something—was moving through the shadows. The black demon? Fist to lips, she held her breath, her eyes striving to pierce the darkness. There it was again, moving through the lesser shadows on the other side of the trail, a crouched figure taking a few silent steps, halting, taking a few more steps, rapidly approaching the red sedan.

The figure paused a moment at the rear of the car, then glided swiftly to its side, threw open the door, and thrust an arm inside.

There came two flashes of light and two crashing shots followed by a piercing scream. Then the figure wheeled away, its contorted face caught briefly in the moonlight as it ran rapidly back down the trail. In a moment, a motor sprang into life and a car went speeding away into the night.

Then came the scream again.

Betty was not certain if the second scream had come from the car or from her own constricted throat. Driven by stark panic, she leaped back into the trees and ran toward the moon, her arms crossed before her face to ward off the clutching branches.

Betty did not remember locating her car or driving home. When the shock began to wear off and her mind began to function once more, she found herself seated at her livingroom table, weak, shaken, and staring into space. How long she had been that way she did not know.

She looked at the clock. Twelve o'clock. The poker game would be over now, and soon Fred would be coming . . .

Sudden realization flooded over her. No! Fred would never walk through that door again! Fred was dead! Lying in the back of a parked car . . .

She began pacing the floor, fists clinched, tears of frustration beginning to well into her eyes. Then she realized that she would have to get hold of herself or lose her senses. And what if Fred should come walking in and find her like this . . .

She sank down at the table again and began striving to put bits and pieces together in her mind. First of all, the one who had fired the shots had been a woman. She was reasonably certain of that. Secondly, the woman had tailed that car into the parking area, had followed it into the shadowy trail, and had known—or guessed—where it would eventually stop. But what woman could possibly hate Fred to the extent of following him and trying to kill him! The woman's face, etched briefly in

the moonlight, had been contorted with hate, unrecognizable.

What should she do? Call the police and report the shooting? They would want to know her identity. If she called anonymously, they might have ways of tracing the call to her. They would want to know how she happened to know about the crime. Had she been there at the time of the shooting? Why?

And then a new fear clutched her. If the police learned that she had been present at the time of the shooting, she, the jealous wife, would instantly become the prime suspect!

Her only ray of hope was that the red sedan had not been Fred's car. In that case—it was twelve-thirty now—Fred should be coming through that door . . .

That single ray of hope faded as minute after minute dragged slowly by. She began pacing the floor again, wondering when the body, or bodies, would be found. Other parked couples would probably not investigate the shots, would not want to become involved. She remembered that there had been a shooting in that area a year or so ago. The shooting had been attributed to hoodlums. The bodies had not been found for two days . . .

Finally, she made a pact with herself. If Fred had not returned by one o'clock, she would call the police, tell them the whole story, rid herself of the suspense that was threatening her very sanity.

She turned to go back to the table again, then stopped in her tracks. A car had pulled into the driveway. She wheeled around, waiting. Steps came falteringly across the porch. The door came open, and Fred stood there, his collar open, his face pale, and and the front of his white shirt smeared with blood.

"It's all right," he said, coming in and closing the door behind him. "Don't be alarmed. I'm not hurt. Just—just an accident."

He hurried to the bar, poured himself a stiff drink, gulped down half of it, and returned to stand beside the davenport.

"We were on our way home and, suddenly, out of nowhere, this—this hoodlum came dashing out to the street corner and began shooting . . ." He caught sight of the blood on his shirt and began staring at it as if seeing it for the first time. "My God!" he gasped and hurried toward the bathroom adjacent to the kitchen.

Yes, he was lying, putting on some kind of act for her benefit. She felt certain of that.

He was back in a minute or two, bare to the waist. There were no bullet holes in his chest or torso. The blood on his shirt had been from the girl . . .

He picked up his drink from the table and finished it off. "This—this hoodlum," he continued, "came rushing up and began firing, point-blank. T. J. got a slug in his arm and another one high up in the shoulder."

T. J.?

"Guess I got blood on me when I was helping him out of the front seat and into the back where he could lie down while I rushed him to Doc Markham's place."

So that's why Fred was lying! Not to save himself, but to cover up for T. J.! Just like a man!

And then, suddenly, Betty felt a ton of grief and worry slide from her shoulders. Fred had not been parked in that car! It had been T. J.! And T. J. had probably been parked in that car the Saturday night before and other Saturday nights . . .

But who had done the shooting?

Gloria? Gloria was certainly familiar with that parking area and might easily be involved. Men *in general* were important to Gloria's life, but it was hard to conceive of any man *in particular* driving her to violence.

Sara? A jealous wife finding that her husband had betrayed her? But Sara had been positive all along that *Fred* had been the philanderer! Even on the previous Saturday night when Gloria's headlights had swept over the parked sedan, Sara had been so positive Fred had been in the car that she had showered Betty with sweet rolls and cloying pity for several days—until she had brought the jelly roll into the garage that morning and had suddenly became angry . . .

"Fred," Betty said abruptly, "does T. J. own a green shirt?"

"A green shirt?" He wrinkled his brow. "Now how on earth would I know what kind of shirts T. J. owns?"

"Try to remember," Betty urged. "Was T. J. wearing a green shirt last Saturday night?"

Fred's brow wrinkled some more. "Come to think of it," he said, finally. "He was wearing some kind of a green thing. A knit pull-over . . ."

"With three or four buttons at the throat?"

Fred nodded.

Now suddenly, the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. The jelly roll, the garage, the litter Betty had gleaned from the back seat of the sedan and placed on the newspaper—gum wrapper, cigaret butts, green button—and Sara's quick anger. The button! Sara had recognized it and had hurried home to check the green shirt—and her world had begun to fall apart.

But Sara had not as yet been absolutely certain. T. J. always rode to the club with Fred, and

the button could have got into the back seat in a perfectly innocent manner. And so, tonight, Sara had called off the bridge session and had driven to the club parking lot to watch and to wait. T. J. had probably bowled a game or two before coming out of the club and getting into the red sedan to go after his paramour. Sara had followed, and when the sedan had pulled into the wooded area, her ego had received its final devastating shock. For weeks, she had been showering down poisonous darts and false pity from the parapets of her pride-built castle, and now the whole structure had come crashing down, its foundations kicked asunder by her own husband who at this very moment was probably sitting in the back seat of the sedan—making love . . .

Obsessed by uncontrolable rage, she had taken the gun from the glove compartment where T. J. generally carried it, had gone to the sedan, thrown open the door, and fired blindly into the interior, caring little whether she killed one or both of the occupants.

After that, T. J. and the girl—whoever she was—had managed to drive the sedan back to the club where they had summoned Fred and Doc Markham and had concocted a story . . .

"I guess I'll just never understand women," Fred said, his brow still wrinkled. "T. J. gets almost murdered tonight, and you want to know the color of the shirt he wore last week!"

"It's probably best for all concerned," Betty said, ambiguously, "that you don't understand."

Fred was thoughtful for a moment. "Poor Sara," he said, finally. "Maybe you should bake some Brownies tomorrow and take them to her. "She's been mighty good to us, you know, bringing us sweet rolls and things."

Betty nodded. "Poor Sara," she said. "I feel so very, very sorry for her," she added—and was not at all surprised to find that she really meant it.

CAVE IN THE RAIN

by Gil Brewer

Fear touched lightly, at first. She tried hard to dismiss it, but it would not go away. What Warren had just told her was frightening. He had been jovial about it, too.

She stood waist deep in the lake waters, and looked at the sky. She wanted to sound as if what he'd said did not affect her.

Her voice was strained. "It might rain."

"Looks like it, Charlotte," Warren said. "I like the rain. though. Spring rain."

"Yes, but the way those clouds are piling up, it won't be just a sprinkle. Maybe we should go back to town."

"Let's swim, honey."

She looked at him and forced a smile. It was the first time he'd called her anything but Charlotte. Just the same, any guy who would bring a girl out here, knowing what he knew, did not exactly inspire confidence.

Warren grinned at her, broad-shouldered, slim, handsome, with an extraordinary amount of jaw, and dark blue eyes that could be very still, and a moment later light with excitement. He was brown-skinned, as though he took a lot of sun, and his teeth showed startlingly white.

Light thunder shuddered in the late afternoon. She glanced across the short stretch of woods to the cliffs beyond the lake. Above the ragged silhouette of the cliffs, dirty near-black clouds streaked.

"You think we should go back to the car?" she asked.

"No."

Sometimes he was abrupt.

"But we haven't eaten, Warren."

"We will. All that food you brought. Enough for an army."

He dove under the water. She watched for him to surface. He didn't. He could stay down the longest time.

She stood there feeling uneasy, almost alone. She could not forget what he had told her about this section of the lake, the county.

She moved slightly toward the pebbled shore.

Wearing a light, bright orange bikini, she was extremely shapely, with olive skin, tufts of auburn hair jutting from under the bathing cap. Her large brown eyes looked worried. Her broad-lipped mouth was a red pout.

He grabbed her legs underwater, gave her a yank, and she splashed down, under. She fought to come up, touched with tinges of fright.

As she struggled, she thought, too, how she knew so little of Warren Talley. They had met only a week ago. They'd been out twice together. He had proposed a picnic, a swim, up here at this end of Indian Lake, sixteen miles from Sladeville.

She burst the surface. He bounced up beside her, laughing.

It started to sprinkle as a gouge of lightening tore the sky. Drops freckled the surface of the lake. The water felt suddenly colder than it had.

"Damn it," Warren said. "I'm afraid we're going to get it."

They looked at the sky.

Her gaze dropped, traveled along the shore, among the shadows of the dark trees. It was growing quite dark now, and she did not like it. She knew it was what Warren had said of the rapist-murderer around here. She asked him why she hadn't seen it in the papers, and he told her he'd learned from a TV newscaster friend that the authorities were trying to keep it quiet, so as not to frighten the man off. But, even so, word had leaked out, newspapers were putting on pressure, and the story would probably make headlines today or tomorrow.

Nine girls had been raped and killed, Warren had said, their bodies, broken, torn, discovered in the woods, the fields. One had survived long enough to tell how the man carried Poloroid snapshots of his victims after he was finished with them, forced her to look at them before he commenced on her. She had not been able to describe him. She had died.

Whoever it was, he was terribly elusive. The police were working day and night, but there was no trace.

Charlotte shivered. "Maybe we should go back," she said. "We could eat at my place."

"Nothing doing," Warren said. "We came here for a picnic. I wouldn't miss that."

"But—"

"It's just rain," he said. "Boy, though—it is going to come down. I can tell."

Thunder pounded, then, and a streak of lightning ripped at the woods. The rains came. A deluge streamed upon them.

"This'll last for a couple three hours!" Warren shouted. "Come on. I know what we'll do."

"Come on—" He grabbed her arm and they ran splashing for the shore. Now the drops of rain felt colder than the spring-fed lake.

They reached the pebbled shore, stepping gingerly.

"In the car?" she asked, talking loudly above the streaming, pounding water.

"No. We'll get the food from the car. Then I'm taking you to the cliffs."

"The cliffs?"

"Surprise. Come on."

They hurried to the car, parked in the woods. He rushed around, gasping, streaming water, picked up the large picnic basket and took her arm again, grinning down at her.

He was so big, so overpowering.

"Hadn't we better stay in the car?"

"A little rain won't hurt. Come on."

She held back.

"Charlotte." He pulled at her.

She went along with him.

They hurried through the woods, running across slippery pine needles, softly humped ground, across the road, through a field, into more woods. He kept laughing, now, and it troubled her. His muscles rippled under the sheen of water.

"Where we going?" she asked, gasping, spitting rain.

"Up here. C'mon."

They crossed glistening black slate, and began climbing a slope.

"But, Warren!"

"You do as I say."

But he was grinning at her. It was all right.

"Here we are."

It was absolutely pouring now, thunder rippling and pounding, lightning fleeing the heavens.

"What's this?"

"A cave."

She saw the dark opening, the rocks, the bushes.

"C'mon, inside," he said. He pulled at her arm, and she tried to hold back, but he was very strong, yanking at her. They stepped into the sudden, dry hush of the cave. "It's not very large," he said. "But it'll do."

It was about the size of the average living room, domed and jagged, niched in stone, with a rocky, dirt floor.

"Good thing we have matches in the basket," he said.

"But, Warren—"

"You just wait here," he said. "Be right back."

He dropped the picnic basket, squeezed her arm, and rushed outside into the gray-black late afternoon. She stood there. She felt cold. She folded her arms and clutched herself. She looked around in the near dark, unmoving.

Presently he returned, his arms loaded with pieces of wood.

"Kind of damp," he said. "But it'll dry out."

He tossed the wood in the corner, hurriedly made a pile in the center of the cave. He took paper from the picnic basket, and matches, and soon there was a glowing blaze.

The warmth felt good. The cave flickered and leaped, their shadows weirdly gesticulant on the walls.

"Nice, huh?" he said.

"Yes." She cleared her throat. "Warren, how'd you know about this place?"

He stared at her, unsmiling. "I've been out here lots, Charlotte. I know this country like the palm of my hand."

"Oh?"

He continued to stare at her, and she thought again how little she knew about him. He had said he was an artist, looking for a good place to paint. But she

had never seen any artist's equipment. She'd been a fool. Yet, how could she have known, until he told her, what had happened out here? The way he looked at her was disturbing.

Those girls who had been attacked, killed, who were they?

"I thought you were new around here," she said.

"A white lie, honey. Let's eat, huh?"

"I—I'm not very hungry."

"I'm starved. You'll have to excuse me, then. Got to have something." He went to the picnic basket, hunkered down, the firelight reddening his face, gleaming in his eyes. He opened the basket, unwrapped a sandwich, and began to wolf it, chewing and swallowing. "Man, can you build a sandwich," he said around a mouthful. "Delicious. Steak, too. What a man needs."

"Glad you like it."

He tore open another sandwich, then opened the thermos of coffee, began drinking. "You better have some. We'll save some, though. No telling how long we'll be here."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, the rain, you know." He chuckled, looking at her. "Say. Why not sit down? That rock'd make a good seat. C'mon, Charlotte."

"I don't want to sit down. How did you know about this cave?"

"Always knew about it, honey." He glanced at the dirt floor, then up at her again. His mouth was sober. "I've brought plenty girls to this cave, Charolotte. Plenty." He cleared his throat. "Be surprised how many. But—"

"Girls?" she said quickly.

"Yeah, honey. Girls. I was always kind of girl crazy. Ever since I was very young."

She stepped back toward the wall of the cave, one step, watching him. He stood up, then, staring at her. The wrapper from the sandwich fell from his hand, fluttered to the dirt floor of the cave. He leaned quickly, set down the thermos, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Charlotte?"

"You're not an artist!" It burst past her lips.

"No," he said. He took a step toward her. "I'm not. And I'm not new to this country, honey. But you're the first girl to—"

"Stop!"

"Charlotte." He stepped quickly to her. She cringed back against the wall of the cave. He was between her and the fire. It leaped and roared behind him, smoke bellowing out the entrance. He was a huge black shadow.

"Please, Warren—please!"

He grabbed her arm. "Charlotte, come here. I've got to tell you . . ."

"What're you two doing here?"

Warren whirled. A man in overalls, red-faced, eyes shining in the firelight, stood crouching in the smoke-filled cave entrance. "Seen the light from my place," he said. "What's going on? This is my land." He looked at Charlotte.

She gave a long sigh as Warren released her.

"Oh, please," she said. "Please."

The man smiled. He carried a shotgun.

"Well?" the man said. "What you got to say for yourself?"

Charlotte was so relieved she could hardly contain herself. She abruptly ran for the man, her arms out.

"Get back," Warren snapped.

He lashed out with one arm, struck her brutally. She sprawled back against the wall of the cave, landed on her side. She looked up quickly. The man lifted the shotgun. Warren leaped at him.

It was true, then. He was mad. She cringed on the floor of the cave, against the rocky wall.

Warren grabbed the barrel of the shotgun. It was double-barreled, and it went off, an ear-rupturing explosion in the confines of the cave.

They fought, struggling together, and she could hear them breathing, hear them curse, gasp. The flames leaped and wood popped. It was getting very hot.

Warren struck the man on the jaw. The man fell back heavily, still clinging to the shotgun.

Charlotte sent up a bitter prayer.

Warren again leaped at the man, and fell on him. They fought, rolling on the floor of the cave. She could not see the gun, it was between them. Abruptly, another explosion rocked the cave. The man fell back, his chest torn.

Warren stood up, breathing rapidly.

"He's dead," he said. He turned to Charlotte.

She could not speak. She lay back against the wall of the cave, her fingers picking at rock.

He stepped toward her quickly, took her arm.

"Honey," he said. "You all right?"

"Get away!"

"What's the matter, Charlotte? It wasn't nice, I know. But it's done. I couldn't help it. I wanted him alive."

"Alive?"

"Yes. He's the killer, Charlotte. He's the man who's been doing all the raping around here." He turned, went over to the body, ripped open a shirt pocket. "Got to be here. They are." He brought something over to her. They were snapshots. He spread them before her in the firelight. She recoiled at the outrageous pictures. "You see?" he said. "His camera's probably

outside someplace. I'm sorry, honey. I lived here as a boy. I know this country. I'm a special investigator for the state. The governor sent me down." He grinned at her. "You were a decoy. A dirty trick, but we had our eye on this guy. I knew he might show. See? That's all there is to it."

She stared at him, wanting to say something.

"Before he came," Warren said, "I was trying to tell you about it. I couldn't. I was trying to say you're the only girl who ever really got to me. Out of all the girls. I mean it, Charlotte."

She still could not speak.

He took her in his arms. "You're frightened. You thought it was me, didn't you?" He stood quickly. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

"Decoy!" she said. Abruptly, she reached out and slapped his face.

He looked stunned.

"You're right, we'll get out of here," she said. "You'll take me home, Warren Talley. And, believe me, I never want to see you again!"

TO BE—OR NOT TO BE . . .

by Dan Hall

It started out as a pretty good party, especially the kissing scene. Then Joan hauled out that revolver and I suddenly became a party-pooper. It was supposed to be all in fun, but the muzzle of that .38 wasn't smiling .

I got into it by accident. I was driving down a busy suburb of Phoenix, admiring a blonde in a bikini across the street, when I drove through a red light and side-swiped a sheriff's department patrol car.

It made an awful crunching sound and the two bull-like faces that swung to glare at me were those of Smith and Jones—the two deputies who were already after my hide.

I took off. They swung around at the end of the block and came after me. We played cat-and-mouse until I reached the outskirts of town and finally lost them on one of the country roads. But I felt no relief—I knew they would hunt me for the rest of the day. Even worse than the side-swiping, they would remember how I had tried to be a shrewd amateur detective and show them a trick or two . . .

A couple of weeks before, there had been a big-time blackmail group operating in Phoenix, headed by a beady-eyed, thin-lipped character called Cicero Sam. For three days I had tailed a beady-eyed, thin-lipped character who *had* to be Cicero Sam. Sometimes he would have mysterious callers at night—victims from whom he was extorting money, of course.

Well . . . I would rather not review the painful details. Let it suffice for me to say that I slipped into Cicero Sam's house through the back door one night—bumping into a couple of his victims in the dark as they hurried out—with the intention of confronting him with my knowledge of his identity and holding him there until the police arrived.

I was still confronting him when Smith and Jones came roaring in like a pair of enraged lions, to tell me that he was Mr. K. J. Keningsworth, one of Phoenix's more respected business men, and that he had been cooperating with them in laying a trap for the kidnappers; a trap that would have been sprung that very night if I hadn't interfered.

They were very unhappy with me. I'm pretty sure they would have shot me if it hadn't been against the law.

And now they were baying blood-thirstily along my trail, panting for revenge, while I had a tire with a slow leak and no spare, fifteen cents in my pocket, and a gas gauge that was just touching the E.

Through the dark cloud of worry I saw that I was driving up La Paloma Valley. This is a small and exclusive valley; estates of the rich scattered the length of it. The houses—mansions, rather—all set some distance back from the road, protected from the proletariat by high steel fences and locked gates.

I drove on, without much interest. I earn my groceries—usually hamburgers—as a mediocre fee-lance writer, but I couldn't see any story in La Paloma Valley.

Then I came to a gate with a little sign that read: *Brookson's Rancho.* A bell began to ring in my mind and I stopped, to stare thoughtfully at the locked gate. Beyond, among a grove of trees, was a rambling, ranch-type house that seemed to cover about an acre. The gravel driveway showed very recent travel.

I wondered if Joan Brookson might be there. Her father had died recently, leaving her several million dollars plus a string of supermarkets. She was rich—you know, the kind who can say to her chauffeur, "Hubert, I noticed some dust on one of my Lincolns this morning. Take it in and trade it off on a new one."

She had been written up several times in the past six months with such baloney headings as: *YOUNG MULTIMILLIONAIRE BUSINESS GIRL DISCUSSES PRCE LEVELS WITH TOP EXECUTIVES.*

Actually, of course, she had highly paid managers to take care of her business for her and probably didn't even know the price of her own Brookson Supermarket hamburger. Which, by the way, was forty-nine cents a pound.

I had my camera with me and I could see a story coming up. I would portray her as the poor little rich girl who yearned for the simple things of life; who hated the sordid world of business and million-dollar bank accounts; who loved to get away every week-end and relax on her rancho, doing her own cooking and sweeping; roping and saddling her horse every afternoon to go galloping across the fields with her golden hair blowing in the wind (I hoped there would be a horse of some kind around and she could keep from falling off it long enough for me to get a picture); the kind of girl who liked to read a good book in the evening as she petted the kitten in her lap (there would surely be a cat around somewhere) and who, in her more thoughtful moods, liked to walk barefooted in the rain as she communed with nature.

She belonged to some amateur theatrical group and would probably enjoy hamming it up for my story, especially walking barefooted in the rain even if it hadn't rained for six months. And I would have a story that would bring me some steaks instead of hamburgers. I had reached the point where it turned my stomach even to think about another hamburger.

If only I could get in . . .

It turned out to be very easy.

A car drove out from the house and stopped on the other side of the gate. The guy in it looked like some way-out conception of a movie producer;

loud clothes, beard, dark glasses, beret . . .

"Hello," I said. "Is Miss Brookson home?"

"She was expecting you?"

He sounded a little surprised—and I was a little surprised that he spoke plain, ordinary English.

"No," I said. "I'm here to do a story about her—assignment from the *Republic*."

Which wasn't quite true—but it sounded impressive.

"So you're a reporter?" He sounded thoughtful.

"Free-lance, except on special assignments. Name is Don Steele."

"Hmmm—I don't believe I've read any of your stuff."

"Oh, I use a pen name for that," I said.

Which was true—Don Steele. My own name of Elmer Dunkengerfer seemed to lack something . . .

He thoughtfully stroked his beard. "Do you have any other appointments this afternoon—anyone to come hunting you up while you wait to see Miss Brookson?"

"I'm free as a bird."

"Good." He got out and unlocked the gate. "I'm a talent scout for the *Adventures of Gloria* show and we're here to give Miss Brookson a screen test. Did you ever do any acting?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "I used to be very active in the small theatres."

Well . . . actually, it was a high school play, once, in which I was the masked burglar with no speaking part and the boy who played the lead role slugged me over the head with a real baseball bat instead of the balsa wood fake he was supposed to use. He was the jealous type and had caught me smooching his girl a couple of hours before . . .

"Fine—fine!" the talent scout said. "Our little caste is one member short—I'm afraid the young fellow I hired must have stopped at a bar—and I was just going out to find someone else." He stroked his beard again. "I'm glad you came along, Don."

He swung the gate open and I drove through with the creepy feeling up my backbone that Smith and Jones would be along any moment. I parked my car as well-hidden as possible, saw that the tire with the slow leak was almost completely flat, and we went into the house.

It was a large room, furnished with expensive furniture, and three people were sitting at a big mahogany table.

One was a tall, sallow-faced man of about thirty, slouched in his chair with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. One was a dark-haired woman about the same age, wearing

some kind of a semi-formal gown, a long, ivory cigarette holder in one white-gloved hand. She was good looking in a cool, impersonal way.

And one was Joan Brookson; golden-haired and gray-eyed, her face flushed with excitement, looking like seventeen instead of twenty-two. She would have been a knock-out in a bikini . . .

The talent scout introduced us:

"Folks, meet Don—he's had acting experience. You recognize Joan, of course, Don. This is Jack, my camera man, and Sophia, Jack's wife and my script writer for these bits we're about to do. And I'm Dave—we won't bother with formality here."

"Yeah," Jack said around the cigarette in his mouth. "We're just a friendly little group, here to give Joan her big chance. Sophia, hand Don a drink."

"Bourbon and water would be fine," I said to her questioning glance.

"Sit down by Joan," Dave said to me. "You two might as well get acquainted."

I did so and Sophia handed me a tall drink. Joan smiled at me, so warm and friendly that I suspected she had had several more drinks than just the one she held in her hand.

"Isn't this thrilling, Don!" she exclaimed.

I took a long drink—Sophia had certainly been liberal with the bourbon—and said, "I suppose so, Miss Brookson—Joan. I'm a little hazy as to what it's all about, though."

Dave spoke before Joan could answer:

"Unless I'm mistaken, Don, you're sitting beside the future star of a new show my sponsor is starting—*Big City Girl*."

"Joan has a marvelous stage presence," Sophia said, putting another cigarette in the ivory holder, "but we have to have her on sound-track film to show the producer what she can do."

"Imagine!" Joan said excitedly. "I did Joan of Arc in our little theatre last night and I didn't even know these talent scouts were watching me!"

"*Big City Girl* will call for a variety of roles," Dave said. "A society girl, wealthy and aristocratic—which Joan already is—who has another side: that as the girl who is an FBI man's secret helper. Which means anything might happen, including gun battles with killers."

Jack spoke again. "Found anybody for the FBI part yet, Dave?"

"Ah . . . some that can act well enough but they don't have the hard, masculine look that the producer wants."

"How about *him*?" Sophia asked, pointing her cigarette holder at me. "Wuth that square

jaw, scarred face and broken nose, he certainly looks masculine."

"He looks the part," Dave agreed. "If he can act it, he can have it."

"Oh, good!" Joan almost clapped her hands with delight. "You can do it, Don—I'll bet you've fought a lot of battles in your life!"

I drained my glass and said modestly, "Well, I didn't get this face by playing tiddly-winks."

Which was true. I acquired it by getting drunk one night and falling down a flight of concrete steps.

"Let's bring in the equipment," Dave said to Jack. "Sophia, fix Don and Joan another drink then come out and pick out the script we want."

Sophia poured us each another drink, then all three of them went outside.

"Nice place you have here, Joan," I said.

She made a face. "I hate it!"

I saw the poor-little-rich-girl story going down the drain.

"You mean you prefer a life of high society, deluxe parties, and big business?"

"High society and de luxe parties bore me. And I have a law firm, an accounting firm, and a batch of managers to take care of business for me."

"Then what do you want?"

"To act!" She took another drink. "Did you ever want something more than anything in the world? I've always wanted to be an actress; to make people laugh, and cry, and hold their breath with suspense, and say, 'Isn't she wonderful!' Didn't you ever want something very much like that?"

"Well—I've always wanted people to say of me, 'That Don Steele is certainly a good writer.' "

"And they never did, did they?"

She patted my hand sympathetically and I took another drink of bourbon. Damn it, she wasn't following the script . . . or something.

"Nobody ever heard of me, either, Don"—I winced again—"but now I'll get my big chance. They came to me backstage last night and asked me if I would be interested in a film test out here today."

"And you were, obviously."

"I could hardly wait. I was here at daylight and told my caretaker and his wife to take the rest of the week-end off. Then I paced the floor until Dave and the others showed up."

She sighed with ecstasy and I rearranged my plans for the future. I wasn't stupid enough to think I could ever be an actor but if she passed the test, I would still have a good story—the beautiful, talented rich girl

who scorned Society and Wealth for her Art . . .

Sophia came in with a brief case and Dave and Jack followed with a compact—and evidently very expensive—sound-track movie camera complete with tripod, floodlight, and all the trimmings.

As Jack set up the camera, Dave said, "These will all be just short bits, but very important. They will call for everything from loving glances up through jealousy, hatred, and even muderous rage." He looked at Sophia. "Fill their glasses again and give them their scripts."

Joan lifted her glass and stared at it uncertainly, as though she might be seeing two of them. "I don't know about another drink—if I'm going to play my part well—"

"You're quite right, dear," Sophia said. "Enough for you. But Don needs to be a little more relaxed."

She filled my tall glass again, handed us our script sheets, and went back to stand beside Dave. I looked at the first page. There was a small amount of simple dialogue—easy enough to remember.

"All right," Dave said. "You two have fallen in love. Move closer together—that's it. Now—action!"

Joan was instantly another person, despite the drinks she had had.

"Darling," she said pleadingly, her eyes seeming to be almost ready to fill with tears, "tell me you won't leave me—tell me your love is greater than that!"

"It has to be this way," I said, in the hopeless—I hoped—tone the script called for. "You are a rich girl and I have nothing, nothing but a little pride—"

"Pride!" Her eyes flashed with temper. "Is it pride—or another woman?"

"No, Joan—there can never be anyone but you."

"Then why"—her voice broke forlornly—"must you leave me alone in a lonely house and"—her tone changed to one of seductiveness and so did her expression—"a lonely bed?"

This was supposed to be the cue for us to go into a passionate clinch, which we did.

I guess she really wanted to be the star of *Big City Girl* because she turned loose with some long, ten-thousand-volk kisses that put me into an orbit that must have gone out past Mars somewhere. Never had I been kissed like that. I didn't want to ever come up for air but Dave kept yelling:

"Cut! Cut! All right, you two—that does that scene! I said, that's it—stop! It's all over—damn it—*stop!*"

I turned loose of her, reluctantly, started breathing again, and said, "I flubbed that one—we'll have to do a retake."

"Perfect!" Dave said. "Marvelous!" Sophia said. "Fantastic!" Jack said.

"Nuts!" I said. "I demand a retake—"

Dave cut me off with:

"Now, enter the Other Woman—Sophia will dub in for that. You sit in the chair at that little table over there, Don. Take your glass and the whiskey bottle with you. In fact, have another drink. Then face the camera and make like a guy that's got a serious problem on his mind."

I did as directed, thinking of Joan's kisses as I took another drink. By now the whiskey had filled me with a warm glow and a feeling of supreme confidence; such confidence that I knew I could act well enough to get the role as FBI man . . .

I checked the script, finding it to again be quite simple and no problem.

Until I came to: *JOAN WHIPS OUT REVOLVER—*

"Hey!" I said. "Wait a minute! I—"

I jumped up as I protested, just in time to see Sophia hand Joan a .38 and hear her say, "Keep it hidden behind you until the right time, then empty it into him."

Joan took it gingerly and said doubtfully, "I don't know about this—"

"I do!" I yelped, knocking over my glass. "If you think I'm going to get shot—"

"Quiet, Don,'" Sophia said. "These are just blanks—I'll show you."

She was telling the truth. It was loaded with blanks and as harmless as a water pistol.

"Okay," I said, sitting down again and refilling my glass. "Let's go."

Joan took the gun and disappeared down the hallway behind me—which led to the bedroom, according to the script. I did my best to look worried, which wasn't hard. On top of everything else, the locked gate would never keep Smith and Jones from climbing over the fence . . .

Sophia came walking up to my table, her back to the camera, while I stared moodily into my drink. When she was almost to the table, she said:

"So *this* is where I find you!"

I jerked my head up in what was supposed to be alarmed surprise and said, "Julia! I didn't hear you come in—"

"Obviously not!" she said cuttingly. "I traced you here today. If you play around with that woman one more time, we're through!"

"Julia—it's not like you think . . ."

"It's exactly like I think! Where is she now?"

"In bed when I left her—uh—I mean—"

I thought, *My God—no idiot would ever be dumb enough to say anything like that—of all the corny scripts!*

"I see." The tone had an edge like a razor. "I'm going now. Don't ever come back to me—we're through!"

She swung out of the range of the camera while I stared after her, pleading, "Please, Julia! She means nothing to me, absolutely nothing . . ."

There was the sound of a door slamming to indicate Julia's exit. Then there was a movement behind me and I turned to face Joan, who had just come out of the hallway, wearing a bathrobe to hide her clothes. She had taken off her shoes and stocking to make it all look very real.

"So there *was* another woman!" Joan's face was twisted with jealous rage. "And I mean nothing to you, you said!"

"You don't understand, Joan—I didn't mean it that way—"

"Yes, you did!" Joan said, and brought the .38 from behind her back, to point it square at my hamburger basket. "Now, we'll see—"

"Joan—please don't kill me—" I pleaded, suddenly deciding that my role of constant pleading didn't sound very bold and masculine. The corny script was getting worse all the time . . . "Please, Joan—"

"Now we'll see how she likes loving your dead body!"

Before I could plead again she turned loose and ripped off those six blanks. I threw up my hands and fell limply to the floor, shuddered and gurgled a couple of times for effect, then became a dead body.

"Cut," Dave said.

I got up and saw that he didn't look very pleased. "Joan, you did well but not well enough. Remember, you're so jealous that you're insane with murderous rage. And, Don—you're about to die—try to look scared."

He looked at Sophia and said, "Put some more blanks in that thing and let's try again—I hope Joan makes it this time—we forgot to bring that other roll of film."

Sophia took the gun to the brief case, reloaded it, and handed it back to Joan. Joan went back down the hallway while I stared moodily at my drink. I heard Joan come back up behind me as the camera started and I stood up to face her, determined to help her by looking scared as hell.

"So there *was* another woman!" Joan was really doing a job

of acting. "And I mean nothing to you, you said!"

"You don't understand, Joan —I didn't mean it that way—"

"Yes, you did!" Joan whipped the .38 around again, this time pointed square at my breast bone. "Now, we'll see—"

"Joan—please don't kill—"

I suddenly lost my voice and I suddenly was no longer just pretending to be scared.

Just within the open end of each of the four visible cylinder chambers was the deadly gray of real bullets.

I didn't have to look at the faces of Dave and Sophia and Jack, and see them intent and shining with anticipation, to realize several things in a split second. Sophia had put blanks in the .38 the first time to lull me into believing that these would be blanks, too. And Joan—there was no way she could know the difference . . .

I was aware of Dave making urgent motions to Joan for her to continue her part, even though I hadn't—and didn't intend to—finish my own lines.

"Now we'll see how she—"

I thought of a line from Shakespeare and I thought, *I have about about two seconds to figure out how to be—or not to be—alive.*

"—likes loving your—"

With something resembling the speed of light, my one stage performance flashed through my mind. I was told later that when the baseball bat smacked me on top of the head, my mask flipped up, my eyes crossed, my tongue popped out about four inches, and I fell on my face with a noise that sounded like, *"Gahhhh!"*

Everyone had seemed to think it was hilariously funny . . .

"—dead bo—"

As she was finishing the fatal words I frantically crossed my eyes, popped my tongue out at her, and fell across the table with a strangled, *"Gahhhh!"*

The table and I went to the floor together and I fish-flopped in the general direction of the big table while Joan stared in wide-eyed amazement and Dave bellowed:

"You fool! What do you mean!"

"The idiot!" Sophia shrieked. "That scene would have been perfect for us!"

I reached the big table and hauled myself up, holding to the edge of it.

"Coffee!" I gasped. "Too many drinks—make me some black coffee and I'll be all right."

Right then I was willing to drink almost anything, just so long as it took them a little while to fix it and I would have time to

try to figure out how to keep from getting shot.

Dave had his hand in his coat pocket and I could feel his glare of hatred, even through the dark glasses. Jack was scowling blackly, his hand in his coat pocket. Sophia's lips were thin, hard line, and her hand was in her purse.

It didn't look like they were going to make me any coffee . . .

Sophia looked at Dave and said thoughtfully, in a tone that was low and very deadly:

"Where he is now is good enough."

"Yeah," Dave said in the same tone. "Yeah . . ."

Joan had come over to the table, still holding the gun pointed at me and not even aware of it as she tried to understand what was happening.

"Pop those blanks at him where he is, Joan," Dave commanded. "Jack—action! Joan—hurry it up—shoot!" His tone was intense with urgency. "We're almost out of film—if you want that role, *shoot!*"

Her finger tightened on the trigger. I didn't stop to say *"Gahhhh!"* I dived under the table and the .38 roared a split second behind my dive.

A glass knick-knack stand across the room exploded as the bullet tore through it. Joan made a sound like a startled squeak and Dave yelled in a tone more urgent than ever:

"Beautiful! Now shoot at him again—*under the table!*"

I saw her hand drop with indecision, the .38 still in it.

I popped halfway out from under the table like a greased gopher, jerked the gun out of her hand, and popped back under again as Dave fired.

The bullet plowed into the heavy table top, then Dave said swiftly:

"He's wise to us—we'll have to knock them both off—"

Joan screamed, and I reared up under the table with all my strength. It seemed to weigh a ton but Joan and I were the same as already down the drain unless I did something fast.

The table rammed against Dave and Sophia, knocking them down. I brought it all the way over as Jack shot at me, and missed. Dave and Sophia disappeared under it with a baritone *Oooomph!* and a soprano *Eeeeek!*

Jack shot again and I felt the right half of my mustache suddenly vanish. Joan, mystified but determined to help me, heaved a quart of Scotch at Jack. I ducked barely in time to keep from getting brained by it.

Then the front door practically left its hinges as two men crashed into the room with drawn guns.

It was the Matched Pair; Smith and Jones, both of them big and muscular and rocky-

jawed and looking about as friendly and gentle as a pair of mad grizzlies. Their jaws dropped at what they saw but their guns didn't.

I thoughtfully dropped my gun, however, and Jack followed suit. Dave and Sophia, halfway out from under the table with their guns in their hands, took a look and decided to go along with the crowd.

All three were handcuffed a few seconds later. I was grateful that Smith and Jones ran out of handcuffs before they got to me.

Smith looked around at the wreckage in the room then turned to Joan and said, "Now, Miss Brookson, tell us what this is all about."

"I—I really don't know," she said, looking even more puzzled than they did. "These people got mad at us all at once and tried to kill us. It was because Don can't act very well and fell on his face . . . I think."

"What?"

"If you two don't mind," I said, "I can tell you exactly what happened."

They hesitated, then Jones said curtly, "All right—go ahead."

I told them what had happened, then said:

"When I saw they had put live cartridges in the .38 I knew it could be but one thing—they were framing Joan for about half a million dollars worth of blackmail. If she didn't come across they could have notified the police where she—presumably—had buried my body. They would have the .38 with her finger prints on it and the film, which they would have cut and edited to suit their purpose."

Joan, wide-eyed, her hand to her mouth, said, *"Good heavens!"*

Jones and Smith said nothing, mentally digesting the information in their slow, thorough way.

"And now, gentlemen," I said, resisting the desire to bow sardonically, "allow me to present you with your elusive quarry—Cicero Sam. Just remove the dark glasses and beard."

For once they didn't argue. Jones went over to Dave and I crossed my fingers as the disguise was jerked off. Then I breathed again.

There, beady-eyed, thin-lipped, bald-headed and glaring, was Cicero Sam.

Smith and Jones looked thoughtfully at each other, then turned to stare at me.

"Yes, Mr. Dunkengerfer," Smith said in an icy tone. "This is our elusive quarry. But do you recall why we didn't have him in jail two weeks ago?"

"I assume," Jones said in the same tone, "that when you write your story about this, you intend to omit mention of your amateurish bungling?"

Well, as a matter of fact, I had . . .

"You've got him now, haven't you?" I said. "I think I deserve recognition for what I did today."

"Yes, indeed," Smith said, in a tone I didn't like. "Let us enumerate your achievements for the day . . ."

He produced a pad of forms and intoned as he wrote:

"Driving through a red light—failing to yield the right of way—destruction of Sheriff's Office property—leaving the scene of an accident—hit and run driving—"

"Wait!" I protested. "You can't do this to me!"

"Reckless driving," Smith went on. "Exceeding the speed limit—"

"Negligent driving," Jones added helpfully. "Exhibitionist driving—attempting to elude capture—"

"I didn't even know I hit you!"

"I see," Smith said, nodding happily. "Driving while intoxicated—disturbing the peace—"

He paused, chewing on his pen.

"And disorderly conduct," Jones said. "I think that pretty well covers everything he did today."

"It ought to!" I wailed. "Not even Al Capone had that many charges against him!"

Joan stepped forward and said in her sweetest tone:

"Sirs, I can never thank you enough for what you did here today. As for Don—I'll assume full responsibility for him and pay all his fines Monday. Don't take him to jail—please!"

She made her eyes soft and pleading and her lower lip trembled a little. They wilted, as though each had been hit in the stomach with a cannon ball. They didn't even bother to look at each other before they answered.

"As you wish, Miss Brookson," Smith said, with a slight bow.

"Of course, Miss Brookson," Jones said with a slight bow."

A minute later, they and the prisoners were gone and Joan and I were alone. I sighed and Joan patted me on the shoulder.

"Don't worry Don—I won't let them put you in jail."

"It's a good thing you're rich," I said. "Do you have a horse?"

"A *horse?* No—why?"

"I'm hungry enough to eat one."

"How about some thick steaks? I'll put them on right now."

"Wonderful! Make mine medium rare. But, first, let's do a retake of that kissing scene. By the time I come back down out of orbit again, my steak should be done."

So, we did and it was.

by Ed McBain

Every year, just after Thanksgiving, Jimmy would go to four or five of the biggest department stores in the city, and he'd spend perhaps a hundred bucks in each store. That was his initial investment. Four, five hundred dollars, something like that. On this investment, he could count on twenty or thirty gift-wrapped items of various sizes and shapes. As soon as he got back to his room, he would unwrap all the boxes, and put aside all the

things he'd bought, which he would later give to his friends and relatives. Then, inside the now-empty store boxes, he would put newspapers, or pebbles, or beer cans he had squashed under his foot, depending on the size of the box and the heft he wanted it to have. Then he would gift-wrap them again, and put the bows and ribbons back on, and he would be ready to start his *real* Christmas shopping.

On this particular Christmas Eve, Jimmy was about to finish on the last of his many shopping trips. He had perhaps five gift-wrapped items left, each box containing various assorted garbage, but looking very pretty on the outside. He went into an expensive department store carrying the store's shopping bag full of this gift-wrapped junk, and began searching around for a prospect. There was a good-looking blond lady with splendid legs and a remarkable bosom shopping from counter to counter. She charged everything with a charge plate which she took from a battered leather wallet that had in it at least a dozen charge plates and credit cards. He followed her around the store and noticed that she bought a porcelain pitcher that cost a hundred and seventy-five dollars, which she had gift-wrapped, and which she put into her shopping bag. And then she bought a cut-velvet evening bag, which cost two hundred dollars, as it was imported from Italy, and she also had this gift-wrapped, and into the shopping bag it went.

And she bought a silk scarf that cost fifty-five dollars, and finally she wandered over to the jewelry counter—which Jimmy had been hoping she'd do—and she bought a man's sterling silver bracelet that cost two hundred and fifty dollars. Her shopping bag was on the floor next to one of her beautiful legs. She gave the clerk her charge plate, and Jimmy busied himself looking at some stuff in the case while the bracelt was being gift-wrapped and the clerk was writing out the sales slip.

Into the shopping bag went the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar sterling silver bracelet. Jimmy hoped she had more shopping to do before she left the store, otherwise he'd have been following her around for nothing for a good half-hour. But sure enough, she went over to the tie counter, and she put the shopping bag on the floor again, and Jimmy put down his bag alongside hers, and fingered a few nice silk reps, and in a minute he picked up *her* shopping bag instead of his own, and off he went. He was a block away from the store, and was just about to drop a quarter into Santa Claus's big iron pot, in fact, when someone clapped him

on the shoulder, and a man's voice said, "Just a second, buddy," and he turned and looked up at the biggest person he had ever seen. The man was wearing a brown overcoat and a brown fedora. He was holding something in his hand. Jimmy looked at it.

What it said on the silver badge was "Security Officer."

"Security Officer," Ralphie said. "I'll relieve you of that stolen merchandise, if you don't mind."

"Stolen?" Jimmy said. "You're mistaken. I have sales slips for each and every item in this shopping bag."

"You are full of crap," Ralphie said. "I've been watching you for the past half-hour. That shopping bag belongs to a blond lady in the store, and I'm going to relieve you of it now, and return it to her. If you want to make a fuss about this, I'm perfectly willing to call the police, and you can spend Christmas in a nice warm cell downtown. Otherwise, just hand it over and get the hell out of here."

Jimmy handed over the shopping bag without a whimper, and then hurriedly walked away. A crowd had gathered on the sidewalk, and Ralphie said in his best department store manner, "All right, folks, it's all over, go about your business now," and the crowd dispersed.

Ralphie felt pretty proud of himself, and also pretty smart. He had bought the security officer badge two years ago from a junkie who had swiped it in the apartment of a bank guard. It had cost him only five dollars, and he could not even begin to calculate how much it had earned him since. In the store, he had been searching for a prospect for more than an hour when he finally saw a good-looking blond lady with splendid legs and a remarkable bosom, and she was being followed around by this guy who seemed very interested in all these purchases she was charging. Ralphie normally picked only shoplifters for his victims, but he had tipped to the guy's trick almost immediately, and now he had in his hands a shopping bag that was worth quite a bit of money, instead of a mere wristwatch some dope had quickly stuffed into his pocket. He figured the unexpected haul was good-enough reason to knock off for the day, in fact for the holiday, and he decided to start the yuletide season by hoisting a few in a nice little bar, where most of the clientele were squares.

The bar, at three o'clock, was already jammed with early celebrants, squares in business suits much like the suit Ralphie himself was wearing, advertising copy writers drinking martinis

with lemon twists, publishing house secretaries giggling at jokes, suburban matrons wearing hats and gloves and chatting with other suburban matrons wearing hats and gloves—an altogether nice crowd. Ralphie did not leave the shopping bag in the checkroom. He checked only his brown overcoat and his brown fedora, which he felt made him look more like a department store dick, and then he squeezed into a booth in a dark corner of the place, and ordered a double shot of very expensive scotch. The shopping bag was on the seat beside him. He was already counting the money he would get from his favorite fence for the stuff that was in it.

The girl who came up to the table was perhaps twenty-four years old. She had red hair and green eyes. She was wearing a fake fur coat. Under it, she had on a green dress that was very short and also low-cut, affording Ralphie a quick glimpse of splendid legs and a remarkable bosom that were similar to the blond lady's in the store, but more visible. The girl was holding a whiskey sour in her left hand, and a cigarette in her right hand, and she was smiling very broadly.

"All alone on Christmas Eve?" she asked.

"Would you care to join me perhaps?" he answered politely.

Jenny sat quickly, but she was just as quick to say, "You'll think I'm brazen." She had the feeling he didn't know what "brazen" meant, though, because what he answered was, "No, as a matter of fact I myself often drink socially," and lifted his glass of whiskey and said, "Cheers, and happy holidays."

"The same to you," she said, and lifted her glass and clinked it against his. "There's nothing so depressing as drinking alone on Christmas Eve, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes," he said.

Now that they had got the formalities out of the way, Jenny felt it was perfectly all right to engage in conversation. Lighting another cigarette, she told him she was on Christmas vacation from Bryn Mawr, where she was going for her masters in educational psychology, and her father was an enormously wealthy architect, and she got along famously with him despite the so-called generation gap. Her mother was a lovely person, too, engaged in all sorts of charity work and the like. They lived in a rambling house her father had designed, right on the water, and whenever she was home from school she usually played tennis on one of their two clay courts, or else took her father's sloop out for a sail, though of course she didn't do either of those things during the Christmas break.

What she did at Christmastime was read poetry a lot and play chess with her younger brother who was a graduating senior at Lawrenceville.

"What do *you* do?" she asked, putting out the cigarette and immediately lighting another one.

"I'm an investment broker,' he said. "I take other people's money and invest it for them."

"That must be fascinating work," she said.

"It is, though of course there's a large element of danger involved. Why don't you take off your coat?"

"I'm a little chilly," she said. "Winter gets into my bones."

The second round of drinks came, and they lifted their glasses and toasted the holiday season, and Jenny pressed her knee against his under the table and told him he would probably think it brazen of her again, but she felt that in this day and age it was perfectly all right for a woman to take the initiative, as for example she had done when she'd come over to the table and practically invited herself to sit down. Did he think that was indicative of a permissiveness in the society, or merely an expression of self-worth, a woman behaving like a *person* instead of a passive object to be treated with scorn and disdain?

"Yes," Ralphie said. "I think so."

"Oh, hell, I'm out of cigarettes," she said, and crumpled the package. "I'll just be gone a minute, the machine's right around the corner of the bar."

"I'll ask the waiter to get you a pack," he said. "What brand do you smoke?"

She told him the brand, and then she said, "It'll take forever for the waiter to get them I don't want you to think I'm a compulsive smoker, but really when I'm engaged in conversation with an attractive and intelligent man, there's nothing I like better than to have a cigarette in my hand, I don't know what it is. I also like to smoke after I've had sex, especially in the afternoon on a cold day outside in December, like today is," she said, and looked deep into his eyes.

"Well," Ralphie said "Well, let *me* get the cigarettes for you then, there's no sense waiting for a waiter, is there?" He rose hastily, almost knocking his drink off the table. "Where did you say the machine was?"

"Right around the corner ot the bar."

"I'll be right back," he said "Don't go away now."

The moment he disappeared around the corner of the bar, she picked up his shopping bag and headed for the door. Holding the fake fur closed with one hand,

holding the shopping bag in the other hand, she stepped quickly into the street. She was two blocks away from the bar when she realized she was being followed. The man following her was not Ralphie. He was instead a good-looking fellow of about thirty-eight or thirty-nine, with a nice haircut, and a black coat with a little velvet collar. He was carrying a shopping bag identical to her own, with the same store name imprinted on it. He caught her glancing at him over her shoulder, and he grinned. She slowed her pace, allowing him to catch up.

"Hello," he said, matching his stride to hers. "My name is Andrew." His voice was cultivated and smooth, he had probably gone to Lawrenceville like her non-existent brother.

"Are you following me?" she asked, and returned his smile.

"I am indeed."

"Why?"

"I'm interested in having a little party," he said. "Are you interested in having a little party?"

She stopped stock still in the center of the sidewalk, and looked at him in amazement. This had to be some kind of miracle. A guy looking for a party on Christmas Eve? When most men were rushing home to their loved ones and their blazing fires? In Jenny's profession, which was the oldest, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were the two worst possible days of the year—which was why a hard-working girl had to stoop to cruising in bars, and ripping off shopping bags loaded with gift-wrapped items.

"What do you say?" Andrew asked.

"That depends," she said.

"On what?"

"On how much you've got to spend," she said, and her eyes hardened.

"I know a racehorse when I see one," he said. "Whatever it costs is fine with me."

"You're on," she said, and looped her hand through his arm.

It was a little after four when they entered the hotel room. Jenny stopped talking about her clay tennis courts the moment Andrew locked the door behind them. She put her shopping bag on the floor just inside the door, and Andrew put his identical shopping bag alongside it. Jenny then removed first the fake fur, and then the green dress, and then her shoes, her bra, and her panties. "That will be a hundred dollars, please," she said, and when Andrew handed her the money, she said, "Merry Christmas," and grinned and fell upon him with good holiday cheer. They remained in the room for

close to two hours, at the end of which time Jenny put on first her bra and panties, then her shoes, and then her green dress and fake fur. She told him she'd had a very nice time, but was late for a chess match with her brother. In her haste, she picked up Andrew's shopping bag instead of her own. Neither of them noticed the error. She whispered, "Merry Christmas," again, and he closed the door behind her.

Andrew showered and dressed leisurely. Then he picked up the other shopping bag, and went downstairs, and paid the discreet room clerk, and took the 6:38 back home. He was in the living room of his own house by ten minutes to eight. The fireplace was cheerily blazing with yule logs, the Christmas tree was aglow in the corner. His wife was waiting. She was a good-looking blond lady with splendid legs and a remarkable bosom.

"How was the Christmas party?" she asked.

"Beautiful," he said, and kissed her on the cheek.

He had discovered over the years that office Christmas parties were not only not beautiful but were something of a bore besides, rather like a great deal of thunder and lightning promising a rainstorm that never came. Which was why each and every year he stayed at the party only for an obligatory half-hour, and then took to the streets in search of a lady with whom to share his spirit of Christmas joy. He had learned, much to his amazement and delight, that Christmas Eve was a particularly slack time for such ladies.

His wife relieved him of the shopping bag he had carried home, and then took the gifts out one by one, spreading them beneath the tree, where she had already placed the other presents she'd bought that day.

"I'm sorry about the bag," she said, "I know you hate carrying shopping bags."

"No problem," he said, and went to the bar and poured himself a drink.

"But I was running late, and I still had a few more stores to hit, and I didn't think you'd mind if I just dropped it off at the office."

"No problem at all," he said.

"Then you didn't mind my coming up there?"

"Of course not," he said.

"The party hadn't started yet, so I didn't think you'd mind."

"I didn't mind at all."

"And you didn't mind carrying the shopping bag on the train?"

"Not at all."

"Well, good," she said, and smiled.

At midnight exactly, they went through a ritual that had become custom in the eight short years of their marriage. They had bought each other many gifts, of course, and all of them were under the tree. But at midnight, each selected only one gift from all the others, and silently unwrapped it.

His gift to her was a pink wallet with twelve sections for credit cards and charge plates.

Her gift to him was a sterling silver bracelet.

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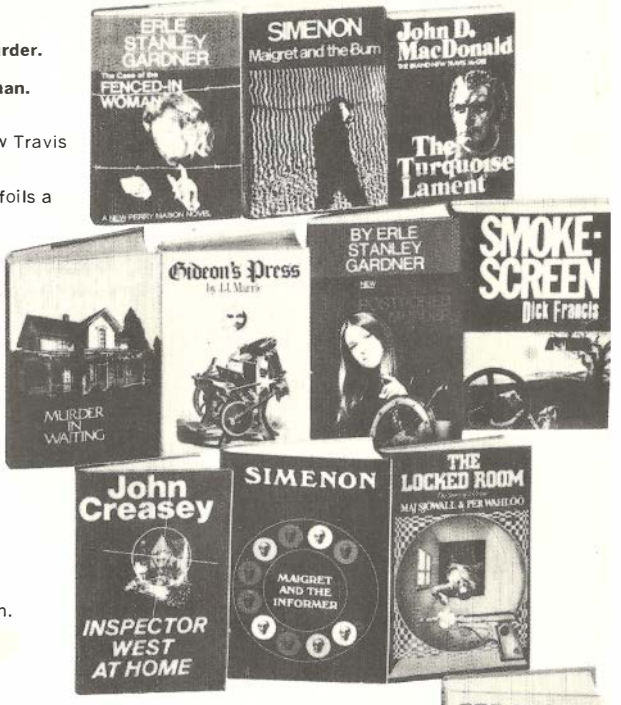

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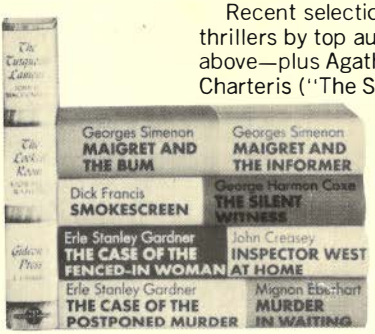

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