

MANHUNT

WORLD'S BEST-SELLING CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

APRIL
35 CENTS

FIRST KILL!

by
Helen Nielsen

EVERY
STORY
NEW!

"You!" Bart screamed,
leaping at her. Then
his head exploded.
(See "A TROPHY FOR BART")



Also — RICHARD DEMING • JAMES CHARLES LYNCH
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Cover by Tom O'Sullivan

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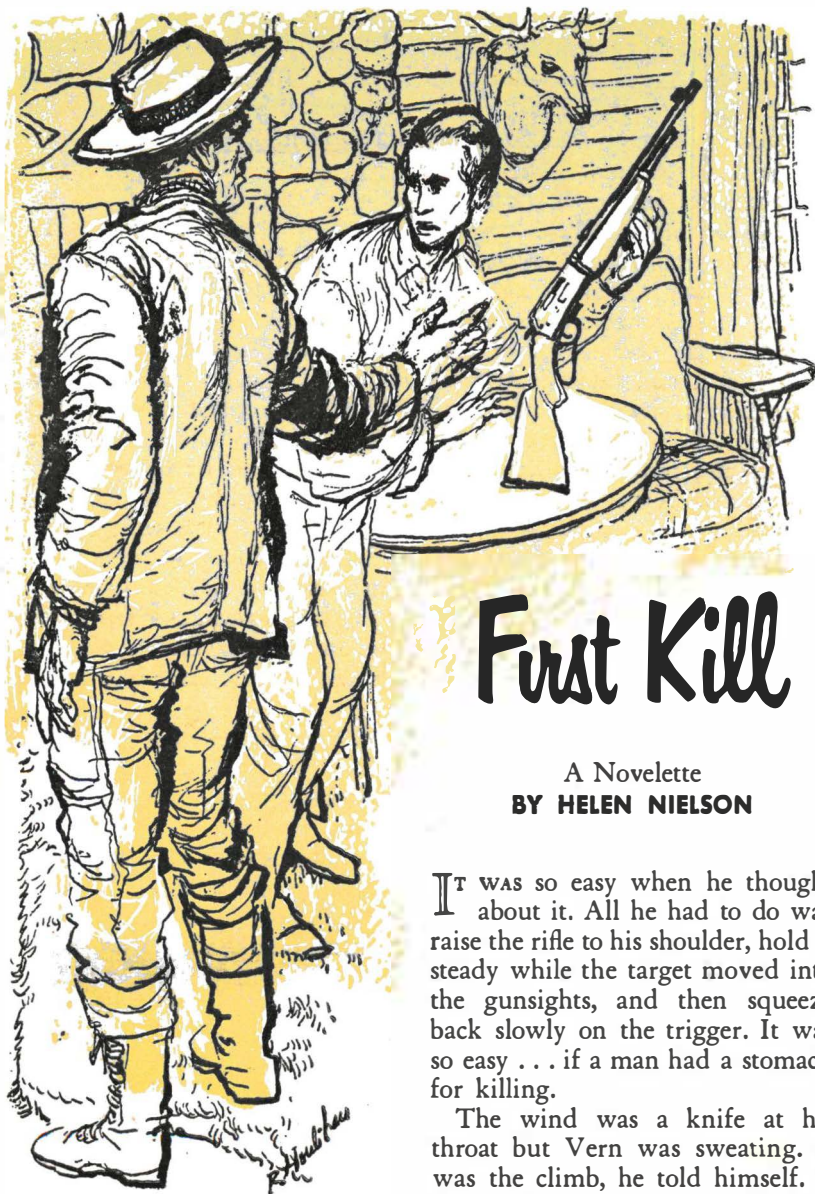
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It was easy. All he had to do was raise the gun, aim — and fire.



First Kill

A Novelette
BY HELEN NIELSON

IT WAS so easy when he thought about it. All he had to do was raise the rifle to his shoulder, hold it steady while the target moved into the gunsights, and then squeeze back slowly on the trigger. It was so easy . . . if a man had a stomach for killing.

The wind was a knife at his throat but Vern was sweating. It was the climb, he told himself. It

was the altitude and the rugged, rocky climb. Up ahead, Kirby moved as swift and easy as the half-wild dog trotting at his side; but then, Kirby belonged. His booted feet knew the ground they covered, and his rifle arm knew what to do with that weapon when the time came. Now and then he'd stop to examine the trail for some trace of the big cat they were hunting, and then he'd raise up again, his broad back straining the seams of his denim jacket and the pale winter sun making a silver target of that snakeskin band on his Stetson. He'd raise up and move on without so much as a backward glance for the man behind him. And Vern would move on, too, with sweat on his forehead and the wind at his throat.

Now it all seemed crazy. Crazy to have come on the hunt, but even more crazy to have come to this country at all. Kirby belonged but he didn't. He should have stayed back in that smokey city and let the slow death eat out his lungs, for life was no great gift if a man didn't have the guts to live it. For one wild moment he fought the urge to hurl the rifle into the nearest thicket and turn back. But back to what? The thought was colder than the wind. There was nothing to turn back to except that ranch house in the valley. Kirby's ranch house . . . and Kirby's wife.

The first time Vern saw Nadine she was smiling. She'd come to the door wiping her hands on her ap-

ron, and the one she extended was still soap-suds warm.

"You must be Vern," she said brightly. "I seen you get off at the mail box. It's nice you got a ride out so soon."

2.

The smile and the soap-suds hands were a lot more important than the words. It wasn't easy to show up, suitcase in hand, on the doorstep of people he'd never seen; even less easy when he remembered Kirby's unenthusiastic reply to his letter. Not that he blamed Kirby. An ailing guest was the very worst kind, but the doctors said "go west" and Vern, with a bank account running into two figures, knew only one place to turn. For almost two thousand miles he dreaded the meeting, and then it came and Nadine smiled.

"Kirby ain't here right now," she added, "but he'll be coming in any time now. He was going to drive in for you right after supper."

She talked too fast, like a tenant explaining to the landlord how the rent will be paid any day now, but Vern wasn't listening anyway. He'd stopped listening the moment Nadine opened the door. It was crazy, all crazy right from the beginning. She was too young to be Kirby's wife—no more than twenty, he guessed—and Kirby, being ten years older than himself, was almost thirty-nine. But age wasn't the only

thing that made her seem out of place as a ranch wife. It was her hair, mostly—mussed, as if she hadn't found time to comb it all day, but of a conspicuous shade of silver blonde that didn't at all match the dark streak at the roots. It was her eyes, and the way she walked before him when they went into the living room

But this was Kirby's wife and so Vern tried to forget what he was thinking. He began to make conversation, the awkward words strangers trade bargaining for friendship. He talked about his trip and the man at the bus depot who heard him asking for Kirby's place and volunteered a ride. He talked about the chilly weather and how good the open fire looked.

"Mind the rug," Nadine broke in. "It like to scared me to death the first time I tripped over it."

The warning came a little late. Planting a foot in the open jaws of a snarling grizzly wasn't exactly a nerve tonic, and Vern executed a quick backstep. Now that he could see something besides Nadine, he became aware of the room they were in. Over the mantel hung a magnificent pair of antlers, on the side table perched a stuffed eagle poised for flight, and along one wall was a well stacked gun rack. The place looked more like a gun club than a home, and that brought back all those questions he'd been asking himself about Kirby's wife.

"I'd have it out of here in a min-

ute but Kirby won't hear of it," she said, still frowning at the rug. "He shot the bear, you see."

"Near here?" Vern smiled feebly.

"In the mountains. Kirby shot all these things. He's a real good hunter. I guess you don't have much hunting back where you come from."

"I've never even fired a gun," Vern admitted.

"Me neither. I get scared just looking at them, but Kirby sure enjoys—" Nadine abandoned words for the moment. She stood on the opposite side of the bear rug and scrutinized Vern like a curious child waiting to see what the visiting relative has in his suitcase. Vern knew exactly what she was seeing: a tall, skinny, colorless man with awkward manners and an obvious aversion to completely dead bear rugs. He wanted to run outside and come in all over again, for the first time. He'd step on the rug without flinching; he'd say that he shot big game in Africa . . .

"You're not a bit like Kirby," she said.

"I've been sick," Vern protested.

"Oh, that's right, and here I am gabbing about hunting when you're probably needing to lay down after that long trip! I know how it is. I took a bus to Denver once and got the back seat. I was black and blue when I got there. I'll just turn down your bed—"

"No!"

Once a man put a foot in his

month, he had to yell to get it out. The last thing Vern wanted was to start off playing the invalid, and his protest brought Nadine up short. She was bound to look bewildered when he shouted that way, and he was bound to try and explain. He felt fine . . . he didn't need to lie down . . . he didn't want to be a bother.

"Bother?" she echoed. "But you mustn't feel that way, Vern. I'm so glad—I mean, we're both glad, Kirby and me, to have you with us. It'll be nice having someone to talk to. It gets awfully lonesome on a ranch."

Lonesome. Even then Vern knew that he shouldn't have come. Outside, a late September sunset was fading behind the mountains, and in all the valley there was nothing to stop the wind except the shuddering window panes of Kirby's house. Blank window panes, curtainless like eyes without lids. The snarling rug, the antlers, the eagle, and the barren windows—all of these things said it was wrong. Nadine was no kind of woman to be buried in a place like this, and the puzzle of it kept him tongue-tied while his eyes seemed to grow to this artificial blonde in the apron that wouldn't stay shapeless.

They were standing like that, with the snarling rug between them, when Kirby arrived home. He came in thunderously with a slamming of doors and stomping of feet and much muttering about the un-

washed dishes he'd passed in the kitchen sink. He was halfway across the room before he noticed that Nadine wasn't alone. He stopped and pushed a big hat off his forehead. He was carrying a rifle slung under one arm and had an ugly yellow dog tagging at his heels.

"It's Vern," Nadine said. "He's just come. He got a ride out from town."

Nadine had smiled at the doorway, and Kirby smiled too—but not right away. Kirby didn't smile until the dog, his ugly head lowered and a deep growl in his throat, had driven Vern back against the fireplace. Kirby seemed to enjoy that.

"Vern—" he repeated. "Yes, you look like her all right. Like her pictures, anyway. I don't rightly remember her face."

Those were the first words Vern heard from his brother.

3.

A naked branch from the shoulder-high thicket cut across Vern's face, switching him back to the hunt. He looked up, startled, and then quickened his pace. He didn't dare fall too far behind Kirby's lead. Somewhere on this ragged mountainside, if Kirby was right—and he was always right about such things—was a hunger-crazed killer who could as easily be the hunter as the hunted. It was useless to tell Vern the cougar wouldn't attack a

man unless cornered. He'd seen the torn remains of its most recent victim, and a man's flesh was no more enduring than a calf's. Anything that perished in the big cat's domain would never need burial, much less an inquest. Vern tightened his grip on the rifle, trying to remember all he'd learned about its use, and it seemed ironic that Kirby was responsible for this knowledge . . .

4.

Things started badly between Vern and his brother and didn't improve. It was trouble from that first night. Not loud trouble. Not violent trouble. Nothing to shout at or sink a fist into, even if Vern had possessed the strength to sink a fist into anyone; but something sensed and felt like the icy wind that whined in across the flatlands when the wild snows blotted out the mountains. Kirby was like the mountains: rugged, dominating, and cut off by a shroud of silence that allowed only such cryptic statements as the one with which he'd first greeted Vern. It took a long time to understand what was behind those words, and in a house that was more a museum than a home time was just another word for hell.

But there was Nadine. As a conversationalist she wasn't much. Her education seemed to begin and end in the stack of cheap romance magazines she dug up when Vern asked for something to read. But she was

alive and lonely. With just those two things in common, a man and a woman could create a world. With just those two things, and time.

It began with the curtains.

"I always meant to get around to them," Nadine admitted one day. "But somehow I never did. I guess I'm just not much of a housekeeper."

"Maybe I can help," Vern suggested.

"But they have to be sewn. All Kirby bought was the material, and I don't know much about sewing."

"Let's have a go at it anyway," Vern said. "It'll give us something to do."

So they made the curtains, with Vern doing most of the work, and they hung the curtains so that the bleak scene outside the windows seemed a little more remote. Curtains make a difference in a house, and they began to make a difference in Nadine, too. Or maybe it wasn't just the curtains. Maybe it was having someone to talk to on those long, wild days that never discouraged Kirby from making his rounds of the range or going off hunting with that ugly yellow dog. Maybe it was just those two things in common starting to work with time.

Kirby noticed the change, too. With Kirby it must have been instinct, the same kind of instinct that told the big yellow dog he could send Vern cowering against the wall anytime he lowered his ugly

head and growled. Kirby didn't seem to appreciate the curtains. He came in from hunting while they were finishing the kitchen windows.

"Well, ain't we getting fancy!" he said. "I didn't know my wife was so handy in other ways."

That was the way Kirby talked to Nadine. He never said anything nice without spoiling it some way. But it was strange to see Nadine blush. She wasn't the type—or hadn't been before the curtains.

"It was Vern's work, mostly," she said. "He's the handy one."

"With a needle!" Kirby threw back his head and laughed. It was an ugly laugh that matched the words that came with it. "Now, there's a real job for a man! Can you embroider too, Vern? Or maybe mama's boy can knit me some socks."

It was Vern's turn to blush then. "I used to help Ma when I was a kid," he said. "That's how we lived. She took in sewing."

"Are you sure that's all she took in?"

"Kirby! You mustn't talk like that about your own mother!"

The thing Vern remembered later was that the first time he heard Nadine talk back to Kirby it was for him; but just then he wasn't aware of anything but the hatred in Kirby's eyes. That was when he began to understand. Kirby was jealous. It was an incredible thing that Kirby could be jealous of him for any reason.

"Look who's getting delicate!" Kirby roared. "And why shouldn't I talk like that about my mother? I told you what she did. She ran off when I was just a kid. She had to take Vern because he wasn't born yet, but she ran off just the same. Who knows? Maybe that's why she ran off. Now that I notice, there sure ain't much about Vern that brings to mind the old man."

It was as low a blow as Kirby could throw without using his fists, and it drew the result he wanted.

"That's a lie!" Vern choked. "She ran off because he was mean to her. She couldn't stand it any longer!"

"And maybe that's your trouble. Maybe that's how you feel!"

The small triumph Vern had felt at the sight of Kirby's jealousy vanished. Kirby was in command again. This was Kirby's house and Vern was just a sick man with no place to go. This was the way Kirby liked to see him, silent and cowering. When he couldn't answer, Kirby's smile came again.

"You'll like it better when you get used to the place," he said. "Trouble is, you stay around the house too much. Now, if you'd been out with me today you might have bagged yourself one of these."

Kirby shifted the weight of the rifle on his arm and used his free hand to pull the game out of one of the big pockets on his storm jacket. It was only a rabbit, but its body was still limp and the blood on its head made a stain on the cloth

when he tossed it on the kitchen table. All the time his eyes were watching Vern and grinning at the way Vern paled when he saw the blood.

"That's a man's job, bringing home the meat," he said. "Of course, it gets more interesting when you're after something big, like a buck deer maybe, and you come across a bear or a wildcat."

"I've never even held a gun," Vern said, weakly.

"Then there ain't no time to start like right now."

Kirby didn't give warning. He just swung that rifle up into both hands and tossed it at Vern. There was nothing to do but catch it and the weight of it, and all that force behind it, sent him staggering back against the wall. Kirby's smile could break into a laugh then, and the yellow dog at his heels could leer as if he saw the joke too. But the important thing was that Vern held a gun in his hands. For the first time in his life, he held a gun.

5.

The weight of the rifle was lead-heavy on his arm, and then, after a long while, he couldn't feel it at all. He was getting numb, that was the trouble. The wind and the weariness was turning him into a kind of dumb mechanism that trailed Kirby's heels like a toy on a string. When Kirby stopped, he stopped. He saw Kirby crouch and examine

the hard earth with careful eyes, and then he stood up again and sniffed the wind like that ugly dog at his side. Every movement of his body was animal movement; every instinctive turn of his head was animal instinct. He was no different from that big cat they were stalking, only more dangerous. Vern thought these things while the rifle hung lead-heavy on his arm, but his arm wouldn't respond to the thought.

His legs were getting numb, too. He tripped over a broken branch and lunged forward. He caught himself just short of a fall, and straightened up to find Kirby had turned about and was glaring at him.

"I stumbled," Vern muttered.

"With a gun in your hands! What are you trying to do, blow your brains out?"

Vern didn't answer. For a moment there was just the sound of the wind between him and his brother. The icy wind and the steel cold glint of Kirby's eyes

"It happens all the time," Kirby added slowly. "Some fool greenhorn who doesn't know how to handle his gun—"

"I can take care of myself," Vern said.

"You'd better, because if anything should happen—any kind of an accident—the smell of blood would draw that cougar for sure. When he finished there wouldn't even be enough of you left to bury."

The way Kirby spoke the words, they were a lot colder than the wind. His eyes met Vern's, and the hardness in them seemed to be telegraphing a message. Vern took a tighter grip on his gun. Maybe it was just his own conscience that put an ominous implication on Kirby's warning; but it did seem strange to hear a thought from his mind being voiced by his brother.

"I can take care of myself," he repeated.

"Sure you can!" Kirby taunted. "You're the boy who's going to bag the cougar and prove what a man you are! I'll tell you what. Just to show there's no hard feelings, I'll give you the first shot when we spot him."

It wasn't like Kirby to be generous, and he wasn't being generous now. He was just giving Vern a chance to make a fool of himself again, Vern knew that. Vern, the mighty hunter, who had devoted months learning to shoot tin cans off fence posts with amazing accuracy, but whose finger froze at the trigger every time a live target appeared in his gunsight. How could he tell Kirby about that? How could he explain what happened when the instant for the kill arrived? There was no way. All he could do was hang onto the rifle as if it were the last link with life, and tag along behind when Kirby moved ahead again.

But the ominous sound of Kirby's taunt tagged along with him, and

his mind, going back again to all that lay behind, heard the echo of other words whispered in the darkness of a tortured night:

Don't go, Vern. Don't go on that hunt tomorrow. Kirby hates you. He's always hated you . . .

6.

Vern hadn't even remembered what day it was. It was a bad day, one of the worst. Four times he'd ventured out on a hunt with Kirby, and four times returned without having fired a shot; but today was special. Even a schoolboy—even an old man blind in one eye—could have brought down that deer; but he'd stood there like a fool with his fingers numb on the trigger and his stomach turning over like a churn until the big buck got his scent and raced off into the thicket. And Kirby, of course, standing by. Kirby jeering him all the way home. But that wasn't the worst of it. On the way back to the house they'd come across the mangled remains of the calf, and that was just one shock too many for Vern's nervous stomach. It was a day, all right. A day to forget, not remember.

But the kitchen was warm when they came into the house. Nadine had the oven going, and the place smelled good the way a wife's kitchen should smell. The dishes were all washed and the table was set, and Nadine was wearing a kind of cute dress under her apron and her

hair was combed. It struck Vern, as he came in, how different she was from the woman who had met him at the front door a few months earlier. He should have understood all along without having to wait for the explosion.

It started over the cake. It was sitting in the center of the kitchen table, a kind of sad looking, lopsided cake with the chocolate icing spread in lumps and one lone candle stuck down into the top of it. Kirby looked at the thing and scowled.

"Where'd that come from?" he demanded.

Nadine looked almost embarrassed. "I baked it," she said.

Kirby looked skeptical. "What's that thing in the top?"

"A candle. I could only find one. It's Vern's birthday."

Vern had forgotten. Now that the cake reminded him, he wished that Nadine had forgotten, too. This was the wrong day for friendly family relationships. He couldn't even remember how she knew the date unless he'd mentioned it sometime when they were talking. They'd done a lot of talking before he started going out with Kirby.

"Now, ain't that nice!" Kirby said. "Did you hear that, Vern? My wife's gone and baked her very first cake just for you! I don't know if you should have done that, Nadine. Vern's got kind of a weak stomach, especially today. Maybe I'd better take the first piece.

It wasn't much of a cake, but it was supposed to sit in the center of the table until supper was over, and then Nadine would light the candle and make a little ceremony over cutting it. Vern knew that by the quick look of dismay that came over her face when Kirby reached for a knife. Kirby knew it, too. Everything Kirby did was deliberate. He cut a thick wedge, took a huge bite, and chewed it slowly. Then he came out with that twisted smile again.

"Well, I guess I don't have to worry," he said. "I didn't marry Nadine because I wanted a cook, but I don't have to worry if this is the best she can do."

"I'm sure it's a real good cake," Vern said quickly.

"Oh, sure! Now if only you'd bagged that deer this afternoon we'd have a nice venison steak to go with it."

Kirby peeled off his jacket and sat down at the table. The yellow dog crouched on his haunches beside him, grinning as if he knew what was coming.

"What do you think of that, Nadine? Vern had this beautiful buck right smack in his gunsight and was too chicken to pull the trigger."

"Everybody doesn't have to go around killing things," Nadine said. "There are other things to do."

"That's right, After all, not many men Vern's age can make such fancy curtains."

Kirby started piling food on his

plate. He was the only one seated, but that didn't bother Kirby. He looked up at Vern, measuring the tallness of him with careful eyes.

"So it's your birthday," he murmured. "If only I'd have remembered, I'd bought you a present."

"I don't need a present," Vern muttered.

"Sure, you do. And I know just the right thing. What you need, Vern, is a wife."

There was something special in the way Kirby spoke the words that made the kitchen go quiet for a few seconds. The yellow dog sensed it, too. He grinned all the wider.

"A woman would make a man of you," Kirby added. "The right kind of woman, that is. Of course, a man has to know how to find the right wife. Did I ever tell you how I found Nadine?"

Nadine was fussing at the stove. She turned about. Her face looked hot.

"I don't think Vern's interested in getting married," she said.

"Sure, he is," Kirby answered, "but he doesn't know how to go about it. The trick is in knowing what you want, Vern. Now, I've got a friend on the next ranch who never thinks of anything but his stomach. When he decided to get married, he shopped around until he found himself the best cook in the county. Homely as a mud fence, but that don't bother him a bit. Then I got another friend who wanted a lot of kids. He found him-

self a woman as healthy as a heifer and she's fresh every spring. As for me—"

Kirby put away a huge mouthful of potatoes and winked at Nadine.

"I knew what I wanted, and I knew where to look. I'm a man that don't buy nothing without trying it out. Come to think of it, maybe we could get one of the girls for Vern. What do you think, Nadine? How about Flo or Maizie?"

Nadine didn't answer. Nadine couldn't answer. It was Vern who cried out as if the words were torn from his throat:

"Shut up! Damn you, shut up!"

Kirby's head came up slowly.

"Why, what's the matter, little brother?" he asked. "As cozy as you and Nadine have been, I figured she must have told you she was a—"

"She's your wife!" Vern broke in.

"You're damn right she's my wife, and I don't want either one of you forgetting it!"

Kirby shoved back his chair and came to his feet. He was even taller than Vern and twice as broad. His face was flushed, and his eyes were two slits backed with fire.

"My wife," he repeated, "and my ranch. Don't you forget that either! I don't owe you a damn thing!"

"I never said you did," Vern protested.

"But you take all you can get, don't you? Bed, board, and anything else handy. Too weak to help with the work, too yellow to fire a gun, but plenty brave when it comes

to showing off in front of Nadine like some swell gentleman! She should have seen you this afternoon puking in the bushes because you couldn't stand the sight of a cougar-chewed calf. Some protector you've got, Nadine. Maybe he'll go out and shoot that cougar tomorrow so no more calves will get killed. Maybe he'll go out with me and find enough nerve to pull that trigger."

"Maybe I will!" Vern cried.

It was crazy, all right. It was crazy right from the beginning. But Kirby hurled the challenge and Vern's tongue went wild. It raced way ahead of his brain.

"Maybe that's exactly what I'll do!" he said.

It was too late to start thinking.

Vern didn't eat any supper at all. He went to his room and fell across the bed, trembling and sweating and letting the thoughts he'd fought back all these months come rolling in without argument. He forced his mind back to the moment when he'd held the deer in his gunsight and couldn't shoot. What was he thinking? The deer was a living thing—that was part of it. A man who's had to fight for every breath of life takes life seriously. Life is a sacred thing—any life at all. Killing doesn't come easy. But it was something more that had caused his hand to freeze on the trigger. Suppose he did shoot the deer and found that killing came easy? What barrier could then restrain him from what he wanted to do? . . .

It was hours later when Nadine crept into his room. She'd been crying. He could tell by the hoarseness in her voice, muffled so that Kirby, sleeping in the next room, wouldn't hear. Not that there was much danger. Kirby was all animal. His stomach filled and his desires satisfied, he'd sleep like the dead until instinct told him it was almost dawn. But there had been no sleep for Vern or Nadine.

"Don't go, Vern. Don't go on that hunt tomorrow . . ." That was when she said it, bending low over the bed so that he could almost see her face in the pale moonlight. "Kirby hates you. He's always hated you because your mother left him behind when she ran away."

"That wasn't her fault," Vern protested. "She had no place to take him. She thought he'd be better off on the ranch."

"Kirby wouldn't think of that. He never thinks of anything but himself. And the ranch is another reason why he hates you. He's afraid you'll claim a share."

"But I don't want his ranch!"

"Just the same, you could claim a share. It belonged to your father as well as his. That's what he's afraid of. That's why he said those terrible things about your mother that night."

Nadine was trembling. It was cold in the room and she had only a light robe over her nightgown; but it was more than the cold that made her tremble.

"I'm afraid, Vern," she said. "I've had awful dreams lately. I'm afraid."

Vern drew himself up on one elbow so he could see her face better in the moonlight. It was a child's face, almost, but the fear wasn't a child's fear.

"Are you afraid for me?" he asked.

The face became a shadow when she turned away.

"You've been decent to me," she said. "No other man has ever been that way."

"You've been decent to me," Vern said. "I'd have gone crazy here without you."

It wasn't much to say to a woman. It wasn't a love lyric or one of the fancy speeches he'd read in the library books; but he saw Nadine's shoulders tremble, and then she straightened up quickly and walked to the door. She stopped then, with her back to him so he couldn't see her face, and said the rest.

"Everything Kirby said about me is true. You got to remember that, Vern."

"I don't see why either one of us should remember it," Vern answered. "Sometimes people can't help what they do—the way I couldn't help getting sick. Everything Kirby said about me is true, too, but it isn't going to be true any longer. That's why I have to go with him tomorrow, Nadine. He has to learn that I'm not afraid . . . and so do I."

Kirby hates you. He's always hated you . . .

The words made a kind of rhythm to march to, something to keep the brain alive so he'd forget the pain and the cold. Kirby was moving more slowly now, watching, listening. More and more he brought to mind the cougar. Every movement of his body, every turn of his head. Suddenly he stopped and motioned Vern to come forward. They had reached the edge of a clearing where a small cataract leaped from the rocks to form a pool. At the edge of it, turned so he couldn't catch their scent, the big cat was drinking his fill.

He was barely a hundred yards distant. Van stopped in his tracks, a kind of momentary awe blotting out the fear of the sight before him. Kirby made no move to raise his rifle. He looked at Vern and the message in his eyes needed no translation. *Go ahead, little brother, they were saying. Here's what you asked for. This is your chance.*

And so it was the time. Vern raised his gun to his shoulder and took careful aim. It was an easy shot, as easy as the deer yesterday. The big cat still hadn't caught their scent. It was drinking slowly, deliberately, its massive head thrust forward and the muscles playing across those powerful shoulders like the play of the sunlight on the pool. It had a kind of terrible beauty for

the eyes—all that life, all that strength, and yet so fragile that Vern had only to pull back on the trigger . . .

But if he killed once, what barrier would remain?

“Damn you, shoot! He’s getting away!”

Kirby’s cry was drowned out by the explosion of his own gun; but he was off balance and the cougar loped off and disappeared in the thicket. Kirby fired again. It was blind shooting, blind with fury. He whirled about, his rifle only half lowered and his face terrible with anger.

Vern took a couple of steps backwards. “I tried,” he began. “I tried to shoot—”

“But you’re too good, aren’t you?” Kirby said.

“No, I just couldn’t. You don’t understand—”

“Just too damn good to pull the trigger. You might kill something and get blood on your nice white hands. You might spoil them for Nadine!”

“Kirby, for God sakes—”

Kirby still hadn’t moved, except to turn and face Vern, but he still had the rifle in his hands and that terrible look in his eyes. Vern took several more steps back. The dog at Kirby’s side sensed the danger, too. He moved slowly toward Vern, head lowered and mouth drawn back in an ugly grin. Kirby saw the way Vern looked when the dog moved toward him.

FIRST KILL

“Scared of everything, ain’t you?” he said. “Just plain yellow and passing it off as being something holy and too damn good to get his hands soiled. Well, you’re no better than me, mama’s boy, and I’m going to prove that right here and now. You’re getting just one more chance to pull that trigger.”

There was no other warning. One command from Kirby and the dog would come to heel, but that wasn’t the command Kirby gave. What Kirby hated, his dog hated.

“Look at him,” Kirby said. “He’s just itching to get his fangs in your throat . . . *All right, boy, take him!*”

8.

Everything happened so quickly, there was no time to think until it was all over. The dog leaped forward at Kirby’s command. Vern couldn’t begin to run. He dropped to his knees. All he could see was a yellow blur lunging toward him, and all he could do was bring up the rifle and fire blindly. The blast of the explosion sent him back on his heels. He waited for the fangs at his throat that never came, and then, dumbly, came to his feet again, the rifle still clutched in his hand.

It was easy to see why those fangs had never reached his throat. He hadn’t even heard the dog yelp. From the looks of it, it hadn’t had a chance. At close range, the rifle had done a fairly complete job of blowing off the beast’s head and it

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wasn't a pretty sight. For a few moments Vern couldn't pry his eyes from the awful thing, and then he began to realize what it was that Kirby had forced him to do. He'd made his first kill at last.

And it was nothing after all. It was stupid and ruthless, but there was no feeling afterwards. No real feeling at all. A man might think this way if he'd killed in battle. A little sad that it had happened, but not so much sad for the dead thing as glad that he was still alive and whole. What had been a threat and a fear was just a carcass now. Just another meal for the big cat . . .

And now Kirby was laughing like an idiot. That was the first

thing Vern heard as he groped his way back to reality—Kirby's wild laughter. He understood that, too. Kirby had won. The dog's life meant nothing to him—no more than any other life—just so long as he could win. Vern did have blood on his hands now. There was no barrier between them.

It was only a matter of minutes until Kirby would stop laughing and finish the job he'd really come up on this mountain to do, but he didn't have that much time. Vern straightened and raised the rifle to his shoulder. It was so easy when a man had a stomach for killing.

Kirby hadn't quite finished laughing when he fired . . .



Blame The Name

J. Walker, of Los Angeles, was recently ticketed by police. The charge—you guessed it—jaywalking.

Sweet Revenge

French Robertson, chairman of the Texas prison board, said one of his old school chums got into trouble and was sent to prison. When Robertson refused to use his influence to get the man out of prison, the man told him: "I'll get even with you someday."

Several years later the man came to Robertson's office and asked him to come outside. Robertson followed him outside to the street. "See that big car," the man said, pointing. "It's mine. It's just like yours. I told you I'd get even with you someday."

Strictly Business

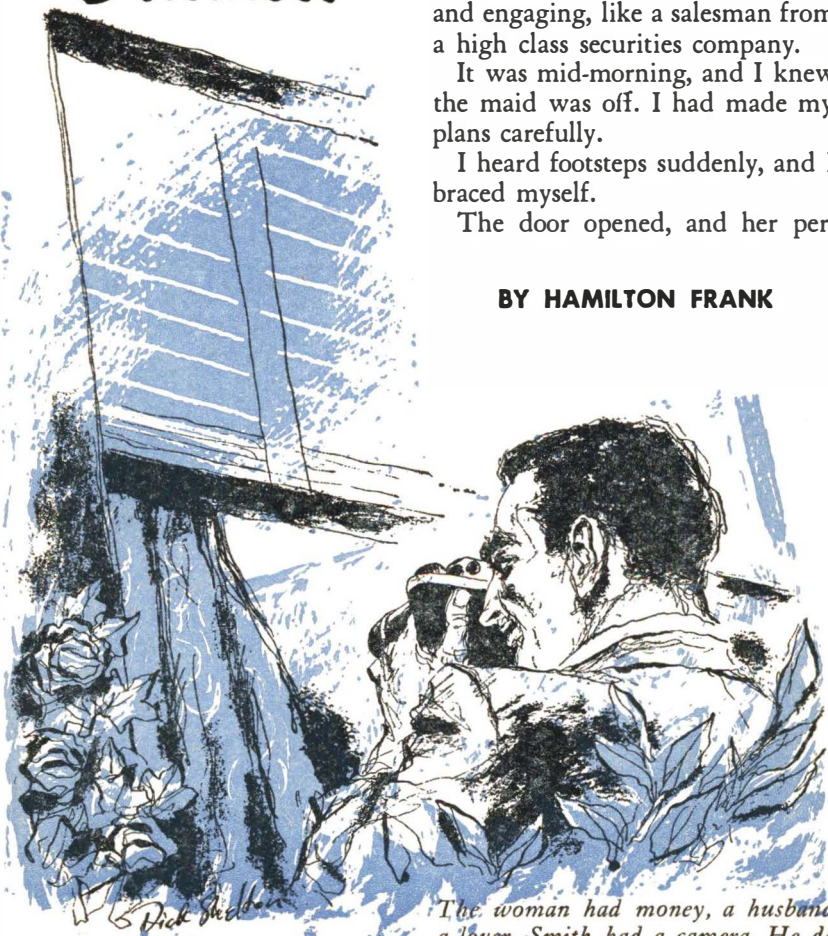
THIS WAS my first try, and I took a deep breath as I twisted the brass bell ringer. Then I listened attentively as chimes played a tune inside the low-slung ranch type house. The palm of my hand under a shiny new briefcase was sticky wet. I hoped I looked conservative and engaging, like a salesman from a high class securities company.

It was mid-morning, and I knew the maid was off. I had made my plans carefully.

I heard footsteps suddenly, and I braced myself.

The door opened, and her per-

BY HAMILTON FRANK



The woman had money, a husband, a lover. Smith had a camera. He decided to move into the chips . . .

fume hit me like a cool breeze. She was about thirty and as beautiful as fire encased in ice. For an instant I wondered how a fella went about chipping away the ice to get at the fire. Then I remembered quickly that my call was strictly business, and I smiled pleasantly.

She brushed abundant auburn hair away from a satiny sophisticated face, and her filmy negligee floated around her like pink fog; the soft sunlight outlined curves more dangerous than a mountain road, and I felt the heat rise under my collar. Her sea-green eyes went over me probingly. I tried my best to look sincere.

"Yes," she said warily, parting silky red lips. "What is it?"

I took off my hat, gentlemanly. "May I have a moment of your time, Mrs. Simpson?" I said, exactly the way I'd rehearsed it.

"I'm in a rush," she said peevishly. "If you're selling, I'm not buying."

"I'll make it short," I said. I hung my head a little, smiling. "I'm sure you won't find your time wasted."

Her green eyes searched me again. "Oh all right," she said grudgingly. "It's against my better judgement, but I'll give you a few minutes, and that's all."

I followed her across a high glossed foyer, admiring her shadowy silhouette, especially the swaying of haughty hips. She was class all right, and I was excited over the opportunity to do business with her.

She led me into a living room only slightly smaller than a football field. I was impressed by the carload of fine antique furnishings, and I knew I had figured right.

She scooped up a cigarette from a long silver tray. I was quick with my lighter, and I was glad my hand was steady.

"Thanks," she said indifferently. "Now what's it all about?"

I didn't try to smile. I unzipped my briefcase and handed her three 8 x 10 glossy prints.

She glanced at the photos with cold interest, not batting an eyelash. It was all very plain. She'd been caught in a compromising position with a muscular lover, and she knew it.

"Very interesting," she said cynically. "I was afraid you were going to be terribly boring, but you're not—are you, Mr. Blackmailer?" She blew a cloud of smoke toward me. "Are you in business for yourself? Or are there others?"

There was a smirk on her lips, and I knew she'd like'd to have called me something more earthy. I grinned to let her know I was on to her, then I said, "Name's Smith—believe it or not—and I'm in business for myself, even did the dark-room work."

She peered at me under her gorgeous lashes, slyly. "And you're sure, Mr. Smith, that this man is not my husband?"

Wiggle, sweetheart, I thought, I've got you on my hook, but good.

"It's no use," I said, smiling. "I've seen you and Mr. Simpson on the society page a few times lately. Your husband is plump and—"

"All right!" she said sharply, crushing her cigarette in a tray. "Now—how did you happen to take these pictures?"

I could have been balky, but I wasn't. "I recognized you in a bar on the Strip, and I knew this—er—gentleman was not your husband, and I followed the two of you back here. I had my camera along, and I was lucky there was daylight and an open window."

"I see," she said nastily. "And I suppose you want to be paid for your trouble? How much are these pictures going to cost?"

"Only twenty-five dollars each," I said evenly.

She narrowed her eyes. "And the negatives? How much will they be?"

"Five hundred dollars," I said, watching her reaction closely. "Each."

I could have asked for more, really made her stew, but she was my first victim and I wasn't pressing too hard.

Her disposition, nevertheless, didn't get any sweeter. She said, angrily, "I'm not a mint!" She paused. "All right! I'll get the money from my bank—that is, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. I'll be glad to meet you there."

"Absolutely, no!"

"Well, then—I'll have to insist upon your meeting me at the Payango. Let's say this afternoon, at one." That was the bar on the Strip, her rendezvous, and she gave me a dirty look.

I relieved her of the photos, and she spun huffily toward the foyer, her filmy negligee whipping after her softly supple body. She yanked the door open quickly. I didn't break my stride getting out.

It was only ten-thirty, and I drove up into the hills, hoping time would pass rapidly. It didn't. So I turned back. I landed at a fountain counter and stalled over coffee, sweating freely even though I knew I'd made the switch from small-time hotel room collusion photographer to the big money more smoothly than I'd thought I could.

I was deliberately late reaching the Payango. I was anxious, but why should she know?

I found her in a dim corner, sipping a martini like a mystery woman in a suspense movie. She was exciting in black. Her neckline was enticingly low, showing softly rising mounds that formed twin peaks under satiny material. Somewhere along the way, however, she had taken on an additional load of ice, and I knew that it was just for me.

A sudden snap of her head toward me caught my stare, but I didn't let myself get bothered, and I smiled.

"Let's be brief about it," she said

tightly. Then she dug into her purse and came up with a stack of bills.

"Suits me fine," I said. I sat down and riffled through the neat pile. It was all there. I unzipped my briefcase and handed her the pictures and negatives.

She crushed them into her purse and got up quickly. "I trust, Mr. Smith, that you haven't any more negatives."

I shrugged. "It's a chance you must take, Mrs. Simpson."

She stamped away, a real doll in black, hips haughtier than in the morning. I wondered how the muscle guy had chipped away all that ice.

It was none of my business. I should have taken a quick powder, out the back way. But I didn't, and that was my big mistake.

Instead I had to toast my success with a scotch over rocks. Then I marched out to the street like an idiot nine feet tall, and even a kid on a bike could have followed my car.

I reached my apartment all right, but I didn't even have time to count the dough again when there was a knock on the door. I thought it was the manager, as usual, wanting to bum a drink. I felt big hearted, and I opened the door.

A big guy, dressed for yachting, came sailing at me, slamming a gun into my guts, doubling me like a jackknife. The back of my neck caught a sharp blow and I hit the

floor hard, stinging all over. A hand grabbed my tie and lifted me up like so much feathers.

Finally my eyes focused and I got a glimpse of the guy. A toothpaste-ad smile split his leather tan face, and his eyes danced as merrily as Christmas. I recognized him easily. The muscular lover. I'd never figured he'd come into the picture, and that was my mistake.

"Mr. Smith, I presume," he said gaily. "I'm glad to meet you, cousin. All I gotta do is squeeze the trigger and I collect two grand—she hates you that much."

He chuckled, and I chilled. He didn't look like the type to pass up two grand. I waited desperately for the bullet, my head spinning dizzily.

His hand on my shoulder steadied me slightly. "Don't wet your pants, cousin. I'm not gonna ventilate you." He stashed his heater in his hip pocket. "See?"

"Thanks," I said, glad for the reprieve, wondering how much of my blood he was going to spill.

"Skip it, it's nothing," he said grandly. "The lady is sore at you, I'm not."

Lucky, wasn't I?

"I like a lad with talent," he continued. "So—if you'll play ball with me, I'll forget about the two grand. I'll tell the lady you got away." He fiddled with an expensively thin gold lighter. "It's like this, cousin. The plush bars are full of rich, married ladies, eager as beavers.

With my romance technique and your picture snapping, we can make a neat fortune. Do we have a deal?" His voice was husky and warm, but his eyes glinted like steel.

"Sounds great," I said quickly.

"I knew we'd get along," he said, flashing his dazzling white teeth. "Now—so we keep things straight—I'll take a grand."

I gave it to him without delay, and he gave me a brotherly pat on the back. He was the senior partner, no doubt about it.

He made himself comfortable on a chair. "Our lady is loaded," he said, puckering his forehead. "I don't suppose you have any more negatives?"

"No," I said sadly.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he said, winking. "The old man is on a trip, and I have a date with her tonight. At my place. It's not so different from hers, only about \$40,000 different. It's a cottage, has a good window—just like hers. Here's the address. You can stake it out." He handed me a slip of paper. "At the window, at eleven. Don't forget your camera, cousin—this is for real dough."

"Will the lights be on, or should I use a flash?"

"Guess she'll be a touch uneasy about lights, now."

I grinned, nodded.

He rose from the chair, stretch-

ing like a lazy tiger, and moved toward me. His big fist jumped at me suddenly, grazing my chin. "Okay, partner," he said cheerfully, but his eyes were too bright for comfort. He left then, jauntily.

I watched through the window as my partner climbed into a glossy red MG and whizzed away. I wasn't very happy, but I was alive.

I could have made a run for it, but I was certain he could track me in that red waggon, and I knew that he wouldn't be very friendly when he found me. So I looked over his place. It was like he said, a cottage set nicely away from other cottages with a big living room window. A good bedroom window too. Time passed slowly, then, until the appointed time.

I got over the low brick wall, being careful about my camera and equipment bag. I knew exactly where to go, and I wanted to get it over with in a hurry.

Drapes were pulled tightly across the window, but my partner, evidently, had left the window open. I pushed the drapes slightly aside, and they were there just like they were the other time.

I steadied, then I shot in rapid sequence. Not with a camera, but a gun. It was a clean job, and I ran.

I could feel sorry about her, all that fire and ice gone—but not about him. Who needs a partner?



*Play poker with a man and you can get to know
him real well . . . even why he'd want to kill*



Pat

Hand

A Novelette

BY J. W. AARON

THERE WERE only two of them left in the pot, Bart Hamilton and Ed Whalen. It was a big pot, close to six hundred, and Ed was trying hard to look nonchalant. He had already shoved his bet to the middle of the table and was waiting to see

if Bart was going to call.

Bart was, and I knew it and the others knew it. I think Ed must have known it too, but Bart had to drag it out. He was toying with Ed the way a tiger might toy with a kitten. It was the kind of situation the big man relished. Ed Whalen, of all the players in the game, could least afford to lose. Now Whalen, goaded by his losses into making a rash bet, was squirming. Bart Hamilton kept his victim on the hot seat, playing with his chips absent-mindedly as he studied his hand, apparently very deep in thought.

Ed was sweating now. He pulled a soiled handkerchief out of his hip pocket and mopped his face. "Do something", he croaked, "even if it's wrong."

Bart raised carefully trimmed eyebrows behind steel rimmed glasses. The expression on his face was pleasant. Much too pleasant. "Let's see," he said, smoothly, "your bet was fifty, wasn't it? I'll call, of course. And I believe I'll tip it a little." He shoved in some chips. "Call the fifty and, say a hundred better." He leaned back and regarded Ed through bright, expectant eyes.

Ed licked his lips and sifted his chips. "I ain't got a hundred in front of me, Bart."

Bart shrugged. "Write a check", he said. "I'll waive the table stakes rule this once."

"I . . . I don't think. . . ."

I broke it up. "A rule is a rule, boys. This is a table stakes game."

A few of the others, feeling as sorry for Ed as I did, chimed in agreeing with me. Bart didn't look at us. His grey eyes turned cold now and remained locked on his dupe. "How much do you have in front of you, Ed?" he asked quietly.

Ed took a quick inventory. "Sixty-seven."

"All right, Ed", Bart said, reasonably. "I'll tap you. I'll call the fifty and raise you, ah, sixty-seven dollars." He counted out the raise carefully. He looked at me, blandly. "That all right with you, Johnny?"

"It's just peachy, Bart", I answered wearily.

Ed was studying his cards. I knew he should have folded, and found myself hoping that he would, but he pushed his remaining chips into the pot with trembling fingers and I looked questioningly at Bart Hamilton.

Bart's voice was dry. "I've got three little ladies and two little trays." He read the expression of defeat in Ed's face and raked in the chips. His gaze was business-like as he looked about the table. "Who's deal?" he asked.

Ed rose with a sigh. "That's enough for me." He turned to the handful of kibitzers grouped around the table like vultures. "There's a seat open, gents."

I stood up. "There's two open. These guys have been shelling me like an ear of corn." I was suddenly very sick of the game, very sick of Bart Hamilton.

Now he looked up at me, surprised. "What the hell, Johnny," he said reasonably, "it's only money."

Was it? I wondered. It seemed to me that he had gone to a great deal of trouble to sandbag Ed. It seemed to me Bart enjoyed watching the man sweat. Maybe I was being too squeamish, but it seemed like a hell of a way to get your kicks. I waved goodbye and left.

I live alone in the old-fashioned white frame house dad left me—along with the hardware business and some other property—when he

died several years ago. That's why it was queer, seeing a light through the livingroom window. I knew I hadn't left it on because I hadn't been home since that morning and Mable, the woman who comes in to clean, wasn't due until later in the week.

Lois Martin met me at the door. Lois Hamilton, rather. Mrs. Lois Hamilton, to be exact, although it was always difficult for me to think of her that way.

"You weren't around", she explained, "but I didn't think you'd mind if I made myself at home." She was still pretty, but six months of married life had sobered and matured her, and the change was most apparent around her eyes and in the firm set to her mouth. I wondered, for the first time, if her marriage was a happy one.

"I'm glad you waited," I assured her. "We haven't seen each other much lately."

"Then I'm glad too," she said quietly.

"The worst of it is," I went on, "I needn't have kept you waiting at all. I was just down to the Elk's, horsing around in a card game. I could have broken away any time."

"It's all right." She seemed nervous. "I didn't mind waiting."

I led the way into the living room. The copies of *Life* and *Look*, strewn carelessly about the sofa, told a mute story. The ashtrays, unless she'd changed her smoking habits in the last year or so, contained about an

hour's worth of lipstick-smeared cigarettes. This surprised me, as I'd never known Lois to wait an hour for anyone.

"Can I fix you a drink?"

"No thanks. I should be getting back." She drew a breath and seemed to search for a way to begin. "The . . . the reason I came here . . . I want to ask you something."

For some reason I felt let down and it must have shown in my face, because there was a pleading look in her eyes as if she were silently asking me to bear with her. She placed both of her hands on my chest and pushed gently. "Would you sit down a minute, Johnny? I . . . It's rather important."

I took a backward step or two and eased myself down on the sofa, thinking as I settled among the magazines how nice it was to hear her call me "Johnny" again. It had been "Mr. John Kelly" on the engraved wedding announcement that I found in my mail box just before Thanksgiving. Since then, it was either a luke-warm "John" or a cool "Mr. Kelly," depending on the occasion, whenever we happened to meet. But now it was "Johnny" again, and she was looking at me the way she did three years ago in the Black Hills, about five seconds before I killed the rattler that lay poised before her.

"Johnny," she began, looking down at me, "I want to . . . I want to ask a favor of you." She misread the expression on my face and hur-

ried on. "I know I have no right, but . . ."

"Listen," I laughed, "this can't be as serious as you are making it out to be. Hell, if it's money, if it's anything I can possibly handle, just sing out."

She shook her head. "It's not money. Actually, it's simple. I don't know why I'm making such a fuss about it."

She fished about inside her purse, dug out a key and held it before me. "Keep this," she said. "Just put it away and forget it. Will you do that for me?"

The key was warm, and it's warmth surprised and in a strange way excited me. Until tonight I was certain that I'd got the haunting melody that, to me, was Lois, out of my system for good. Now, as I sat regarding the key, I wasn't so sure.

"Will you?" she repeated.

"Sure, but . . ."

She held up a hand, shutting me off. "And no questions, Johnny. Please!"

I shrugged. "Okay, Lois, sure."

"You . . . you won't mention this to anyone?"

"Of course not, if that's the way you want it."

She seemed relieved. "That's the way I want it." She bent over and squeezed my hand. "And thanks, Johnny."

The interview was over. "Don't bother," she said, as I got to my feet. "I can find my way out."

I watched her go, and the room seemed empty after she had left.

2.

Lake Minnadoda lies seven miles West of Riverview, bounded on the south by the state highway and on the north by the new U.S. highway 16. A scattering of cabins, located on the northwest shore of the lake, have always been maintained by a few of the more affluent families of Riverview. Before the new highway was built, these cabins could be reached only by following the old Cabin Road.

A dusty, two lane gravel trail that veers off the state highway, the Cabin Road meanders in a northerly direction around the lake, eventually connecting up with the new highway at Connor's Corner; then it leisurely drifts south, circles the lake, and ends only a few miles west of it's starting point. In it's wandering, the Cabin Road also passes the only lakeside cabin situated on the southern shore. Known as the Kelly Cabin, it was built by my father and passed along to me when dad died.

Outside of occasional neckers, I am about the only customer the Cabin Road has left. Since the new highway went in, the North Shore crowd has found it easier to drive west out of Riverview on 16 to Connor's Corner and turn south, using the Cabin Road for only a mile or two. For me, located where

I am, it is still closer and quicker to drive west on the state road and turn north at the Cabin Road cut-off.

I use the cabin as a sort of headquarters for fishing parties and a warming house during the duck season. Any of our crowd is welcome there and the door is never locked. Acting as host for the boys, I generally take it upon myself to lay in a supply of canned goods in the Spring of each year. After that we all sort of feel our way along, providing ourselves with such quantities of fresh bread, milk, and other perishables as the given occasion seems to warrant. In return, the rest of them always see to it that the liquor cabinet is well-stocked, and no fishing or hunting outing seems to be complete without an all-night poker session on the last night out, with plenty of liquid refreshments. It is a happy arrangement, one begun many years before by my father and cheerfully continued by myself. And although the faces of the "Kelly Club" members are, for the most part, different from those who had haunted the cabin in my father's time, the type of individual involved is the same.

Every town has a group like ours. Mostly, we are businessmen. Mostly, we can afford to pamper our tastes. We are the fishermen, the hunters, the fellows who enjoy turning a card now and then for money. We are the golfers, the convention-goers, and thirty years ago we

would have probably been members in good standing in the various local barbershop quartets.

Tuesday, the morning after Lois' visit, dawned fresh and clear. Toward noon a mellow southwest wind brushed gently over the town and set the smaller trees, already sprouting tiny leafbuds, to swaying gently. By one o'clock, a suit jacket was uncomfortable and my shirt collar, anchored in place with a necktie, seemed sticky. No question about it—Spring was here.

I didn't feel like selling hardware. According to Connie, the old gentleman who works for me, I seldom do. I made my excuses to him and sauntered around to the Elk's. With the exception of a deliberate bridge game, featuring elderly players and cautious bidding, the place was deserted.

The whole town was like that: empty. For want of something better to do, I decided to stock the cabin with groceries. If nothing else, it would provide an excuse for a drive in the country and after the long winter, I was eager to revisit the cabin. I made my purchases, favoring soups and the different varieties of pork and beans. I bought a two-pound tin of coffee and, on the outskirts of town, stopped at a gas station and filled a five-gallon can with kerosene against the possibility of an empty cooking stove.

The old Cabin Road seemed to retrograde a bit more each year,

and two miles south of my cabin I discovered with some surprise that the cement and concrete bridge across Dry Creek was still out. The shoulder of the gravel road was liberally stacked with warning signs to that effect. "Detour," said one of them, and a bit further down the road another warned, "Caution, Construction Work Ahead."

Apparently, however, that last sign was incorrect, because from all appearances there was no immediate reconstruction work on the agenda for the county road crews. Across the entrance to the bridge lay a two-by-four barricade, supported on either end by a wooden horse. Resting on top of the two-by-four was a red lantern, to further alert unwary motorists. The detour, necessitated by last Fall's flash flood which had taken a thirty foot section of concrete bridge span along as it careened down Dry Creek, was passable. But it involved easing my car down a rather treacherous bank, across the now-dry creek bed, and up an imposing looking bank on the opposite side. In rainy weather, it could be murder.

Two miles straight down the lane, Cabin Road veered east. I turned west onto a rutted, single track dirt road that skirted a series of small trees and sneaked up on my cabin from the side. I sat in the car and regarded the lonely cabin, the jagged, rugged shoreline, the cold, impersonal lake, and felt a wave of nostalgia filter over me as I recalled the

good times. Dad, in hobnailed shoes and dirty pants and no shirt, drinking beer and playing horseshoes; dad in a boat, 'way out in the middle of the lake in the late afternoon, standing precariously and holding a huge fish high above his head; dad in a five-card stud game, announcing grandly as he uncovered his hole card, "Count your cash, boys, I filled up."

And the other memories, the later ones—the good times of our own. Pat Wilson and Joe Berry and Tim Brody and the others. It was good to be back.

Inside, the cabin was dusty and the air was stale. A mouse skittered along the far wall, passed his hole in his haste, backtracked hurriedly and disappeared. A thick layer of dust had accumulated over the flat surfaces and several spiders had spent an industrious winter, staking out early claims in likely-looking corners. I carried the boxes of food inside and set them on the table. I'd get Mable to come out and clean: she might as well store the grub away in clean cupboards. I threw open the windows and both doors and stepped outside, counting on the breeze to wash away the sour air.

Walking down to the water, feeling the warm, late afternoon wind at my back, my spirits suddenly turned low. The impending Spring had lost it's glamour and even the wind, it seemed, began taunting me coldly. I realized I had been

thinking of Lois, and that was bad.

"Out of sight," we say, "out of mind." And sometimes, rationalizing, we can almost succeed in convincing ourselves that things that once had happened, had never really happened at all. Passions experienced were not passions, but lusts. Joys were only racy thrills. But success in rationalization, it seems, is always just out of reach. At odd moments, the crushing truth comes pounding through. Lois is married. That's a truth. She's not married to me. That, too, is a truth. She's married to Bart Hamilton. Harsh, but also true.

I stood regarding the water, and the lapping waves against the shore seemed more like the rolling drums of doom. Suddenly it was no longer warm. The drive home was lonely and the night air in the fading light was chill.

3

The business establishments in Riverview pay their forces on Friday. That makes Saturday the big business day of the week and Friday the big banking day. Along with most of the other business men, I do the bulk of my banking on Friday afternoons.

It was nearly eleven when I reached the bank and the building, as befits a prosperous community, was teeming with customers. I chose the smaller of two window lines and awaited my turn.

I was near the window when Dale Severson, the local railway agent, stepped to the counter and, ignoring the lines, called to one of the tellers not engaged behind the cage. "Two twenty-four, Ted," he said, holding up a key. I recognized it as a key of the same type Lois had given me the previous Monday night and it occurred to me, for the first time, that what she had given me was the key to her safety-deposit box.

Ted, a youngish man with a sallow complexion and an apparent tendency towards fattening foods, raised his eyebrows behind dark, horned-rimmed glasses and cupped a hand behind his ear. Severson, interrupting the questioning gesture correctly, again displayed the key and repeated, "Two twenty-four, please."

This time the request registered. Ted nodded his head intelligently, waved his arm in a "wait-a-moment" signal and disappeared into one of the offices. He returned a few seconds later waving a key with a black, hard-rubber attachment, much the same as the tab attached to most hotel room keys.

I had always regarded Ted as one of the bank's more indifferent employees and I wondered vaguely how closely he had bothered to check the key number against the holder of the box. It had been a short, quick trip to the office and back . . . just a routine matter.

I watched the two men retire to

the safety-deposit room toward the rear of the bank and had to be nudged by the man behind me before I realized that there was no one between me and the cashier and that I had been holding up the line.

Several times that afternoon I found myself playing with the key Lois had given me. I had been fighting an idea since noon but shortly before two o'clock I gave up and returned to the bank.

I spotted Ted behind the counter, operating some kind of computing machine and glancing up frequently for a peek at the clock. I waited a moment, wanting to catch his eye rather than risk being waited on by a more painstakingly careful employee. When he looked up I waved the key and smiled. "One nineteen, please." That was the number engraved in tiny numerals on the face of the key.

He went through the same routine with me as he had previously: the semi-intelligent look; the raised eyebrows; the cupped hand. I held the key aloft. "One nineteen." This time he raised a forefinger as he scampered to his feet.

It was a suspenseful wait, although he couldn't have been gone more than thirty seconds. He was blissfully unaware of my tenseness as he came swinging back, tapping the bank's key against his thigh. He showed me the key and headed for the deposit room. I followed him from my side of the counter and met him at the swinging gate

at the rear of the bank. He led the way into the vault, went directly to one nineteen, opened the outer door to the box and waited as I slipped my key into the lock and turned it. To my relief, the rectangular box slid easily out.

"Just holler when you want to lock it up."

"Okay Ted," I answered. "Thanks."

I made my way into a small, glass-enclosed partition not much larger than a telephone booth and closed the door. My hands on the box were wet with perspiration. I set the box on a small table and opened the lid.

It was crammed with currency, neatly bundled and stacked, apparently according to denomination. There were four packages. I didn't try to estimate the total amount.

Beneath the money lay thin sheaves of U.S. Savings Bonds and some stock certificates. The top few bonds were of \$100 denomination and the certificates—judging from the familiar corporate names inscribed across them—were strictly blue-chip. I didn't bother with a count here, either.

Beneath everything lay an unsealed envelope. A single sheet of bonded paper was neatly folded inside, and the writing on the paper, in the clear, unmistakable hand of Lois, told the story. It was a grim indictment of embezzlement and suspected attempted murder. It was tersely written, starkly accusing:

"During the construction of the Riverview Memorial Hospital," it began, without preamble, "my father, Dr. Stevan W. Martin, embezzled a sum of money slightly in excess of thirty thousand dollars. At the time of his theft my father was a dying man. He was fully aware of this.

"My husband, Mr. Barton G. Hamilton, has discovered my father's theft. He is trying to blackmail me with this knowledge. His price for silence: the money itself.

"I suspect that if and when my husband should get his hands on this money, he would not hesitate to kill me. His motive: to insure my silence.

"Neither my brother, Dr. David M. Martin, nor myself had been aware of my father's crime until it was discovered by my husband.

"I have purchased this safety deposit box in the Riverview State Bank, and given my key to a friend. I have gathered together what cash and securities I own and placed them in the box.

"In the hope that if this letter is ever read, that person will do all in his power to see that justice is done, I close this letter and sign it,

"Lois Ann Hamilton 4/7/55"

I spent the rest of the afternoon at the Elk's drinking coffee until it tasted like burnt powder, smoking cigarettes until they tasted like filed steel.

It was after seven when Bart finally showed up. I knew he would.

It was payday for most of the town and Bart, always looking for action, knew that the biggest games, and the best, were played on payday.

He was a relative newcomer to Riverview. He'd moved to town only three years before, but in spite of the fact that he had married my girl we'd remained on friendly terms. I realized, with some feeling of self-contempt, that this was at least partly due to the fact that I had felt that any show of animosity on my part might be construed as a display of poor sportsmanship.

Actually, I didn't like the man, I never had. I didn't like some of his business methods. I didn't like the way he played poker. I didn't like the way he was beginning to throw his weight around the club, arguing down opposition with a quick, biting tongue and a ridiculing sneer. I didn't like the reputation he was slowly reaping as a bad man to cross. I resented the fact that, in a small, middle-west town like Riverview, he ostensibly affected a Jaguar sports car and an immaculately sheared French Poodle. But all that these things really indicated was that Bart and I were not tuned in on the same wave-length. The real bone of contention between us was—and always had been—Lois.

We were close to the same age, in our early thirties, but I couldn't help noticing with grim satisfaction that he was showing his age more than I. His sandy hair was beginning to recede a bit faster than it

should, and the lines about his eyes and mouth were developing into deep, well-defined slashes. He was heavier than I, and a fleshy inner tube was beginning to inflate above and beneath his beltline; lately he had begun wearing double breasted suits. He was wearing one tonight, an expensive-looking grey gabardine, as he threaded through a group of men loafing around the entrance to the snack bar and made his way toward me.

"Looking for trouble?" he asked, rubbing his hands together in an exaggerated gesture.

"Not tonight, Bart," I said. "I'm a working man and tonight I've got to work."

He raised his eyebrows in simulated surprise. "Work? Spelled with a W?"

I laughed, successfully resisting the urge to slug him. "With a W," I agreed.

He shook his head. "I'd have sworn you couldn't spell it, Johnny-boy. Never knew you were on speaking terms with it." The expression on his face was that of a man who always has a pat hand.

"Oh, but I am," I said. "Painful, but true."

He patted me on the shoulder. "Tough, real tough," he sympathized, surveying the room for other likely looking candidates. He spotted a couple of card players over by the coffee urn. "I see some victims now," he announced, not looking at me. "See you around, kid."

PAT HAND

"You bet," I answered as he walked away. I watched him go, saw him gladhand his "victims," saw him sit down with them and engage them in laughing conversation. When they sent for the cards I slid off the stool and left. Bart would stay put for hours.

She answered the phone on the third ring. "Yes?"

I didn't bother identifying myself. "I've got to see you."

"No! Don't come here, Johnny."

"I said I've got to."

"You mustn't. I mean it."

"I'm coming. I'm home now. I'll be there in five minutes."

"I won't answer the door."

"I'm leaving . . ."

"Wait! Wait, Johnny. I'll . . . I'll see you, but not here."

"Where?"

"Where we used to . . . by the school?"

I studied my watch, wanting to give her time to walk the distance. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"I'll be there," she assured me.

4.

At first I didn't see her. She had slipped into the shadows of the tall old building, near one of the fire escape ladders. I made a U turn at the corner and, briefly, my headlights caught a glimpse of white ducking back towards the building. She was a very jittery girl. In six months she had changed more than I would have believed possible.

I drove up on the school yard, eased close to the building, and swung the door open.

She slid in, not looking at me, and pulled the door closed softly. "This is crazy," she murmured.

I drove away fast, picked up 16 on the north side of town, drove west several miles, and turned off onto a deserted-looking country road. I parked on the shoulder, turned the lights off, and killed the engine.

I studied her for a moment. "Are you nuts?." I tried to keep the rasp out of my voice.

She still hadn't looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean."

Now she turned to me slowly. "You've been to the bank," she accused in a small voice. "You've opened the box."

"I did," I admitted.

She put her face in her hands and began to weep, softly. I didn't trust myself to touch her. I let her cry it out, covering my emotions by making a ritual of lighting a cigarette. It tasted dry and harsh, and after one puff I contented myself with holding it in my fingers and blowing at the curling smoke. Finally, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her straighten and begin to search for her purse. I pulled out my handkerchief and tossed it in her lap. She used it to wipe her eyes and blow her nose.

"Why couldn't you leave well

enough alone?" she asked, wearily. "Why did you have to get involved?"

"You involved me."

"If only you would have just done as I asked."

"So that after you were dead I could assist the police in pinning down your murderer?"

"You just don't understand, and I haven't time to explain. I must be getting back."

"Bart will be tied up in a card game for hours. You know that."

"And if he isn't?"

I was getting angry. "All right, suppose he isn't. So what? Does he mind if you leave the house?"

"If you knew him you wouldn't ask questions like that."

"Well what can he do about it?"

She moaned, hopelessly, shaking her head. "He . . . he hurts me. He likes it, likes to see me suffer." She was beginning to cry again. "He says he won't stand for a wife who gets out of line. I think he likes to catch me doing something he considers wrong. It . . . it gives him an excuse."

"Your getting out," I said, thickly. "Come home with me, or get a room in the hotel. In the morning you can see Mark Bradshaw."

She shook her head. "Divorce won't help," she said through the tears. "Nothing will help."

I grasped her shoulders and shook her. "Talk sense, damn you. So your old man took some money. So what? He had it coming to him.

Half the town owed him dough when he died. He never mailed out a bill in his life. Do you think he'd want you to go on like this, living with a guy like Bart?"

"It isn't just dad. There's Dave's position to consider," she pointed out tonelessly.

I'd forgotten Dave, her brother. He was a doctor too. When old Doc Martin died, shortly before the new hospital was completed, the board of trustees appointed Dave as the new hospital director, replacing his father. It had been a nice gesture.

"I see what you mean," I admitted. "It's tough, but I don't see how it can be helped."

"No," she insisted, "you don't see what I mean. Dad didn't leave us the money in cash. We found stock certificates in his desk when we went through his effects. There was money in Postal Savings and in his savings account at the bank, and his checking account contained a rather large balance, but neither Dave nor I had ever questioned dad about his finances. There had always been enough money.

"After I discovered what he'd done, it occurred to me to check back on his deposit dates. The bulk of the stocks and bonds had been purchased during the last year of his life. The same was true of his postal savings and the bank balances. It could all be checked, and it was simple enough to figure out *after* the facts were known."

"And how did the facts become known?", I asked.

She smiled wanly. "Dad collected a good deal of the hospital money—donations and contributions and subscriptions. After all, the hospital was his baby. He had conceived the idea, pushed it, fought for it. Dad was the one who made the hospital go, who put the fund-drive across." She shrugged, bleakly. "He simply didn't turn in all the money he collected. Evidently, no one ever asked him for an accounting. Because it was all there, in his books. The amounts received, who he received them from, when. And the amounts turned in was in his books too. The shortage would jump out of the books and hit an eighth grade accounting student over the head."

"And no one went over his books, checked him out at the end of the fund-raising campaign?" I asked, incredulously.

"Who'd suspect dad of anything?" she asked, wearily. "Who'd suspect a man who never sent bills, a man who had never in all his life concerned himself about money?"

"Until he knew he was dying and realized he had nothing to leave his kids," I added. "Still, what's the point?"

"The point is Dave. As I've explained, Dave and I didn't know all this when we learned the extent of dad's estate. Dave's share came to something in excess of fifteen

thousand." She turned to me. "He didn't squander his money," she explained, earnestly, "but he had been building his practice and there hadn't been too much money to go around. With his share he bought his new home: he bought a car. Necessary things, but the money is gone. How would it look now if the shortage of dad's were revealed? Dave took an active part in the fund-raising campaign too."

She had an argument. In addition, the hospital had been a hotly contended issue around town in the first place. With the clinic at Rochester less than fifty miles away, some folks had argued that a new hospital was a waste of money.

"And Bart snooped around your dad's books and discovered the shortage?"

She nodded. "He's sure we were all in it together, certain that it was a family affair. You've no idea how quickly the man changed. He'd been thoughtful, considerate. But it was all a pose, which he dropped once he smelled money."

"You've talked it over with Dave?"

"I . . . no. Dave doesn't know."

"You mean about Bart or about the money?"

"He doesn't know about either Bart or the money."

I sighed. "I wonder if that's smart?"

"It's the way it is," she said, positively.

"Lois," I said, "I'm going to ask

you a question and I don't want any double-talk for an answer." I waited a moment. "What makes you think Bart would kill you if he got the money?"

"If he ever gets the money," she said, softly, "he'll kill me." There was a cold conviction in her voice. "He'd like it." She was trembling. "I even know how he'll do it. I know exactly."

She seemed too cool, too self-possessed. I tried to head her off, fearing her calmness might be the prelude to another tearful storm. "It isn't important how," I said, flatly. "The important thing . . ."

She hadn't heard me. "He'll tie me," she said. "He'll tie me and gag me. Then he'll pinch my nostrils with his fingers, tightly."

It was a moment before the horror of what she was saying struck me. When it did my throat went dry and I could feel the blood pounding in my temples. In that instant I hated Bart Hamilton as I had never before hated a living being.

"He'll ask me, over and over, 'Shall I let you go, little chicken? Shall I let you breathe?'" She drew a herky-jerky breath, sucking air through clenched teeth. Her lips were bared. I knew she was reliving a nightmarish memory.

I slid out of the car and stumbled off the road, but the vomit wouldn't come. Standing in the ditch by a barbed-wire fence I swayed, cutting my hand on the fence when I

grasped it for support. A long time later I re-entered the car. Lois was slumped in her seat, a study of despair, wanly regarding her cigarette.

I drove her home. Neither of us spoke. She was fumbling with the door handle as I eased the car to a stop. I grabbed her arm, tightly, and I saw her wince. My voice was hoarse. "If you love me," I told her, "you won't answer your phone tonight."

Her body jerked in surprise. With expressionless eyes she regarded me for some moments and then, saying nothing, she slipped out of the car. Her heels on the sidewalk sounded confident and proud.

5

I drove home and made the phone call from there. One of the barmen answered the phone. He sounded bored. "Elk's Club."

"Bart Hamilton, please," I asked, in a high voice.

There was a delay, during which the noises I knew so well filtered through the earphone—the steady, flat clinking of the slot machines; the dry rattle of poker chips; the undertone of voices, blending together to form a constant murmur in the background.

"Bart Hamilton speaking." His voice was sharp and clear.

I made my words a continuous, high-pitched cackle. "Know where your wife is tonight, Hamilton?"

"Who is this?" he asked.

I snickered insanely. "A friend. Where's your wife, Hamilton?"

"She's home," he answered, but his tone seemed uncertain.

"Yeah," I agreed heavily, "but who's home is she at?"

"See here, what are you trying to say?"

"Johnny Kelly ain't around tonight is he? Ain't been around since early, has he?"

"What about it?"

"Just this, you chump. Your wife's out at his cabin. The two of 'em. How do you like them apples, chump?" I hung up.

I didn't waste time after that. Bart Hamilton wouldn't. I figured I had about fifteen minutes.

Two miles north of the washed-out bridge over Dry Creek, and just beyond my cottage, the Cabin Road turns east. I waited there, around the bend.

Far down the old road a pair of headlights began tinting the skyline a milky hue, and the elation I felt racing through me had nothing to do with Bart. It was certain that Bart would not have come without first calling home. Apparently, Lois had not answered.

Soon I could hear the distant hum of a car's engine and see the twin beams of the headlights as the car itself hove into view. It was less than five miles down the road, now, and the engine's hum was gradually changing into a distinctive, siren-like whine, identifying it as Bart's

Jaguar. I snapped on my lights and slowly began moving toward the onrushing car. As my car completed the curve, Bart dimmed his lights and snapped them bright again. I dimmed my own.

The two cars were less than a mile apart, and Bart's was only blocks from the bridge, when I turned my lights on bright again.

I'd played enough poker with the man to guess how he'd react. He quickly, vindictively, snapped his own lights bright, and it seemed to me that he increased his speed.

He never slowed, never attempted the detour. His rate of speed was terrific when he hit the bridge. I saw his car arch crazily for an instant, then plunge forward in a jarring crash.

I maneuvered the detour and carefully guided my car up the opposite bank and back onto the road. I pulled the emergency brake, left the engine running, walked back to the bridge and stood looking down at the crushed automobile.

In a way it was suicide. A more trusting person wouldn't have so easily doubted his wife. A less vindictive individual would have been sensible enough to slow his car rather than plow ahead against the twin hazards of a concrete bridge and an opposing driver who re-

fused to keep his lights dimmed. With an assist or two from fate, the man had killed himself.

Still, it is not wise to depend completely upon fate. I noticed with satisfaction that the two-by-four plank and the wooden horses which had supported it were lying in the creek-bed where I had tossed them. They were splintered and insanely entangled with the deformed and broken car, and who was to say that they were not properly in place, guarding the entrance to the ruined structure, when Bart had raced madly onto the bridge?

Before leaving the scene of the accident I retrieved the two road signs from the ditch where I had tossed them only minutes before. One of them said, "Detour"; the other warned, "Caution, Construction Work Ahead." I was careful to place them in the proper order.

A judge, even with all the facts before him, would surely have frowned, darkly and judiciously. A district attorney would just as certainly have called it murder. But I didn't concern myself with the moral aspects of my deed. In a strange way, Bart Hamilton had lived and died by the sword. And that's the way I chose to think of his passing: as a sort of fearful vengeance, justice by remote control.



Contest Winner: YOU, detective

No. 8 — THE METAL FINGER

Jeanette M. Hlavin
P. O. Box 216
Eatonville, Washington

"Well," Kensington snapped, "tell us!"

"It's simple," Hammond said. "Your wife and your maid have no motive for the murder. and alibi each other. That leaves two suspects: yourself and Mrs. Williams."

The woman started to turn. Kensington remained still.

"Two witnesses say the victim's cry came *right taster* you entered the room, Mr. Kensington," Hammond went on.

"There just wasn't enough time for you to stab him—and throwing the knife would have been impossible." Hammond stopped and turned to the woman. "Mrs. Williams, you were on the grounds when your husband cried out. Why didn't you come directly through the french doors behind him?"

"Leave her alone!" Kensington shouted. "Can't you see—"

"Yes," Hammond said, "I do see. She came in through those windows and killed her husband just as you entered the room, probably because he told her he would divorce her for infidelity. She didn't want it that way. It was a nice try at shielding her, Mr. Kensington—but it won't work."

Mrs. Williams rose slowly. Hammond went to her. "Let's go," he said.



Trapper Trapped

Lt. R. T. Borntraeger, base information officer at the Memphis, Tenn., Naval Air Station, asked local police to set up a radar timing unit to cut down speeding at the base. The first motorist caught by the unit was Borntraeger. He was fined \$10.

Racing Blues

The Springfield, Mass., Better Business Bureau was asked to collect a \$2 bet on a horse race recently. The complainant, a woman, said that a neighbor woman had shown her a "bookie certificate" but refused to pay when the horse won.

Beach Trouble

In Portzic, France, Mrs. Georgette Guibert, 37, told police that she decided to commit suicide. She walked to the beach, removed all of her clothing and waded slowly into the sea. But the water was cold and she changed her mind. She returned to the beach only to find that someone had stolen her clothing.

IT took her a second to recognize him as he parked in front of the shop and began to lower the top on the convertible. Then she realized with a little surprise that it was because she had never seen him in anything but trunks or dungarees in the three months she had known him. He was wearing a pale green, short-sleeved linen sport shirt that deepened the tan

of his face and arms and made his short blond hair look almost white. The brown slacks were the kind that have the belt made right on them, and they had a soft, new look.

He finished folding the top down into the well, snapped the white boot over it, and came inside. "Hi, Nan. How's business?"

She caught her hand as it started automatically to her hair and stopped it in time. "Pretty good, considering that the season hasn't really started yet." She had a small women's shop on Isla Blanca specializing in smart, expensive beach and resort wear. "It should start to pick up within the next week or so, or at least I hope it will."

"Same with me," he grinned. Dud Graham had come to Isla



Widow's Choice

BY COLE PRICE

Graham was a nice guy, a handsome guy. Nan couldn't imagine why she felt she should never go out with him.

Blanca right after Nan and had bought a tiny dock with a shack on it, and a second-hand boat. He was a skin diving instructor and he rented out equipment and took skin diving parties out to the Gulf. "Don't worry," he said. "This place is a natural."

He was leaning across the counter toward her, talking, his one hand resting on the glass top close to her hip, one of his fingers touching and rubbing lightly across the seam of her skirt. She moved away. It's strange, she thought. Looking at him I can feel myself attracted to him, but when he gets too close I want to run. He's good-looking, and he has a way of talking that puts you off your guard, but every now and then you get the feeling he is all keyed up for something, and watching you a little too closely. Like he expected something to happen suddenly.

Or maybe, she thought, it's all in your imagination. Maybe it has something to do with a happy but very brief marriage that really ended on a dark pier in San Francisco. The telegram that came six months later was short and impersonally sympathetic, but the letters that followed it from men who had been with him had all so carefully avoided the word suicide that it had practically screamed out at her. The newspaper account, when they finally released it, had been more explicit. And when the hurt had been the worst, the final letter had

WIDOW'S CHOICE

come. Her heart had soared when she recognized the handwriting, then dropped cruelly when she read the date of the postmark. He had written it before he shot himself and it had been somehow delayed in the mail, as plenty of other APO mail at times had been delayed. She had burned it, unopened, and then had cried all night . . .

Dud's voice brought her back. "Come out to dinner with me tonight. I know a place where we can get some good, untourist-like food. Barbecued cabrito and frijoles and all the stuff that goes with it."

She grinned. "Beans, I understand. What's this *cabrito*?"

"Young goat. So tender you won't believe it."

She made a face. "Sounds terrible."

"Come on. You'll love it." He turned around. "I'll help you close up." He cut off the air conditioner and lowered the blinds on the front windows that would keep the early morning sun from fading the delicate colors of the merchandise in the front cases before she opened the next morning. She locked the back door, set the lock on the front door and followed him out to the car.

They went south, down Shell Avenue toward the causeway, past the new Breakers Hotel and the Austin Beach Club and the Johnny Hedgeland Public Beach across from the causeway. Strange, she thought, that a beach should have

been named after a little boy who had drowned there. It seemed a rather morbid memorial.

They drove on past the causeway to a four-unit apartment building where she lived. Dud waited in the car, listening to the radio, while she ran upstairs to change.

She took a very quick shower, started to put on a slip, then decided it was still too warm in the evenings and settled for a half slip and what she considered a rather daring nylon net and lace bra that had come as a sample from a lingerie firm on the west coast. As she finished dressing, she noticed her hands were trembling slightly; she grinned at her image in the mirror, applied her lipstick. My friend, she thought, you're a little too old for this frightened freshman routine. Besides, there was nothing to be afraid of. Except for that one Sunday afternoon incident in July on his boat when she had let him teach her to skin dive he had never made a real pass at her. And after all, he was a nice guy. It wouldn't be so bad if he did. So he was a little tense at times. So what? Isn't everyone?

The sun was still bright when she went down, and they drove over the causeway and across the flat tidelands to Gulf City. Dud kept the speedometer needle past seventy all the way, until they went by the airport, then slowed and turned down International Avenue toward the bridge.

The customs officer on the Mexican side stopped them and Dud spoke to him in rapid, idiomatic Spanish. They both laughed, then the officer waved them on across the border into Mexico.

"How did you ever learn to speak Spanish like that in Indiana?" Nan asked.

"Huh? Oh." He laughed. "I was stationed down here for a couple of years."

"In the army? My husband was in the army." She could almost feel the tenseness that came over him at the mention of her husband. She knew she shouldn't have said that. A man had a right to tense when a woman he was taking to dinner began talking about her dead husband. "Where else were you stationed?" she asked, to change the subject.

"Japan," he said softly.

Her husband had also served in Japan, but she carefully refrained from remarking about the coincidence. It might irritate him further and it would bring back painful memories for her. Dud drove slowly down Avenida Internacional, past the city square, then turned down one of the narrow streets that led into the older sections of the city. They finally stopped in front of a small cafe in a flat-roofed, wooden building.

Dud led her down a narrow hall, past the kitchen, and into a small patio. The floor was of multi-colored tile, and it was completely en-

closed by a vine-covered, lattice fence. They sat at a table under a leaning papaya tree and a woman brought two yellow candles in saucers and placed them in the center of the table. Dud spoke to her as she was leaving and she nodded.

"I ordered us a drink first. You ever drink a tequila collins?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't care much for—"

He grinned. "Come on. It'll make a new woman of you."

She had to grin back. "Just what's wrong with the old one?"

"Nothing I've found yet." Then his grin seemed to change, like one of those dramatic TV shows where they superimpose one image over another and let the old one fade out while the new one fades in. She shivered slightly inwardly and wished she had worn some kind of a jacket. Her shoulders felt awfully bare.

The meal came and she enjoyed it very much. When they were finished Dud lit two cigarettes and passed one over to her. His hand touched hers, and she moved her hand away—too quickly, she realized. It was the same feeling she had had before, wanting to run away from him.

He was quiet until they had passed the airport on the way back. As they started across the flats toward Isla Blanca, he looked sideways at her. "What is it, Nan?" he asked, "Am I that hard to take, or is it something I did, or what?"

WIDOW'S CHOICE

"It's nothing you did," she said, "It's just that I—I'm just silly, I guess. I'm sorry, Dud."

He turned up the beach after they crossed the causeway instead of toward her apartment, and she leaned forward in the seat.

"I want to run by the shack first," he explained. "I've got something out there I want to show you."

"It's pretty late," she said. "Can't it wait until later?"

"It won't take but a minute."

The car lights flashed across his shack as he pulled up beside it and helped her out. She could hear the waves throbbing softly against the boat that was tied up at the end of the dock. He used a key to open a padlock and reached inside to flick on the light before they went in.

The inside of the shack had been painted at one time, but a combination of salt and dampness had caused the paint to peel and mold, and the bare wood showed through in several places. It was about ten feet wide and fifteen feet long, with a worn looking desk at one end and a window at the other. Three large, blue, compressed air tanks stood in a rack near the door and a half dozen lungs with smaller, yellow tanks stood against one wall. Each tank had a black numeral painted on it near the stainless steel valve.

A rack of over a dozen spear guns of assorted types took up part of the other wall, and the rest of it was covered with foot flippers and

face masks hanging from nails driven into the wall. A loose coil of thin, white nylon rope lay on the floor under the window.

Dud closed the door behind him. "Keep out the bugs," he said. He shuffled some stuff around on the desk and came up with a spear gun. "This is what I wanted to show you. Designed it myself." He held it out to her.

"I don't know anything about them," she said.

He took the gun back and picked up a short spear from the pile on his desk. "Here—let me show you. I made the barrel out of a cut-down Cernia and designed the action myself. It's spring loaded—see?" He inserted the spear in the barrel, placed the ugly barbed tip against the desk, and pushed on the gun, sliding the spear into the barrel until the trigger clicked in place in front of the spring. "See how much shorter it is than the standard gun? That makes it faster and easier to handle in the water. And it's still plenty powerful."

He aimed at a point about shoulder high on the front wall and pulled the trigger. There was a metallic *twang* as the spring was released and then a heavy, solid sound as the steel spear bit into the wood. It went all the way through the wall, leaving only a few inches of the shaft on the inside.

Nan looked at his face. It was harder, the lines deeper and the

angles sharper. It was out in the open now, she felt. Whatever it was that had been keeping him on edge was about to happen.

"You didn't bring me here to show me that spear gun, Dud. What is it?"

He caught her arm as she started to back away from him. "I think you already know, but I can't be sure. What does the name Stanley Harcourt mean to you?"

"Nothing," she said . . . and then, suddenly, it did. "Yes—of course, he was a friend of my husband in Japan."

"I'm Stanley Harcourt," Dud said. "You understand now, don't you?"

"No—I—you were in Japan when my husband shot—died?"

He tossed the spear gun on the desk and took her shoulders in both hands. He swung her around to face him. "Look, Honey, I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but it's too deep for me, whatever it is. I found out you knew about me after I'd killed him, and I kept waiting for you to do something. But nothing happened. I nearly went nuts."

"You—killed my husband?" she asked softly.

"I couldn't help it. He found out about my connection with the black market and said he was going to turn me in. I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't listen. I had a gun and when he tried to take it away from me, it went off and

killed him. Maybe I pulled the trigger on purpose, I don't know. There was a letter to you in his pocket, ready to mail. It referred to an earlier letter he had written you in which he'd told you he'd made up his mind to turn me in. I knew that you'd realize what had happened, but there was nothing I could do then except make it look like suicide and try to bluff it through. But you never did anything about the letter."

The letter that she had burned without reading because it had come during the heat of her hate for a man who could commit suicide!" "And you followed me down here and changed your name, because of the letter?"

"I had to. I had to find out what you were up to. I still can't figure it out. You must have at least wondered about it."

She had to fight to keep her lips from trembling. "I didn't read that letter."

"You really didn't know, then?"

"No."

"Good God!" he said softly.

"What happens now?" Nan finally asked.

He tightened his grip on her arms. "I don't know." A muscle pulsed the flesh along the line of his jaw. "I don't have much choice, do I? If I let you go to the authorities with what I've told you, they'll start checking back on it. It's been over a year. A lot of things have happened since then and I don't

know just how much they could prove, but I can't take the chance."

The room seemed to blur, leaving her standing in a shaft of fear. He started easing her toward the door.

"They will start checking anyway, if something happens to me," she finally managed to say. "They'll find out about you." The hysteria in her voice made it sound shrill.

"Not if you just disappear. The current that sweeps across the Gulf just off the island will carry your body all the way to the other side of the Atlantic."

She screamed then, but he jerked her against him and broke it off in the middle. "I'm sorry, Nan. I don't want to do it, but there's no other way. I can't take the chance. You can see that. I promise there won't be any pain."

She felt faint and fought it off. He pushed her through the door and out onto the dock. The tide was out and the boat rode low alongside of the dock, the forward deck about three feet below the edge of the dock.

She wanted to scream again, but she knew it was useless. It wouldn't carry far enough to be heard above the sound of the waves. There was an all-night service station on North Shore Drive where she could get help if she could get to it. If she could get away from him somehow.

He released one of her arms to catch hold of a piling so he could

swing her down to the boat and as he did she swung against him suddenly, driving the point of her knee out and up at the same time. He yelled with surprise, his hand fell from her as he doubled up with pain.

She watched, frozen, as he slipped, lost his balance, and went over the edge of the dock. He hit the side of the boat, then splashed into the water between it and the pilings that held up the dock.

Nan leaned forward and saw the pale blur of his almost-white hair bob in the water, disappear, then surface again. She could make out one arm wrapped around the piling, holding his head out of the water.

He looked up and saw her and she heard him choke as water splashed into his mouth. "Help me!" he called. "For God's sake, Nan—I think I broke my shoulder."

She stood very still, watching him, and he screamed as the boat rocked gently against his injured arm. "God! Nan—don't just stand there. Get a rope. Do something. I'll do anything you want. Just help me."

When she still didn't move, he

cried frantically, "Please, help me. I'll go to the police with you. Anything you want."

She turned, finally, and went back into the shack. She should start walking, she thought, and just keep going. Let him stay there and, if he couldn't get out by himself, let him drown. Only she couldn't. He owed her more than that. He had planned to kill her; even more important, he had killed her husband. Besides, he was too experienced as a swimmer to drown, even with a broken shoulder. Left alone, he would finally make it back to land. She would never be safe as long as he was alive and free to find her. She couldn't take the chance.

She moved quickly to the shack, looked at the coiled nylon rope, then went to the desk and picked up the spear gun. She inserted one of the barbed steel spears in the barrel, put the point against the desk as he had shown her, and pushed against it until she heard the metallic click of the spring. Then she stepped back out onto the dock.

He was still calling her name.

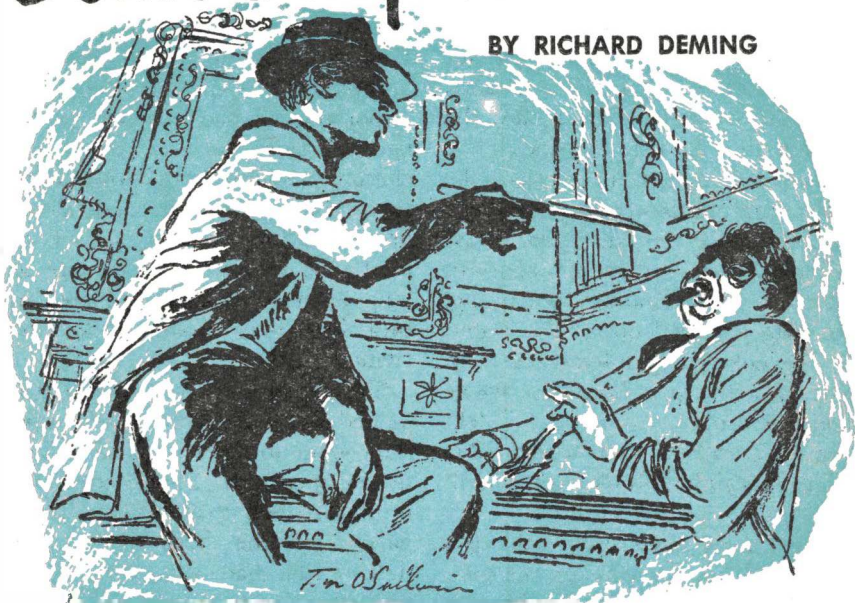
"I'm coming," she said.



The Better Bargain

He'd known the woman for two months. After all, he thought, he had a right to know her name . . .

BY RICHARD DEMING



THE woman was a golden blonde with a body which turned every male head in the park. She was tall, probably five feet seven, with long, full-calved legs and a waist so slim it emphasized the fullness of her hips and the abundance of her erect bosom.

She wore a light summer frock which covered her without really concealing any of her assets, no stockings, and a blue hair ribbon instead of a hat. Her only visible

jewelry was a tiny gold wristwatch, because she had removed and dropped into her bag her wedding band and a four-carat diamond engagement ring.

Nevertheless she managed to look expensive. The frock, though simple, was a Parisian original, and her open-toed pumps and matching bag were hand-worked alligator hide.

The man was no taller than the blonde woman, slim, with sharply

defined features and a lithe manner of moving. He was conservatively dressed in a hand-tailored tan gabardine suit, light tan shoes and a Panama hat. He, too, looked expensive in a quiet sort of way.

They met in front of the bear pits, casually, without greeting, merely drifting together and strolling side-by-side toward the exit from the park's zoo.

He asked, "How much time have you today?"

"Till five," she said. "Three hours. Let's make the most of it. Let's not stop for a drink or anything first."

"On a day like this we ought to spend it at the beach," he said in a mildly teasing voice.

She looked at him quickly, blushed. The man laughed and her blush deepened.

"Why do you like to make me feel I'm a hussy?"

"Do I?" he asked, immediately concerned. "I was only teasing. I think of you as a princess."

They had reached the exit, and he led her to a small coupe parked a few yards beyond. A decal on the lower right-hand corner of the windshield announced that the coupe was the property of the Conway Car Rental Service.

As they drove away, a thin, nondescript-looking man who had wandered toward the zoo exit a few moments after they did, climbed into a sedan standing not far from where the coupe had been parked and followed at a discreet distance.

The man and woman drove straight to the Bide-A-Wile Motel on Route 60, no more than three miles from the park where they had met. The man registered as "Thomas Jones and wife" giving their address merely as "Texas" and they entered one of the cabins.

The thin, nondescript man following them parked his sedan fifty yards down the road in a position where he could keep his eye on the cabin.

At a quarter of five the man and woman reappeared and the man drove her to a cab stand at the corner of Fourth and Walton.

As she started to get out of the coupe, he said, "Am I ever going to know who you are, Princess?"

She stopped with the door half open, turned and frowned at him "Let's not start that again, darling. You'll spoil everything."

"I'm human," he said in a patient voice. "I have a natural curiosity. You walk into my arms out of the blue like some Goddess from a Greek myth who has decided to take an earthly lover. We have a few hours, and then you fly back to Mount Olympus. Is it going on this way forever?"

Her frown turned into a smile. "Now it's Greek mythology. I love it when you talk like that. Have you read something on every subject in the world?"

"Stop changing the subject, my dear," he said. "I'm very curious. Why can't I know who you are?"

She touched fingers to his lips. "Remember our agreement? I don't ask questions and neither do you. Have I pried into your affairs? Even so much as asked your business?"

"At least I told you my name," he said dryly.

"I didn't ask. To quote Shakespeare, as you so often do, what's in a name?"

"But why?" he asked. "What possible reason could you have for all this mystery? Do you realize we've been lovers for over two months and I don't know a single thing about you? Maybe I could accept it if you'd at least give me a reason."

She was silent for a moment, then asked quietly, "*Would* you accept it if I gave you a reason? Would you drop the subject and never mention it again?"

He said cautiously, "If it was a valid enough reason."

"It's valid from my point of view. I don't intend to tell you unless you agree to terms in advance."

He thought for a time, finally decided, "What can I lose? I may as well stop asking questions anyway, because you never answer any. Give me your reason and I'll drop the subject."

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly and said, "If I told you my name, you'd know who I was."

"Really?" he asked. "If you told me your name, I'd know who you were. Amazing. Truly amazing. I'd never have guessed that."

"I mean you'd recognize the name."

He looked at her. "You mean you're somebody famous?"

"No, of course not. But the name is well-known. The last name, that it. You've probably never heard of me, but if I told you my name, you'd know who my . . . father is."

The man frowned. "So?"

"If you ever learn that, it will be all over."

"Why?"

"Because it will. That's all I'm going to tell you. Now stop asking questions before you pry too much out of me and end everything right now."

He looked a little upset. "I haven't pried too much yet, have I?"

"Not if you drop it right there."

Pushing the door the rest of the way open, she climbed out of the car. "See you Friday. Same time, same place?"

"All right," he said. "I'll be there."

The woman climbed into the first of two idle taxis parked at the stand and said, "Forty-two twenty-seven Forsyth."

She glanced back through the rear window, saw that the rented coupe was still parked at the curb and watched it until the taxi turned a corner and cut off the view. Then she opened her bag, took out her wedding band and diamond ring and replaced them on her finger.

Should she have told him even as much as she had, she wondered

as she leaned back in the seat? She had almost said that he would know who her husband was—only at the last second changing it to father. If he did ever learn, it *would* end things. Not because she would have to leave him, as she had deliberately implied, but because he would drop her like a hot rivet.

Was it fair putting him in such danger without his even knowing it, she wondered? Then she decided that, fair or not, she couldn't stand the thought of losing him. And she would if he ever learned her husband's name.

He would realize, just as she did, that if the King ever discovered her infidelity, both of them would almost certainly die . . .

Louis (King Louis) Indelicato, gang lord and political boss of Saint Cecilia, stood over six feet tall and weighed nearly three hundred pounds. A good deal of his weight was muscle, for he had massive shoulders, a huge chest and thick legs as solid as tree trunks. But enough was fat to give him a bulging stomach and an embryo double chin.

After waving the thin, nondescript man to one of the plush visitor's chairs in his private office he selected a cigar from his desk humidor, struck fire to it without offering one to the thin man and said, "Shoot, Cutter."

Cutter said, "At about two yesterday afternoon she met a man in

front of the bear pits at Bryant Park's zoo, Mr. Indelicato. Guy about thirty, not bad looking. Average size, well dressed. Looks like some kind of junior executive. They drove straight to the Bide-A-Wile Motel on Route 60 and stayed there from a quarter after two until a quarter of five. Then he dropped her in front of the cab stand at Fourth and Walton."

King Louis asked unemotionally, "Who's the guy?"

"I couldn't find out yesterday," the thin man said apologetically. "I'll get a make on him next time they meet."

"Didn't you follow him after he dropped her?"

"Naturally," Cutter said. "But I lost him at a fast-changing stop light. I did the best I could after I lost him. He was driving a rented coupe from Conway's Car Rental Service, and I checked with them to see who had rented it. I had marked down the license number, see. But they were a little huffy about giving out information, and I didn't want to press it because I was afraid they might call him up and tip him off that somebody'd been checking. I went back to the motel and talked the proprietor into letting me take a gander at their registration card too. But that didn't get me any farther. They'd registered as Thomas Jones and wife from Texas, and the name's probably as phony as the address. I won't lose him next time."

"There won't be any next time," Indelicato said. Pulling a wallet from his pocket, he extracted two one-hundred-dollar bills and tossed them on the desk. "There's your fee for three days, plus a fifty-dollar tip. You can drop the case."

A little dubiously Cutter picked up the money. "Aren't you satisfied with me, Mr. Indelicato? After all, I've only had three days, and this is the first time your wife—"

"You did fine," King Louis interrupted. "I just don't need you any more. I'll take over personally from here. On your way out, tell that dumb Swede sitting on his butt in the outer office that I want him."

"Sure, Mr. Indelicato," the thin man said, rising.

"One more thing, Cutter. I suppose you maintain some kind of records?"

"Yes, sir. I haven't typed this one up yet, though. Haven't even set up a folder on it."

"Then don't," King Louis said.

"Don't?"

"Not even so much as a book entry that I was ever your client. And don't try to cross me on it. One of these days when you've stopped expecting it, I'll have some of my boys drop by to check your files. I'd hate to find out you didn't know how to follow instructions."

"They won't find anything," the thin man said sincerely. "If you don't want a record made, there won't be one naturally."

"Good." The King dismissed him with a wave.

The "dumb Swede" Indelicato had referred to was a large, flat-faced blond man with the build of a professional wrestler. When he came into the office he said, "Something, boss?"

"Something, Simp. Pass the word along that I want Harry Silver to get in touch with me."

Simp whistled. "Him, boss? Somebody get out of line?"

"Just do what you're told and skip the questions," the big man snapped.

"Sure, boss. Sure. I'll get the word right out."

Harry Silver moved languidly into the office, seated himself and touched flame to a gold-tipped cigarette.

"What's on your mind, King?" he asked.

The racket boss studied the lean face of the free-lance killer a few moments before replying. Even with all the power behind him, he was never quite comfortable in the presence of Harry Silver.

Finally he said, "Got a job for you, Harry."

Silver elevated eyebrows as red as his hair. "Don't your own boys carry guns any more?"

"This is a special job. I wouldn't trust any of the morons who work for me."

The slim professional killer shrugged. "It must be special if

you're willing to lay out my fee. I don't work often, and when I do I come high."

"I know it. This is worth ten grand to me."

Harry Silver failed to look impressed. Letting twin spirals of smoke seep from his nostrils, he said indifferently, "I fix my fee according to the job. It may be less than that, maybe more. I'll tell you after I hear the setup."

"More than ten grand?" Indelicato said, frowning.

"If I think it's worth it. We don't haggle about the price. Give me the pitch and I'll tell you my fee. It'll be a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, because I don't bargain. If you leave it, that's okay. I guess I don't have to tell you that you won't have to worry about a spill from me later."

The King wasn't used to not being in absolute control of situations. He frowned slightly, then reflected that when you were dealing with the top man in his field, you could expect a certain degree of independence.

"Happen to know my wife, Marion?" he asked.

The professional killer shook his head. "Never had the pleasure of meeting her."

"She's twenty-five years old," King Louis said. "Twenty years younger than me. We've been married three years, and I've given her everything. Even made her my sole heir, though she isn't aware of that. I don't believe in putting tempta-

tion in people's ways. I don't know whether she was in love with me when we married or not, but she entered the contract with her eyes wide open. She knew what my business was, and she knew how I am. I don't accept half portions. With me it's all or nothing. She knew she could have anything in the world except one thing."

The red eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"She knew I'd never stand still for another man," the gang leader said quietly.

Silver drew deeply on his cigarette and exhaled through his nose. He didn't say anything.

"I've been suspecting another man for about a month," the King went on. "From little things. Her elaborate explanations about where she'd been and what she'd been doing when I asked a casual question about how she'd spent the day. Her kind of breathless look when . . ." He paused and waved an impatient hand. "Hell, it doesn't matter why I suspected. Five days ago I hired a shamus named Amos Cutter to check on her. Know him?"

Harry Silver shook his head.

"A skinny little guy. Looks like nothing, but he's a sharp operator. And a clam. I've used him before for stuff. Yesterday he reported to me that my suspicions were right. My wife definitely has a lover. I jerked Cutter off the case before he could learn the man's identity, because I didn't particularly want him

to know it. As I said, he's a clam, but the less he knows about my business the better I like it. All I really wanted him for was to find out for sure Marion was cheating. You can track down who the man is as easily as he could."

"I suppose," Silver said. "If she meets him again."

"She'll meet him again," King Louis said. "And lead you right to him. My house it at forty-two twenty-seven Forsyth, and I want you to start watching it daytimes. She has to meet him in the daytime, because she's home with me at night. You won't have any trouble spotting my wife. She's not a bad-looking blonde with a pretty fair shape. And in addition to her wedding ring she wears a four-carat diamond engagement ring I gave her. It stands out like a headlamp. This is her picture."

Reaching into a desk drawer, Indelicato brought out an eight-by-ten cardboard folder and passed it across to the red-haired man. Leaning forward, Silver punched out his gold-tipped cigarette. He did not immediately open the folder.

"Suppose this man turns out not to be a lover after all?" Silver asked. "Maybe your wife's playing horses on the sly, and he's just a bookie."

"He's her lover," Indelicato said definitely. "Cutter gave me enough to convince me there couldn't be any mistake about that. Anyway, I'd expect you to make sure you had

the right man before doing anything. If I wanted somebody to make a mistake like bumping my wife's bookmaker, I'd send one of my own morons."

Silver gave him a wintry smile. "You won't have to worry about mistakes. I don't make them. Let me get this straight now. As soon as I'm satisfied I have the right man, you want him put away?"

"Both of them," King Louis said in a tight voice. "Preferably while they're right in the act."

The red eyebrows went up. "Your wife too?"

"I told you I don't accept half portions," the racket boss said. "Both of them. And I want them to know why before you do it. I want them to know it's with my compliments."

"You want it with a knife or a gun?"

King Louis blinked. "That's up to you. What difference does it make? Except won't it be a little tough tackling both at the same time with a knife?"

The professional killer smiled. "I can do tricks with a knife you never dreamed of. It won't be tough. But I don't much like rubbing women. The fee for this is going to be out of sight."

"Name it."

"Twenty thousand dollars."

King Louis blinked again, but he barely hesitated before saying, "A deal. Half now and half when the job's done. How's that?"

"All when the job's done. I don't need a retainer."

When the gang boss looked surprised, Silver said in a suddenly cold voice, "You won't renege. Not even you will renege on me, King."

After studying the man for a moment, Indelicato admitted, "No, I guess I won't, Harry."

Silver wasn't listening to him, however. He had finally opened the cardboard folder and was studying the attractive face in the picture broodingly. He looked at it a long time before closing the folder again.

"One more thing," he said then. "The cops have a habit of picking me up for routine questioning every time somebody gets killed. And with your wife one of the corpses, you're going to be in for routine suspicion too. Naturally I'll have an alibi rigged, and I assume you will too. But it won't look good if anyone knows about a contact between us."

"Nobody but Simp knows you've been here."

"Then we're all set," Silver said.

Rising languorously, he tossed the photograph onto the desk and walked to the door. With a bare wave of goodbye he opened it, went out and pulled it shut behind him.

King Louis had hardly placed the picture of his wife back into the desk drawer when the door reopened and Harry Silver came back into the room. The gang boss looked at him in surprise as the red-haired man crossed to the desk,

carefully removed the gold-tipped cigarette butt from the ash tray where he had crushed it out, and dropped it into his coat pocket.

"You reduced to sniping butts?" the King asked.

Without smiling the professional killer said, "You're not very good at description, King. Your description of your wife was about as accurate as describing a Michelangelo madonna as a picture, or Brahms' Lullaby as a song."

The gang boss frowned up at him. "What are you talking about? You know I can't follow you when you shoot off into your damned book learning."

"I'll make it simple," Silver said. "You described your wife as a not bad-looking blonde with a pretty fair shape. Hell, man, don't you know she's a raving beauty?"

Indelicato let his mouth drop open. "What . . . what in the hell is this?"

"I figured out a better bargain," the killer said unemotionally. "You shouldn't have told me Marion is your sole heir. Instead of just twenty thousand bucks, I'm going to marry a rich widow."

The big man's eyes narrowed and his right foot surreptitiously felt for the concealed button beneath his desk.

"You needn't bother ringing," Silver said. "Simp's still out there, but he can't hear your buzz. His head just came about a quarter of the way loose from his neck."

He made a movement which was almost lazy, there was a sharp click, and suddenly a seven-inch blade gleamed in his hand.

"What . . . what in the hell's the matter with you, Harry?" King Louis asked in a croaking voice.

"Nothing's the matter with me," Silver said. "I just happened to

recognize your wife's picture."

As he stared with fascination at the glittering knife blade, it penetrated King Louis's numb mind that he wasn't the only one poor at description.

Amos Cutter had completely neglected to mention that his wife's lover had red hair.



POWER-PACKED!

No magazine can match the array of writing talent which reaches you each month in *new* stories through the pages of MANHUNT.

You will find the May issue to be a particularly power-packed issue . . . with stories that combine excitement with fine writing by:

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At first, the cops thought the man was just drunk. Then they got a closer look . . .

Come Across

BY GIL BREWER



A LATE-CRUISEING police car assigned to the midtown business district spotted him on the corner of Fourth and Central at eleven twenty-six. At first they thought he was just another lonely drunk. Then they got a good look at him...

The first time Runyan saw her, she was walking along in front of his apartment building. It was evening and he had just returned from work at Ye Oulde Corner Booke Shoppe, where he'd been a clerk for six years. It wasn't that Runyan

didn't see a good many pretty girls. Possibly nothing would ever have happened if he hadn't at that precise moment decided to light his pipe.

She walked past and he looked at her. He took his pipe from his pocket, tamped the unfinished mid-afternoon tobacco heel with his finger, and struck a match.

She glanced at him as she went by. It was nothing more than that; a casual, expressionless look at a rather undistinguished man standing in front of an apartment building, lighting his pipe.

Something happened to Runyan. He stared after her. His gaze snarled in the black hair tumbling from beneath a tan beret to very nice white-sweatered shoulders, the smooth tan skirt that held a sheen and shadowed pleasantly as she moved her long legs. She carried a glossy brown purse under her arm and her high heels went *click-click*.

The match continued to burn.

He watched her. She turned abruptly in at the door of the next apartment building, just beyond the broad alley.

She lives next door, Runyan thought.

The match burned his fingers. He dropped it and moved on down by the alley, then over to the entrance where she had vanished. He was still holding the pipe to his mouth.

He glanced around to see if anybody had noticed his abrupt pre-

occupation. Not a soul. The pinks and purples of twilight were fading past the ambers of dusk. He returned to his own apartment building, took the elevator to the third floor and went to his room.

As he unlocked his door, he realized he was still holding the pipe to his mouth. He put the pipe away, his mind pressing the aspect of very smooth nylon covering the most beautifully curved legs he'd ever seen.

He swallowed. The choking, elated sensation inside him wouldn't back off.

His apartment was living room, bedroom, kitchenette and bath. It was situated with the outside walls of all the rooms flush on the alley separating the two apartments. The living room also had two windows opening onto the street out front.

After locking his door, Runyan moved rapidly to the front windows, flicked the Venetian blinds open and stared out there at the coming night. He went to the other window. Then he moved into the bedroom and just stood there.

Finally he undressed, went and took a shower, put on a blue flannel robe and returned to the kitchenette. He stood in front of the small electric stove for a time. Then he opened the refrigerator door. Cold food smells touched him. Sometimes he ate out, sometimes not. It was a matter of momentary preference. Tonight he wasn't hungry.

He went into the living room and

slumped into the easy chair beside the radio. His TV set was against the wall opposite him, beside a window looking on the alley. He tilted his head far back, staring at the darkening ceiling.

It was as if that girl had burned herself into his mind like a kind of acid. It was almost as though he could reach out and feel her. He became very tense in the chair, then gradually began to think about his work during the day.

It had been another very usual day. Nothing had happened; nothing at all. He'd sold some books, some pens, a ream of paper, two briefcases and a dozen bottles of window cleaning fluid they were carrying as a gesture to some ink company.

He looked again at the window in front of him and saw her move through the lighted room of her apartment directly across the alley.

From that moment on Runyan was doomed.

He came out of his chair fast, knelt down, hugging the sill, watching. He hadn't turned on a light in his apartment and it was dark outside, so he pulled up the Venetian blinds, very carefully he opened the casement window.

His heart hammered. He was breathing rapidly, and his knees were weak.

Imagine! She lived right there. Right across from him, maybe twenty-five feet away—on the same floor he did.

How long had she been there?

What had he missed?

She was in her living room, the window open, the blinds up. He looked quickly for her bedroom. It was dark, if it was her bedroom, and he could see the drawn blinds.

She was standing in the middle of the room. Combing her hair.

Runyan began to perspire. He watched her with a steadfastness that caused the sides of his jaws to pain. He unclamped his teeth, never once moved his gaze from her.

She had changed to a blue dress that clung and her skin was very white, the black hair accentuating the boldly disturbing skin tone. The windows were large and he could see all of her but her shoes. He stood, stretching, peering at an angle. The black pumps were the highest, slimmest-heeled he'd ever seen.

She turned and looked directly at him, not seeing him of course. He concentrated on her features. They were delicately beautiful. There was a tenderness about the partly open red mouth . . . her eyes, too, were tender and large and he supposed blue. They had to be blue. He tried to recall from down on the street.

Were they blue?

. . . as he stared at her arms.

He had to stop this. With a mental crash, he realized what he was doing. He turned and lurched across the room. He moved to the front windows, looked out on the street. Cars moved by, people passed

on the sidewalk, but he saw nothing.

Without even remembering, he was back at the window.

She was gone.

For a long moment he remained there, watching the exact place where she had stood.

He sat on his bed, his fingers clenched onto the side of the mattress. He was listening. Straining to hear something. He stared at the open bedroom window; he had opened all the windows on the alley side, lifted all the blinds.

That must be her bedroom, opposite. A dim pink glow suffused the firmly closed blinds over there. Then the pink light went out.

He ran into the living room, kneeling by the window again.

"Please," he said.

He heard himself say it. It startled him, but he didn't move. He couldn't move. He was trapped there by the window, staring. She walked into the living room. She rubbed her throat with one hand. Then she lifted both arms and squeezed the thick mass of black hair with her hands, squeezing it back away from her face. She wore long earrings. A bracelet was slung loosely from her right wrist.

She looked at a gold watch on her left wrist. Then she ran one palm down her hip, bent slightly and began to smooth the seam of her right stocking.

Runyan pressed his forehead

down against the cool hard windowsill.

He jerked his head up, staring. Suddenly he knew she was going out. Probably for dinner. He felt it, realized he was not dressed. He turned, rushed into the bedroom, grabbed underwear, pants and shirt and stumbled back to the window.

She had her back to him, reaching into a closet at the far side of the room. He stood there, subjugated by the way her blue dress lifted and clung as she reached.

She brought out a small tan jacket and looked around the room.

Runyan began to dress feverishly. He saw her pick up her purse from a chair, flick the light off. The moment was gone.

He hurried into the bedroom for his shoes, knowing he was much too late. From the front windows he saw her just vanishing beyond his line of vision. He tingled to the remote *click-clack-click* of her spike-heels on the pavement. Then she was gone.

There came a time of waiting. He slumped in the easy chair, not even thinking. Just waiting. He was very tense, still half-dressed, staring with a kind of petrified concern at the dark window across the alley from him.

Nothing mattered. He could have been told an atom bomb would land in the street outside—he wouldn't have moved.

He had to see her at least once more tonight . . . He did.

Perhaps an hour later the light went on over there. He came from the cramped position in his chair rapidly to the window and knelt again.

He drank her with his eyes. He sucked her into his being with an all-out furious resignation to this newly joyous rack.

She came across the room with that languid, yet somehow efficient movement he would come to know well, and stared across the alley. Then she let down her blinds and flicked them shut.

If death were that simple, they would have buried him quite soon.

The days were spent thinking about her; constructing her life to his own pleasure. He was in love with her. She was a single sweetly succulent thought that bridged the hopelessness of his living into a sudden writhing wealth of soft pink light beyond closed blinds.

The bedroom he had never seen.

He began to know her—alone, as he was, vagabond upon the unresponsive city's streets. And as the days passed, there were times when Runyan wept and laughed for her, for them together.

Because it had to be that way.

Nights he knelt by the window, watching, hoping with a kind of frantic need that she would give some sign of understanding. Or just that she would leave the living room blinds up, so he could watch.

Lonely, yes. He knew she was. Far into the night he sometimes

heard the sound of her radio playing. He heard her cough, chuckle. And once she sang. Sometimes he heard the clank of her cooking at the stove in her kitchenette. Probably making coffee, because he had decided she usually ate out.

Whenever he saw her over there, he went completely to pieces. It was like striking a gong inside his head.

All of his time was spent thinking about her. But when he saw her, his entire being went into fine bright-white terrific focus.

He had to meet her.

He was afraid.

To look at her and know, was one thing. To meet her and be certain was something else again.

It was now that Runyan began to realize he must plan. It would be only a matter of time before some man got her. It stood to reason—even Runyan's reason. He knew he was a little crazy, the way he was acting. But the fact remained that he loved her.

Somehow he had to communicate this to her, or die.

But, take stock. What was he? Perhaps she made as much money as he did. How then to lure her?

Lure?

Yes, lure. Sweet lure.

He took Monday off, canvassed the city. Perhaps because of her, of hope, or promise, he became a completely different man. Instead of the rather shy, retiring bookstore clerk, he was possessed of a demon.

By noon he had landed a job paying three times the salary he'd been getting. He became head clerk and top consultant at the state tax commission office in the city. All those lonely nights of correspondence courses paid off.

"You're just what we've been looking for, Mr. Runyan. A man with the nerve and ability to state his due."

Runyan agreed. He asked for a week off to straighten things out, and got it.

Good job. And money in the bank, saved from the long years of spare living.

The next thing was to meet her.

The first day he couldn't make it. He saw her go out, but he couldn't bring himself to follow her. But that night while he was at his kneeling post, she dressed in the living room with the blinds open.

From that moment on Runyan had no idea what he was doing. He moved in a savage dream of desire.

She went out and he followed her. She entered a nearby restaurant and so did he. He took a table near her, made believe he noticed her for the first time and smiled. She smiled back and went on chewing her steak.

He couldn't stand that, either. He left his meal uneaten, went outside and stood across the street by a newsstand, waiting. His head ached.

She returned to her apartment, alone. He watched her enter, then stormed up to his room and knelt

by the window. He wished he could hear better from her apartment, but something prevented this. Traffic noises, night winds. She closed the blinds and he went into his state of visualization, focused on the bedroom, the dim pink thinly showing between the tightly closed slats.

He felt sorry for her. He needed her. He would show her happiness she'd never dreamed of. By now he knew she had no man friend. Probably she hadn't been in the city too long. He would have to act fast.

The light always burned very late over there. He pictured her moving about, lying on the bed among the pink, reading. . . .

The light burned and Runyan accompanied its burning with a secret burning of his own.

Noon the next day, he discovered that she worked as a stenographer in a large department store. He'd seen her go into the store in the morning, following her. She had not come out. He went inside and methodically covered the place until he spotted her at a desk behind a low wall of freckled glass. She was finished with work at four-thirty. From there she sometimes went to a small cocktail lounge and had a drink, alone. Then home, and after that out to dinner—still alone.

He waited at the restaurant this time. When she came in, he nodded to her. She walked by his table. His fingers crept out automatically, like antennae, and brushed her smooth-fitting yellow skirt.

It nearly finished him.

"Hello, there," Runyan said.

She smiled with care. "Why, hello."

She remembered him.

She moved to a table against the far wall and it was as if she were moving in her apartment, to Runyan. When she sat down, she crossed her legs—carefully. He caught himself staring, as he did at his window.

Something became rampant inside him.

There could be no more waiting. Tonight had to be the night. He had to really meet her. Somehow get into her apartment. Yes.

More than anything, he wanted to meet her on home ground. Her apartment, with the pink . . .

He waited. He perspired. His head ached.

Finally she rose and moved to pay her check. He beat her to it, got outside and held the door as she came toward the street.

He gave a little laugh.

"Well, hello, again," he said. "Seems we've picked the same place to eat."

She looked at him, then away. She started past.

He couldn't let it happen. Up close it was still more terrible than he could have imagined. She exuded the very thing he dreamed on. Her skin was soft and delicious looking, her lips red, her eyes frank and clear.

"Don't misunderstand me," he

said. "But I couldn't help noticing that you live in the apartment building next to mine. Noticed you several times, in fact. All right if we walk along together?"

He silently cursed the horrible tremors in his voice. He wondered if she noticed?

She looked at him. "Why, sure. All right."

They moved along. Everything that he had created about her came to life. The noise of her heels striking the pavement put him in a kind of ecstasy, because in his dreams a great deal depended on that sound. The movements of her body—this close, this large, this real—had him desperately stupefied.

He was worked up to such a pitch that he was afraid if he spoke his quivering voice would explode in a shout.

"I believe I have seen you," she said. "Somewhere."

"Yes." He told her his name.

She didn't say anything. They were nearly to his apartment. He would have to leave her. Or should he accompany her to her door? He didn't know what to do, what to say.

In front of his apartment, he turned on her, holding himself in somehow, and said, "I wondered if we might get together? Perhaps a movie? Something? Could I come and see you?"

There, it was out. He felt better. Relieved that he had said it.

"I don't go out much," she said.

"Oh." She kept watching him. Then she smiled. It was a sweet smile and his backbone shuddered.

He said, "I'm—I'll be frank. I don't know anybody in town. I thought perhaps—since we. Could we? I mean, might I come and see you?"

Cars went by in the street. They stood there. He felt weak, ready to collapse. If she said no, he didn't know what he'd do—but something, something.

"All right. It's apartment 302-B."

"What time would be—?"

"Eight?"

"Eight, then."

"Maybe we could get to know each other," he said.

"Maybe we could," she told him. She turned and walked away.

Eight o'clock.

Runyan went into a blank, until that time. He dressed and sat in the easy chair, staring, waiting. He didn't think. He didn't do anything. He just sat there, drowning in a sea of anticipation.

When he tried to think, it was impossible. His mind wouldn't stand it. Everything was jumbled and wild and she lay across his brain naked with want.

He heard himself talking to her.

He couldn't stop.

He checked the clock in the kitchenette over the stove. He drank some water. He washed his hands and face again and again and dried them, but the perspiration burst out quickly.

COME ACROSS

How sweet she was. And as lonely as himself.

He would make a new world for her.

My God, so beautiful.

Going to her very apartment with the pink!

She opened the door and let him into the hallway that ran the length of her rooms.

"Hello," she said. She smiled and closed the door.

She was wearing a thin dressing gown. He was too early. In his haste, he'd read the time wrong. He hadn't given her time to dress.

"Here," she said. "Would you wait in here, please?"

She walked along the hall with him, passed the closed bedroom door to the livingroom entrance. He moved in a thick fog. He could smell her now, all right. There was something diabolically sleepy about her eyes and her lips were very red. She must have just been putting on her make-up.

He noted that she had her stockings on. She was wearing a pair of spike-heeled black pumps. He heard the secret sounds of her body moving beneath the flowing turquoise gown.

"Just wait here," she said.

He went into the livingroom, looked back. She was gone. He heard the bedroom door close. Then he heard her radio a bit louder. Soft music.

The room was furnished with

comfortable modernistic chairs and a couch. A newspaper was on the floor by the couch. He just stood there. Waiting.

He moved to the window and flicked the blinds open and looked across the alley at his room. He could hear her moving in the bedroom.

She was just like he was. Quiet. And because of her loneliness, she spoke seldom.

He heard the bedroom door open, heard her walking.

She came past the living room entrance, moving down the hall toward the kitchenette. She looked in and smiled at him. She was carrying a basin in her hands. She wore a black lace slip that just touched her knees.

"Right with you," she said.

He moved into the hall.

A man stepped from the bedroom, put on a straw hat, looked at him and winked and let himself out the door.

She came toward him up the hall.

"Go into the bedroom, honey," she said.

He looked at her. Her hair was mussed and she smiled and her eyes were sleepy looking. She moved with him toward the bedroom, the pink seething glow of light.

He stepped into the light and she brushed past him, moved to the bed, quickly, deftly brushed her hands across the pink spread.

"Just a sec, honey." She moved quickly past him, her heels clicking,

and away down the hall. The radio played softly atop a bureau. There was a queer antiseptic smell to the room. The pink light became a throbbing inside him. He began to tremble.

She returned, kneeled the door shut. She looked at him, smiling that way. She was carrying a small basin and a towel and a cake of soap.

She set these things on the bureau, stepped up to him, wrapped her arms around him.

He couldn't move or think. His mind was numb, paralyzed, and he couldn't have moved if he had wanted to. So he stood there, dumbly staring at her knowing the life was running out of him fast. The blood had drained from his face and even the pink light didn't conceal his pallor.

She chuckled.

"After this, you'll have to use the back door like everybody else, Mister. I can sneak you in that way, all right. No questions, but once in a while maybe I'll let you use the front entrance . . . if you're nice."

He stared at her.

"Scared, honey?" she said.

He couldn't speak.

She stepped back a bit, and lifted the black slip high until it clung to her breasts, and stuck her tongue out at him. She wore stockings rolled halfway up her thighs, nothing else. She whirled around so he could have a better look at it all.

"You like?"

And then Runyan snapped. A hideous sound came out of his mouth . . . a sound like a hungry wild animal whose food has been snatched from him by the vultures. And at the same time he went for her. He couldn't see the horror in her eyes, because he couldn't see. He was blind with his passion and his fury. He was no longer Runyan. He wasn't anybody.

She tried to scream. She never

made it. He committed mayhem with a vengeance.

He was carrying a small pink lamp. He didn't speak when they picked him up. In the police car, he just sat there holding the blood-covered lamp. He had left a bloody trail to her apartment and when they got there, it was pretty bad. Finally, he told them about it.



The Other Cheek

Frank J. Reynolds, of Bristol, Conn., appeared in city court to face a charge of assault and battery. He was accused of slapping a boy in the face. However, Prosecutor Joseph Donovan asked that the case be dismissed. He explained that the boy squirted a water pistol "in the defendant's face."

This Is News!

A dog recently bit Patrolman Hugh Devlin in Somerville, N. J. On the following day Devlin was feeling fine and rapidly recovering, but the dog died.

Lingerie Larceny

In Middleborough, England, Keith Elkin, 24, left his home in anger after his wife told him that she "didn't have a thing to wear." Shortly later he returned with a bundle containing 26 pairs of panties, 14 pairs of stockings, 12 brassieres, 5 slips, 4 camisoles, 4 nightgowns and 3 garter belts. Elkin was charged with grand larceny after police said he got the lingerie by smashing a display window in a store and removing the entire display.

Good Advice

Mrs. Mary T. Mack, of Pasadena, Calif., notified police when she received a mysterious package in the mail. She said she thought it might contain a bomb. Officer Claude Shores carefully opened the package. It contained a book entitled: "How to Become a Minister."

LATE THIS MORNING I found a dead man in my back yard. Although I wakened at my usual time, eight o'clock, I did not make the discovery until a few minutes after eleven because I did not chance to look out of the back window of my living room until that time.

My house, I should perhaps explain, is small. The living room extends the length of it on one side. The other side of the house has a bedroom at the front and kitchen at the back, a small bathroom between them.

The kitchen, where I had eaten breakfast, has a window opening on the back of the house but it is a high one and as the table is against the wall, it affords me no view. It was such a lovely April day—and April is the loveliest month in Tucson—that I decided to make a shopping expedition afoot. It was nearly ten o'clock when I returned, and after that . . . But I am being prolix; suffice to say that I did a few chores inside the house and did not happen to look out of the back window of the living room until shortly after eleven o'clock. And then I saw the man lying there.

He lay on his back with his head on a large root of the Chinese elm which is in the center of the yard. The position was a natural one; he could have been a tramp or a drunk who had wandered into the yard and fallen asleep.

Line of Duty

A Novel

BY

FREDRIC BROWN

But when I went outside and approached him I could see that he was dead. His eyes were wide open and staring straight up into the bright Arizona sunshine. But I unbuttoned part of his jacket and shirt and put my hand inside to make sure there was no heartbeat. I touched the body in no other way. Although there was nothing visible to indicate that the death was not a natural one, I knew it must be reported to the police and that they would want to find the body undisturbed.

I have no telephone so I did not go back into the house. I walked

Little Mr. Medley was such a tidy man. It wasn't his fault that people insisted on leaving bodies on his lawn.



LINE OF DUTY

across the two vacant lots that separate my property from that of my nearest neighbor, Mrs. Armstrong, a widow who lives with her unmarried daughter. We are not really friends, but we are good neighbors and I knew she would not mind my using her phone.

She must have seen me from a window for she opened the door as I approached. "Morning, Mr. Medley," she called out. She is a big woman with a cheerful, booming voice.

Of course she let me use the telephone when I had explained.

I returned home immediately after the call, of course, because I knew that if there happened to be a radio car in the neighborhood the police would be there soon.

But it was a quarter of an hour before a car pulled up at the curb and two uniformed men got out and walked rapidly toward my front door. I met them there.

"Mr. Medley? You phoned—?"

"This way, gentlemen," I said and led them through the house and out the back door. I waited just outside while they approached the body and one of them repeated my gesture of feeling for a heartbeat. "Dead all right," he said. "Guess we might as well call in right away."

"Won't matter if we take a minute to see if he's got a name on him," the other said. The first one nodded and started reaching into the dead man's pockets.

The other turned to me. "You said over the phone he's a stranger to you?" When I nodded assent to that, "Any idea how he got here?"

I told him I had no idea whatsoever. The first one straightened up, "No wallet, no money, no papers. Handkerchief, cigarettes and matches, that's all. But he doesn't look like a bum."

"Maybe he was robbed," the other said. "Say, Phil, don't move him otherwise but lift his head a little and feel the back of it. If it was robbery, he was likely slugged. Here, I'll give you a hand."

Their bodies blocked my view for a few seconds. Then, "Oh-oh, bullet hole," the first one said. "We better not play around with this. I'll call in, from the car." He walked past me and around the outside of the house, rapidly.

The other one looked toward me. "The boys to handle this will be here pretty soon. You go inside,"

I watched from the front window and within twenty minutes a second car parked in front of my house. Neither of the two men who got out of it were in uniform.

One of them was of medium build and dark; he looked Spanish or Mexican. The other was Anglo, as they call them out here, tall and slender. Even though he wore a hat, one could see that his hair was carrot colored. The uniformed policeman who had waited at the other car came over and talked to them for a while. Then the two

newcomers came toward my house but walked around it instead of coming to the door.

I went to the back door and stepped out as they came around the corner of the house. I introduced myself and explained that I had phoned in, and remarked that I presumed they would wish to ask me questions.

"Yes, Mr. Medley." It was the dark one who spoke and now, at closer range, I decided that he was of Mexican rather than Spanish ancestry. "We'll want to talk to you, yes, but there are things we should do out here first before the coroner comes, and he's on his way now.

I went back inside. This time I watched from the back window. One of them—the tall one—went front again and came back with a camera; they took shots from several angles and several distances. They examined the body and the grass around it, my yard and even the alley behind it. One of them looked into my garbage can, no doubt thinking the dead man's wallet or the gun he'd been killed with might have been dropped there.

Then three more men came around the house, one of them carrying a rolled-up stretcher. The body—I could see as they moved it onto the stretcher—was quite rigid. The third man, the one who appeared to be the coroner since he was older and better dressed and looked like a doctor, made another examination. Then he nodded to

the other two who lifted the stretcher and carried it around the house. He talked awhile to the two detectives and then left, and the detectives came toward my back door.

I met them there and invited them in. This time they introduced themselves, or rather the Mexican one introduced himself and his partner. "I'm Frank Ramos, Mr. Medley. My partner's Fern Cahan. Fern's a funny name for a man but it doesn't matter because everyone calls him Red anyway."

"I can see why," I said. I shook hands with both of them. I offered them chairs and we sat down.

Frank Ramos said, "Mr. Medley, you told the boys that man was a stranger to you. Are you sure you've never even seen him, around the neighborhood or elsewhere? Did you take a close look at him?"

"Quite close," I said, and explained how I had bent over to feel inside his clothing. And that I was certain that I didn't know him and didn't remember ever having seen him before.

"By the way," I added, remembering that I was after all a host, even in these unusual circumstances, "May I offer you gentlemen wine? I have some very good pale dry sherry."

"Thanks," Ramos said, "but we can't drink on duty. Mr. Medley, this no doubt has nothing to do with the crime but would you mind giving us a little background on

yourself? How long you've lived here, what you do?"

"Not at all," I said. "I've lived in Tucson six and a half years. And in this house almost the same length of time. I bought it very shortly after I came here in from Chicago. I'm retired, or mostly so; I own a few pieces of property around town and occasionally buy or sell a piece."

"Were you in the real estate business before you came here?"

"Mostly. As an independent operator rather than an agent."

"I gather you live alone here. Are you a bachelor or a widower?"

"A bachelor, age fifty-six."

"I see," Ramos said. He seemed to be doing all the talking for the two of them. "Now about this morning. Indications are that the body was there since sometime last night. How come you didn't see it earlier? Did you sleep that late?"

I explained, and he asked me what I had done yesterday evening.

"I stayed home. Spent the evening reading, listening to music. Went to bed at approximately midnight. And to answer your next question, I slept soundly and heard nothing."

"Would you have heard a shot, do you think, assuming one was fired where the body was found?"

"After I was asleep? Frankly, I don't know. At any rate, I didn't hear one. Nor before I retired, for

that matter. But if one had been fired then, I should have heard it, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I might have been playing my phonograph loudly at the time. And I *do* play it loudly and did for a while yesterday evening. I have a hi-fi installation and when I play good music, I like volume. I like to lose myself in it. Or the shot might have been fired while a plane was passing over. This is quite near Davis-Monthan field and when a jet bomber comes over low just after taking off, the sound is really deafening."

"Do you have any firearms yourself, Mr. Medley?"

"I have a revolver," I said. "I bought it when I first moved here. This house was more isolated then, and it's not far from the Southern Pacific tracks. I thought of tramps."

"May we see the revolver?"

"Certainly," I said. I went to the desk and took it from the second drawer. Cahan, the red-headed one, had followed me across the room so I handed it to him. It's a small nickel-plated gun, a thirty-two calibre.

He swung the cylinder expertly, ejected the cartridges and put them on the desk blotter. Then he walked to the window and held it up to look into the barrel.

"We won't need to take it in," he said. "Pretty rusty." He came back and put it on the desk beside the cartridges. "You'd better clean

it before you reload it. It hasn't been fired for quite a while."

"Five years," I said. "I had to use it only once. I had a dog then, a mongrel puppy six months old and someone poisoned him. I ran to a phone, all the way up to Broadway then, and called for a veterinarian. But when I got home, the poor dog was in such terrible agony—"

Cahan nodded. "We noticed a little white cross in a corner of your yard. You buried it there?"

"Yes," I said. "Sentimental of me, but I'd come to love that dog too much just to let him be taken away with the garbage."

Frank Ramos said, "Mr. Medley, does the name Kurt Stiffler mean anything to you?"

I shook my head slowly. "No. That is, I don't know anyone of that name. But it does sound vaguely familiar. I have a vague impression of having read it in the newspapers recently, but I can't remember in what connection."

Ramos stood up. "I guess that's all, for now. We may have more questions after we have the coroner's report, and an identification."

"Come back anytime," I said. I followed them to the door. I said, "About the dog I had to shoot. I should have added one thing. The veterinarian got here shortly after and I had him look at the dog. He said it had been poison all right and that it was well that I'd put it out of its pain because he would have been too late to save it."

LINE OF DUTY

Ramos smiled. "We weren't thinking of bringing charges on that count."

From the window I watched them drive away.

2.

FERN CAHAN

"What do you think of the old coot?" I asked Frank as he U-turned the car.

"I don't trust him. There's something wrong there, Red."

"You're crazy," I said. "He's a nice old geezer. And if you think he killed the guy, why'd he leave him in his own back yard? He's got a car."

Frank didn't answer and after a minute I asked, "How sure are you, Frank, the guy was Kurt Stiffler?"

"Halfway sure. I told you I saw Stiffler only once, and at a distance. That's going to be our first job, to get a positive identification."

"Now?"

"Hell, we'll eat first. It's after one. Go for pizza?"

I said I'd go for pizza. We stopped at Broadway and Park at a place we often have lunch when we're in that neighborhood. Frank said, "We'd better report in to Cap, though. And tell him where we are and what we've got so far. Keep him happy. And we'll call Doc Raeburn too, but when we're through eating; he may have more by then."

"Okay," I said. "I'll make the first call and you can have the second. Order me a pizza with anchovies."

I went to the phone booth and called Cap Pettijohn and reported. He said okay to go ahead and see if we could get identification as Kurt Stiffler, and to phone in the minute we knew one way or the other.

When we'd finished our pizza and got our coffee, it was too hot to drink so Frank said he might as well call the coroner while his cooled.

He came back from the phone booth and shrugged. "Nothing new. Doc's stripped the body and examined it externally. No sign of any wound except the one at the base of the skull and he still thinks that it was a twenty-two, fired very close."

"No better guess on time of death?" I asked.

"No. At least six hours from the time he first saw the body and probably not over twelve. Midnight to six a.m. He won't have it any closer till he performs the autopsy, and that won't be till tomorrow—after rigor mortis wears off. Says meanwhile if we get an identification try to find out what and when he ate last. Then from the stomach contents—degree of digestion—he can give us time of death closer than any other way, probably within an hour."

I nodded and Frank said, "Red, do you figure he was shot where

found him or carried there?"

"Anybody's guess," I said. "Ground was too hard to take any impressions."

"Do you think Medley is strong enough to have carried him there if he'd shot him, say, in the house?"

"I guess so. He looks husky enough for fifty-six. But why would he have? It wouldn't have been any farther to carry him to his car and then dump him along the railroad tracks or out in the desert or somewhere. Frank, I think you're nuts to suspect that nice old guy."

Frank just shrugged, and we finished our coffee and went back to the car. It was my turn to drive—we always take turns—and I got behind the wheel and then said, "Jeez, I should have asked Cap to dig out Stiffler's address for us. That's where we want to start, don't we?"

Frank said, "Forty-four East Burke. I don't know whether he'd still have been living there, but that was the address in the paper at the time of the accident."

Frank has the damndest memory; I've never seen one like it.

I made the Burke Street address in eight minutes. It's an old neighborhood, not quite a slum but heading that way fast. Forty-four was a two-story frame building flush with the sidewalk. There was a little run-down grocery store in front and a side entrance leading to the rooms and flats behind it and upstairs.

In the hallway we found Stiffler's name still on a mailbox and climbed the stairs to find a door with a matching number, and I knocked on the door. After a while, a second time and louder, but there still wasn't any answer. It was funny to think that up to two weeks ago five people had lived behind that door and now at least four of them were dead. All five of them, if Kurt was dead too.

"How old was Kurt Stiffler, Frank?" I asked. "That is, if you remember."

Frank said, "I remember all right because he was one year younger than I am. That makes him exactly your age."

Which is thirty-three. Jesus, but fate can swing on a guy suddenly and knock him flat.

Frank moved to the door on our right and I moved with him. This time he knocked and this time the knock was answered. A fat Mexican woman with a gray shawl around her shoulders opened it and stared suspiciously at us.

"*Buenas tardes, Madre,*" Frank said, taking off his hat. "*No está en casa el señor Stiffler, pero—*"

After that the Spanish got too much for me to follow. They talked at least ten minutes, her voice sullen at first but getting friendlier. She probably spoke fair English, but Frank could get a lot more out of her in the language that was native to her. I always let him do the talking when we're dealing with

Mexicans. And most of the rest of the time, for that matter.

Finally a "*Mil gracias*" from Frank and a "*De nada, mi hijo*" from her ended it and the door closed.

"*Qué pasa?*" I asked him. If you don't speak Spanish, "*que pasa*" means "*what gives?*"

"Come on," he said, and started for the stairs. "He's still living there, or was. She saw him last yesterday morning."

"If she knows him, why don't we take her for an ident?"

"Because something she told me gives us a better bet. The person closest to Stiffler is Father Trent, at St. Matthew's. And I know Trent slightly. I'd rather have him do the identifying than just a neighbor."

When we got in the car I said, "Frank, will you brief me again on that Stiffler accident? I remember it was a hell of a thing, all right, but not the details."

"Kurt Stiffler was driving," Frank said. "An old jalopy he'd bought the week before. His wife—she was a Mexican girl—and three kids were with him. Two boys and a girl, all under ten. They'd been to a Mexican wedding in Nogales, just this side of the border. Left at ten and around midnight they were nearing Tucson."

"Sure weren't speeding," I said, "if they took two hours to drive sixty miles."

"There was a car coming toward them and suddenly the Stiffler car

swerved across the center of the road. There was a hell of a side-swipe and both cars went off the road. "Kurt's car rolled over twice."

Frank braked into a parking space. I said, "Let's sit here a minute. Finish the story before we go in."

"Okay. Kurt was thrown clear; didn't even get a scratch. His wife and one kid were killed instantly. Another kid died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, the third one the next day. Driver of the other car died the next day too. He was a salesman from Phoenix."

"They figured the cause was a blow-out, didn't they?"

Frank lighted a cigarette. "Probably. Shape the car and tires were in afterwards, it couldn't be proved. The county boys booked Kurt when he admitted he'd been drinking. Hearing was the next day; I happened to glance in as I was going by; that's the one time I saw him. He looked like a dead man and I guess he wanted to be one.

"On his own story, they'd have thrown the book at him. But somebody—and my guess now is Father Trent, if he was close to Kurt—had got him a lawyer. Lawyer got an adjournment till the next day, and the next day he had half a dozen witnesses who'd been at the wedding party in Nogales. They swore Kurt had been sober. He'd had two glasses of light wine, small glasses, early in the evening, and they'd had a big dinner after that. Dinner was

at eight and he couldn't possibly have been affected at midnight by the little he'd drunk before then. And when Kurt's lawyer made the arresting officers admit the cause could have been a blow-out and probably was, he dismissed the charges."

"Consider me briefed," I said. "Let's go see Father Trent."

Father Trent came with us to the mortuary and made identification. It was Kurt Stiffler all right. We phoned that information in to Cap, and then we drove Trent back to St. Matthew's and, in his study, listened while he told us everything he knew about Kurt Stiffler's background.

It was quite a story.

3.

FRANK RAMOS

Night pressed against the windshield. I was driving and I was tired. I turned the car into the police garage and parked it, turned off the lights and the ignition.

"What time is it, Red?" I asked.

"Pushing nine. Well, I'm for a beer. How's about you?"

I said, "A drink might not hurt. But I don't want beer."

We got in Red's Car. I live within walking distance of headquarters and seldom drive my jalopy to work. Red's a bachelor and drives a sleek black Buick convertible that looks like, and is, a lot of car.

In the bar Red drove us to, we ordered our drinks. A beer for Red and a whiskey and soda for me. Red felt like jabbering but I didn't and gave monosyllabic answers until he got discouraged and wandered over to the pinball machine.

I didn't want to think either, but I couldn't help doing that. Especially about the case we were working on. I didn't like it, and I had a premonition I was going to like it less. Nothing I could put my finger on. Except that we didn't seem to have a single lead that meant anything.

Take John Medley. A solid citizen. Jay Byrne had put in a good afternoon's work on him and everything he'd turned up checked with what Medley had told us. Nothing against him, not even a traffic ticket.

Take Kurt Stiffler. Not even a citizen, solid or otherwise. Father Trent had given us his background. He'd been born in Germany in the early twenties. Very poor timing, for his father had had a Jewish grandmother and that made Reinhard Stiffler a Jew. And it made Kurt one too despite the fact that he had been raised as, and remained, a Catholic. Kurt's mother had died in bearing him; he had been an only child, and sickly. He was ten years old when the pogroms started. His father had had a chance to escape from Germany and had taken it, leaving Kurt with an uncle and aunt. He thought Kurt

would be safer with them. But within a few months Kurt's uncle was accused and convicted of opposition to the Nazis and Kurt's Jewish ancestry came out in the investigation. What happened to the uncle and aunt was never learned but Kurt had been put into a concentration camp at the age of twelve. Miraculously, he survived ten years there and grew to young manhood behind barbed wire. But it broke his health completely; he was never strong again and was to be a semi-invalid all his life.

Reinhard Stiffler had reached Mexico and established himself with a small haberdashery there. After the war he was able to locate Kurt and send for him. Kurt was twenty-two when he joined his father in Mexico City. For a while his health seemed to improve and at twenty-four he married a Mexican girl. They had three children in the next five years. But Kurt's health got worse again and when he was twenty-nine the bottom of things fell out. His father died suddenly, the shop was bankrupt, and Kurt was broke. He struggled to make a living, trying things too hard for him to do. He and his family almost starved.

A priest who was a friend thought Kurt might do better in the United States; another friend offered to lend him money for the trip. With the help of Father Trent, who was a friend of the Mexico

City priest, he'd come into this country on a temporary visa which might be renewable. They'd reached Tucson four months ago. Father Trent had helped him get a job as timekeeper on a construction project, the boss of which spoke German and had himself been a refugee from the Nazis twenty years ago. Kurt seemed to be doing well on the timekeeping job. He had paid off most of the debt back in Mexico and had just bought the first car he'd ever owned, a seventy-five dollar jalopy, on time payments. His first trip out of town in it had been the sixty-odd mile drive to Nogales to the wedding.

What connection could there possibly be between John Medley and Kurt Stiffler? Logically, none. No one we'd talked to who knew Kurt had ever heard of Medley, and vice versa. John Medley couldn't possibly have had any motive for killing Kurt Stiffler. Maybe I was wrong.

Red came back to the bar and ordered a second beer and I saw my glass was empty too and had it filled. Red had put money in the juke box and now a cowboy was singing mournfully about something or other. Beer, cowboy music, Western stories and square dancing—that's my Red. He'd probably wear a Stetson and twin six-guns on the job if they'd let him.

"You know, Frank," he said. "It had to be a simple robbery kill. Nothing else makes sense."

"Let's forget it for tonight. I'm trying to."

"Okay. What do you suppose we'll do tomorrow?"

"Go to work," I said. "And do whatever the captain tells us to. What else?"

"Aw, go soak your head. Well, guess I'm ready for the hay. Can I give you a lift home?"

I told him I wanted another drink and that the walk would do me good.

"Okay. 'Night, then. But watch it, boy, don't turn into an alcoholic."

He was half serious and I told him not to worry.

I could have told him a lot more than that. I could have told him there wasn't any danger of my becoming an alcoholic because I couldn't afford it. One in a family is enough; somebody's got to earn the money to buy liquor.

That's one reason there wasn't any hurry about my getting home. I'd phone Alice this afternoon and the sound of her voice on the phone had told me she'd been drinking fairly heavily already. By now, she'd probably have passed out. I hoped so.

But I'll say for her that she keeps out of trouble and that nobody down at headquarters knows about it. I'll say more than that for her; it's crazy, but I still love her. I even understand her, in a dim sort of way.

Sometimes I wonder why people stay sober.

I have to. As Joe Friday says on television, I'm a cop. And I've got twelve years' seniority at it and I don't know any job I'm better fitted for. I've got a fair education but it's not specialized. I like good books and good music and I can tell Picasso from pistachio, but nobody pays you for something like that.

I looked at the clock and the bartender must have seen me looking because he asked me, "Time for another?" I said I'd let him know in a minute and went to the phone booth. If Alice was home and awake I'd better go home. But she was either out or asleep . . .

There wasn't any answer.

I ordered the drink and sipped it. My mind went back to Kurt Stiffler. Why hadn't the wound been in the temple and the gun beside the body? It would have made sense for him to have committed suicide.

Hell, I told myself, we haven't all the facts yet. We've just started. When we have all the facts maybe it'll make sense. And maybe there'll be pie in the sky by and by. Maybe the clean end of the stick is up There.

I walked home. The cool night air felt good, but I didn't.

The kitchen light was on, but when I let myself in and looked in all the rooms I found that Alice wasn't home. Out somewhere; probably at one of the neighborhood taverns. There are several within

walking distance. Luckily she didn't know how to drive. In the first year of our marriage I'd tried to teach her but she'd had some phobia against it, and I was glad now.

The kitchen was a mild shambles; Alice had done her drinking there. There was flour all over, too; she'd started to make something and on the drainboard of the sink was a cake pan with some dough in it. The recipe book was open on the table and it was open to a recipe for upside-down cake. I wondered if there was subconscious—or even conscious, if drunken—symbolism in that. The world was upside down for Alice. Because she'd married me? Because she'd married a Mexican? Or Both?

Alice, Where Art Thou? Probably at one of the two nearest taverns, but it would relieve my mind to know for sure. I couldn't go around to them; it would start an argument if I found her. But I knew the proprietors of both places and I could phone. Harry's was the more likely of the two so I tried it first. Harry himself answered. I said, "Harry, this is Ramos. Is Alice there? Don't let her know I'm calling, if she is."

She must have been within hearing distance of the phone because he said, "Yes, Bill." He knows my first name well enough.

I said, Okay, Harry. Phone me if you need me. I'll be home from now on. I'll be there at one if I haven't heard from you sooner."

She might or might not resent my picking her up at closing time but I'd rather risk that than her walking home alone at that hour.

I looked at the clock and saw it was half past eleven. I was tired, but not sleepy. If I tried to sleep I'd just lie there and think and I didn't want to sleep.

Nor drink, nor read, nor listen to music. Not serious music, anyway; maybe something light would help time move a little faster.

Most of the lighter music I have is on ten-inch LP's, so I turned on the phonograph to warm up and started looking through the stack of ten-inch records. *Medley from South Pacific*. No Medleys, thank you. One day is enough. *Songs by Tom Lehrer*. That would do it, and I hadn't listened to them for a couple of months. Macabre as a charnel house and funny as hell. I put the record on.

The Irish Ballad started, the one about the maid who didn't have her family long—because she killed all of them.

Her mother she could never stand,

Sing rickety-tickety-tin,

Her mother she could never stand,

And so a cyanide soup she planned.

The mother died with a spoon in her hand,

And her face in a hideous grin, a grin,

Her face in a hideous grin.

Very lovely stuff. I felt relaxed now, enough to sip at a can of beer, so I turned up the volume enough to hear while I went out to the kitchen and got one.

One day when she had nothing to do,

Sing rickety-tickety-tin,

One day when she had nothing to do,

She cut her baby brother in two,

And served him up as an Irish stew,

And invited the neighbors in, —bors in,

Invited the neighbors in.

And while one at a time she killed off all the members of her family, I suddenly thought of a word that rhymed with Medley. Deadly. But *why*? Even insane killers have a reason—an insane reason, but a reason. What could he possibly have had against poor Kurt Stiffler?

Avaunt, John Medley. Let me alone, at least until tomorrow.

And on to the lovely *I Hold Your Hand in Mine*:

I hold your hand in mine, dear,

I press it to my lips . . .

And then:

The night you died I cut it off,

I really don't know why.

For now each time I kiss it,

I get blood-stains on my tie . . .

The phone rang. I shut off the phonograph and answered. It was Harry. "Sorry, Frank, but you'd better come and get Alice."

“Okay,” I said. “She pass out?”

But she hadn't. She was getting quarrelsome, and that would be worse. Much worse, for me. I was in for a bad night, all night.

4.

JOHN MEDLEY

I woke from nightmare and lay there sweating, trying to remember—but not really wanting to remember—what I'd been dreaming. Had it been about Dierdre again? God, how many times will You make me kill Dierdre again in my dreams, and in how many ways?

Usually when I awake like this, shaken from a dream which sometimes I remember and sometimes I do not, I turn on the light, get up and read a while, but tonight I dare not. I do not believe that the police suspect me but it is possible that they do. And if they are watching the house I do not want them to see a light and think that I am troubled.

So I lie here and, more to pass the time than because I am really worried that the police could make a case against me I again run over the things I did evening before last, Tuesday evening. I am certain that I made no error, left no trail to myself. Except, of course, leaving the body in my own yard — and that in itself, in the absence of any other clue pointing toward me, cannot but make me look more inno-

cent than guilty. But one thing troubles me: Was that my reasoning when I changed my mind about putting him in the car and dropping him off near the railroad tracks? It is odd, but I cannot be certain of that one thing. Every other point is clear as crystal in my memory.

I am certain no one saw me leave and no one saw me return with him. The Armstrongs' house was dark; they had gone to a drive-in movie. And I am certain that no one saw me enter that shabby building where the poor boy lived nor saw us leave it and get in my car.

Nor is there evidence here. I had been careful to notice everything that he touched or handled, and I had been equally careful not to touch or handle anything at all in the few minutes I was inside his flat. I left no fingerprints of mine there and there are none of Kurt Stiffler's inside my house or inside my car. So if the police *should* suspect, what could they prove?

The pistol I used cannot be traced to me, even if they find it. I put it in a garbage can down the alley, knowing that the collection was early the following morning. It is on the dump now, but had it been found in the can it would only indicate that a robber fleeing the scene of his crime had left it there. And Kurt's emptied wallet with it. Will they think to search the dump and find them? It does not matter.

Yes, I am safe. None of the little things that could have gone wrong did so. And that in itself is proof that I correctly interpreted God's will, even though the Sign which He had given me this time was less direct and obvious than some of the others have been.

Always, when I have had to kill an animal or a man there is a reaction such as this. But this time had been different from the others because, for the first time, I had had to discover the body myself and face the police. And knowing from the moment of the kill that it would be that way, I had remained calm. This morning I had acted my role so well that I had actually almost forgotten the body was there until it was the hour I had decided to discover it. And knowing the police would come I had held my feelings in check until they had come and gone.

Now was the time for my suffering, and I suffered. When I was calm enough I prayed. For the hundred thousandth time I prayed to the merciful God for the day when He shall extend His mercy even unto me.

The horror of the dream is gone now, and I shall be able to sleep. Would that I could do so and never waken again in this life. God, when shall I be free?

5.

WALTER PETTIJOHN

I got down to the office earlier

than usual and the first thing I did was shuffle through the night reports to make sure nothing had broken on the Stiffler case and that nothing had happened during the night that might tie in with it. Nothing had.

I got the report Frank Ramos had typed yesterday evening and studied it. Nothing in it seemed to provide much of a lead. That's the trouble with a robbery-murder. The killer takes a big chance of being caught in the act or making his getaway, but if he isn't he's got a good chance of getting away with it completely. Of course we wouldn't overlook checking into Stiffler's life and antecedents to make sure there wasn't any angle there, but thus far it looked as though there wasn't.

I looked at my watch and saw it was time for the boys to be in the assembly room so I picked up my phone and told Carmody, on the switchboard, to send Frank and Red in. I'd get them started first.

A minute later Red Cahan entered. "Frank isn't here yet, Cap," he said. "Want to talk to me? Or shall we wait till Frank gets down?"

I told him to sit down. Red's a good boy, not brilliant but hard working, down to earth. I'd rather have one more like him than three with fancy ideas like Frank. Frank thinks he's too smart to be a detective sometimes.

I said, "Carmody'll send Frank in when he gets here. We can talk a

few minutes first. You go along with the report Frank turned in?"

"Sure, all but one thing. I think he's a little overboard in suspecting Medley. He seemed like a nice old duck to me. I can't see him as a killer."

"Of course, that's absurd. Just the same, we want to canvass the neighborhood out there. I'm going to send out Paul and Harry with a photograph of Stiffler and have them check if he's ever been seen around there. I'll have them check on Medley's standing with his neighbors while they're at it, but I haven't any doubts on that score."

"Right, Cap. And what do you want Frank and me to tackle?"

"The construction job where Stiffler worked. Talk to everybody he worked with. That should take you most of the morning. You can phone in then and if you got any leads I'll probably tell you to follow them up. If not, I want you to take Stiffler's neighbors. *Somebody* must have seen him come home from work Tuesday evening, if he did, and leave again afterwards."

Red was nodding when Frank walked in. He said, "Morning, Cap. Sorry I'm a little late."

Obviously he hadn't had much sleep; his eyes looked dull and tired and his face was drawn. At least I thought so; it's hard to tell with Mexican faces. But I felt sure there were signs of dissipation.

I didn't tell him to sit down. I said, "I just told Red what I want

the two of you to do today. He'll tell you."

"Okay, Cap." His voice sounded more sullen than repentant, but it was too late now to reprimand him for being late. I rather pointedly nodded to Red, however, and told him they could leave, saying nothing more to Frank.

When they had gone I reached for the phone to tell Carmody to send in Paul and Harry, but it rang before I lifted it.

The call was from my wife Ethel. "Walter, remember last night when we were discussing that new case of yours, I told you I'd heard the name Medley before but I couldn't remember where?"

"Yes. Did you remember?"

"Not only that, but I looked it up and made sure. On one of the papers in your file. We bought our place from him!"

"That's silly, Ethel. We didn't buy our place. We built it."

"I mean the lot we bought to build it on, four years ago. You bought it through that real estate friend of yours, what's-his-name; but John Medley's name is down as the owner. I *knew* I'd seen it somewhere before."

"I'll be darned," I said. "Well, thanks for calling, Ethel."

After I put down the phone I sat thinking a few seconds, about the funny coincidences that happen sometimes. It made me rather want to meet Medley to let him know we'd bought our lot from him,

without having met him at the time. It would be an amusing thing to be able to tell him about.

Well, why shouldn't I? I decided to brief the other boys first and Paul and Harry last; then I could go out to the Campbell Street neighborhood with them, get them started and then call on John Medley. Besides, if I actually met him and talked to him, I'd be in a stronger position to tell Frank how ridiculous I considered his suspecting Medley to be.

6.

FRANK RAMOS

When we got near the garage, Red asked, "Want me to take first turn on driving? Take us half an hour to get there and you could catch a nap. You must really have hung one on last night."

"I'll drive," I said. I thought, damn it, if I look that bad Cap Pettijohn must have noticed it too and thought the same thing.

I'd had a bad night, all right. Thank God Alice doesn't get in a state like that often. When Alice would rather quarrel than sleep, nobody sleeps.

After a dozen blocks of silence Red said, "Let's stop for a cup of coffee. Maybe it'll do you some good."

I said, "Damn it, I'm all right. Just let me alone."

"If you're *that* proddy, Frank,

maybe we should stop in an alley and get this settled. If a cup of coffee won't help you, maybe a bust in the nose will."

I had to laugh. "Maybe it would," I said, "but I'm not in the mood for it. You win, Red. I'm feeling both lousy and proddy, but there's no reason I should take it out on you. Sorry."

"Yeah. Well, now that you're over it, how's about stopping for some coffee? I want some if you don't."

"I'll buy that," I said. "Literally and figuratively."

I had mine black and it did help a little. And when we took off again I couldn't argue about letting Red drive because we'd made a stop and it was his turn.

But I didn't try to doze; there wasn't enough time. My mind kept going back to last night and wondering if there was *any* way I could have stopped that argument, short of knocking Alice cold or walking out on her. And, damn it, I love her too much to do either of those things. I guess all I can do is hope that sooner or later Alice will see what she's doing to herself, and straighten out. I can't help her, even, until she wants to be helped.

"Here we are," Red said.

The project was a new high school. It looked to be about half finished and like it was going to be a nice job architecturally.

A Quonset hut at one corner was obviously the headquarters and we parked near it and went in. There

were four desks, fairly far apart. A stenographer worked at one of them, a blond boy of about seventeen at another, the third was vacant. And Mr. Hoffmann, the contractor, was at the desk at the far end, studying a blueprint. Red and I knew him; we'd talked to him several times a little over a year ago when there'd been a burglary at his downtown office.

He nodded at us when he saw us coming and motioned to us to pull up chairs for ourselves. "Hi, boys," he said. "Sorry I've forgotten your names."

We introduced ourselves. I told him we wanted to talk to everyone here who had known Kurt. "I guess we might as well start with you. First, did I get it straight over the phone that you last saw Kurt when he quit work at five Tuesday?"

"That's right. Or to be a little more exact, the last time I saw him he was waiting for the bus across the street, a few minutes after five. I didn't see the bus come, though. I was back at my desk by that time."

"Anybody else waiting with him?"

"I think there were about five or six others. But I didn't notice who they were. I happened to notice Kurt because he was standing alone off to one side."

"Was that characteristic? I mean, didn't he mix with the others?"

"Well—yes and no. He got along all right with everybody, but he didn't seem to make any friends

here. Close friends, I mean. Even before the accident. And since then—well, he avoided everybody as much as he could without being rude about it. He seemed to want to be alone, as much as he could. Nobody seemed able to—well, to *reach* him. He was almost like a zombie."

And that, and not much more, was what we got from the other two in the office, the stenographer, a plump woman named Rhoda Stern, and the blond seventeen-year-old boy whose name was Sidney Carrier. But both of them verified—the woman a touch maliciously and the boy reluctantly—something that I had suspected but about which I had not asked Hoffmann. Kurt Stiffler's work had not been really necessary. Rhoda Stern and Sid Carrier could have handled it between them and were handling it now, and no new employe would be taken on in Kurt's place. Mr. Hoffmann, moved by Father Trent's story of Kurt's plight, had made an easy job for him and had tailored it to Kurt's limitations. He'd arranged it so Kurt hadn't even had to walk about the project to pick up time slips; the blond boy had done that for him. Kurt had worked at a desk making tabulations, some of which were necessary and some of which weren't. Light work and under no pressure; even so it had tired him to the extent that he was usually barely able to drag himself to the bus stop at five o'clock.

I wondered if Kurt had known that his job was, for practical purposes, charity. It could hardly have made him happy to know.

We talked to the foreman, a George Wicks, and then to all of the workmen, either individually or in groups of several, as we found them working. None of them had known Kurt even as well as the office employes and we learned nothing new about Kurt personally, but we did hit pay dirt in one direction. We found three of the workmen who remembered riding home on the same bus with Kurt Tuesday evening.

None of them had talked to him; he had got on the bus last and had taken a seat alone. The consensus was that he had looked and acted very miserable, but no more so than he had been constantly since he had returned to work after the accident. At first, after the accident, several of them had tried to be friendly with him and to make a point of sitting with him on the bus. But although he had not been rude about it he had let them see that he preferred to be alone and after that they had let him alone.

But the pay dirt came in the fact that two of them had ridden all the way into town on the bus and both remembered, one of them clearly, that Kurt had got off on his usual corner at Burke Street, a few blocks short of town. That advanced our knowledge of Kurt's movements up to about five-forty

and made it almost certain that he went straight home from work that evening.

What we'd done doesn't sound like much but we'd talked to a lot of people and it was almost noon. We drove over to the nearest drugstore on South Sixth and Red phoned in to report. When he came back to the car he said, "We're to work the Stiffler neighborhood this afternoon. And Doc Raeburn's working on the autopsy now. We can get the dope on that if we phone in after we eat."

We drove to Stiffler's neighborhood first and ate at a little Mexican restaurant I knew of there—it's a little hole in the wall but very good on tacos and enchiladas—and we asked questions about Kurt Stiffler but they didn't know him and didn't identify his picture.

I phoned in this time and Cap gave me the dope on the autopsy.

Cause of death was a twenty-two shot fired at close range, not quite contact, and probably from a revolver. It went diagonally upward and had stopped just behind the upper forehead. Death would have been instantaneous. And Raeburn had revised his estimate of the time of death, had made it earlier by about four hours which put it between eight p.m. and two a.m.

"If he ate dinner right after he went home—or before he went home—it was nearer the earlier of those times," Cap said. "Anyway he last ate about three hours before

he died. Bread and some kind of sausage and some cheese.”

I said, “Then eight o’clock is out because he didn’t eat at five. Got off the bus at five-forty and whether he went to a restaurant or went home—and that combination you say he ate sounds more like a pick-up meal at home—he wouldn’t have eaten before six, or died before nine. Any other findings?”

“Only that his general health and physical condition were really poor. Raeburn says he should have been in a rest home. It was a wonder he could keep going. Enlarged heart. Anemia—extremely low red corpuscle count. Both lungs about half calcified, although t.b. didn’t seem to be active. And—well, you can read the report yourself if you want more than that.”

Our first try was the little neighborhood grocery in Kurt’s building. It had been closed when we’d got around to it the evening before. We hit pay dirt again, for what it was worth. Kurt Stiffler had stopped in Tuesday evening at about a quarter to six. He’d bought three rolls and a half a pound of jack cheese. He hadn’t bought any sausage but it was something he did buy often. And he’d gone upstairs to his flat all right, because he’d come into the grocery by the front door but had left it by a side door that led directly into the hallway and to the staircase.

We took the same route, and

went up to the flat again. We’d searched it fairly closely yesterday evening, but we hadn’t paid much attention to the contents of the refrigerator or the cupboard. Now that we had the autopsy report on stomach contents and the story of his last grocery purchase, they could be important.

They were, to the extent that they gave us definite proof he had eaten his final meal—which Raeburn had placed at three hours before his death—at home.

We found the package of jack cheese opened and the paper bag that had contained three rolls and now held only one. No sausage, but in the step-on garbage can we found wrapping paper that looked and smelled like it had contained some.

But there was no way we could tell whether he had eaten that last meal as soon as he came home, which would have placed his death around nine o’clock, or later in the evening.

7.

FERN CAHAN

Poor old Frank had been in a bitch-kitty of a mood early in the morning. Worst hangover I’d ever seen him have. But he’d gradually come out of it and seemed to be okay. So I thought it was a good time to bring up something I’d wanted to talk about, and when we finished checking Stiffler’s kitchen, I brought it up.

I sat down in one of the chairs at the kitchen table and said, "Sit down, Frank. There's something I want to talk out and this is a good time and place."

He pulled a chair out and sat down astride of it. "Okay, shoot. Something about the case?"

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe I'm nuts but I want to convince myself there's no possibility at all the guy didn't commit suicide. I'll admit I don't see how but let's leave that lay for a minute. Look at the reasons he had. Hell, Frank, out of all the suicide cases we've worked on, how many had as many reasons or as good reasons as Stiffler had? What did the guy have to live for, the way he felt?"

"I'm with you. I'll grant the reasons. And I'll even skip one reason against it—the fact that he was a devout Catholic and suicide would have been a mortal sin to him. I think that's the reason he didn't kill himself, if he didn't, but we'll say he got around that somehow. So that puts us back to the *how* and that breaks down into two questions. Could he have shot himself from that angle, and what happened to the gun? The first one—well, let's try it."

Frank pulled out his revolver and ejected the cartridges, put them on the table. He stood up and turned sidewise to me, doubled his right arm back under so the gun in his hand pointed upward behind his back. He leaned his head back

and pushed the gun up toward it as far as he could reach. "How far is the muzzle?" he asked me.

"About an inch," I said. "And the bullet would go in right about where Stiffler's did, and at about the same angle if his ended up behind his upper forehead."

"Good," Frank said. "Then he could have." He sat down again and started reloading his gun. "God knows why he'd have chosen that angle, but let's say he did. Unless for some reason he wanted to make it look as though he didn't kill himself, and I suppose he could have had some psychological reason for that."

"And that," I pointed out, "would also account for his picking a stranger's back yard to do it in, instead of up here where he had privacy. But it leaves us with what happened to the gun, and the best I can think of on that is that somebody simply saw it lying there and swiped it. A kid, maybe."

Frank shook his head slowly. "No, Red. A kid getting close enough to pick up the gun couldn't have missed knowing Kurt was dead—or else awake. He was lying with his eyes wide open. And it couldn't have been a tramp going through the alley either—he wouldn't have touched that gun."

"One other thought," I said. "What if he had a friend close enough to be willing to help him, by going with him and carrying away the gun afterwards?"

"That seems even screwier, Red. Whatever reason he could have had for wanting a suicide to look like something else would have had to be a private, subjective one. And they couldn't have made sense enough to a friend to make that friend risk getting into serious trouble by helping him. Although there *have* been cases of a suicide having an accomplice."

"There have?" I was surprised. "I never heard—wait, yes I have. In suicide-pact cases."

"Those too. But I was thinking of the Winkelman case, right here in Tucson, a couple of years ago. Before we got teamed up. I put in some time on it with Jay Byrne."

I said, "What gave? I don't remember anything about it."

"Guy named Ernst Winkelman was in a hospital here, dying slowly from t.b. of the stomach. That's damn painful, worse than most cases of cancer, and death is just as inevitable after a certain point. So he died—but weeks sooner than the doctor had figured. They held a post mortem and found the cause of death was approximately two dozen sleeping capsules.

"He couldn't have brought them in with him and there wasn't any of that particular drug in the hospital. Well, it was pretty obvious that his wife, who was about his only visitor, must have brought them to him, probably after he'd begged her to. But she flatly denied

it and we could never prove that she did."

"Yeah," I said. "I remember vaguely now that I read something about it. Well, that was a different kind of deal, but I see what you mean about an accomplice to suicide."

Frank said, "There's one angle we can check. Whether Kurt might have owned or bought a twenty-two revolver, especially if he bought one since the accident."

"Right," I said. "Only I don't think we can get Cap even to consider the idea of suicide, unless we do happen to find Kurt bought himself a gun. So let's keep it under our hats. Otherwise he'll think we're both crazy."

Frank grinned. "Instead of just me. Okay, Red. But we'll suggest we check on *all* recent sales of twenty-two revolvers, and he'll go for that. Probably has it in mind himself." He sighed. "Well, let's go."

Besides the other flats in the building, we managed to cover both sides of the block Kurt lived in. We found people who knew him slightly or "to speak to," but no one who knew him well enough to tell us anything about him we didn't already know. More important, we found nobody at all who remembered seeing him after six o'clock Tuesday evening.

We found, but it didn't help, two women who'd been friendly with his wife, in Spanish. We got some

details from them on the Stiffler children. We learned that they were quite bright, in good health, and very well behaved. But since they were all dead, that wasn't of any help to us either.

We got in the car around four-thirty and drove downtown to report in. I asked Frank, "Do you suppose the guy didn't *have* any friends? We haven't found any."

Frank said, "Some people make friends slowly, and don't forget he'd been here only four months. And besides, he didn't have much stamina left over after work to go in for much social life. But if he made any close friends, it was probably through the church. We'll have to check with Father Trent on that."

Cap Pettijohn looked unhappy when we reported the little we'd learned. He said, "Nothing better in John Medley's neighborhood either. I worked with Paul and Harry part of the time, and I met Medley. Very nice man." He glared at Frank. "Found I'd bought a lot from him four years ago, the one my present house is on."

Frank said, "That so, Cap?" It wasn't exactly sarcastic, but it was dangerously close.

Their eyes locked for a moment and then Cap looked back at me. "Got a call from Father Trent," he said. "Funeral is set for Saturday morning at ten. I think you boys should go to see who shows up, but that's your day off. Like to

work this Saturday and take an extra day off next week instead? Or have you already made plans for Saturday, either of you?"

It turned out neither of us had and Cap said, "Good. And because you've been working a lot of evenings lately, don't report in here Saturday morning; just go to the funeral at ten and report here after."

"Swell, Cap," I said. "Anything else you want us to do today?"

"Two things, but neither of them should take long. I go along with the idea of talking to Trent again to find if he knows who Stiffler's friends were, and if you get that over with today you can start looking them up tomorrow. And the other person I'd like you to see is the daughter of that Armstrong widow who lives in the house next to John Medley's. She might have noticed something Tuesday evening that her mother didn't notice. And she was at work today when we were out there." He paused and frowned. "Well, that's two different directions. For today, take either one or the other of them and let it go at that."

Frank said, "Won't take us any more time to take both if each of us does one. St. Matthew's is within walking distance of my house and the Armstrong place is on Red's way home, more or less."

I said, "That's an idea, Cap. Trent knows Frank and might talk more freely to him alone. And I

don't guess the Armstrong gal will be dangerous for me to see alone."

It was okay by Cap. Ordinarily on a murder case we're supposed to work in pairs, just in case, but I guess he didn't figure that either Father Trent or the Armstrong girl would turn out to be a desperate and dangerous character.

I offered to drive Frank to St. Matthew's but he said he'd just as soon walk, so I put the police car back in the garage and got my own car, and drove out to Campbell Street. I went up the walk to the Armstrong house, next door to Medley's, and rang the bell.

The girl who opened the door was three-alarm, and I almost did a double take looking at her. She had hair just one shade redder than mine, wide-apart big grey eyes. She was tallish for a girl and slender, but really stacked in the right places. Beautifully sun-tanned on all the visible areas, and the visible areas were considerable since she was wearing what women call a play suit, no doubt because that's what it makes men want to do. She was maybe twenty-five, give or take a year or two.

I guess I fumbled a little, out of sheer surprise, in introducing myself. She said, "Come in, Mr. Cahan. Mother is upstairs, but I'll call—"

"We've talked to your mother," I said. "Don't bother."

She smiled. "Of course. Please sit down. But I really should run

and put on a dress. I wasn't expecting to see anyone this evening and—"

"Please don't," I said. "Not for my sake, I mean. This will take just a minute or two."

Unless, I was thinking, I could make it take longer. We sat.

"Your name?" I asked. "Your first name, I mean."

"Caroline."

"Caroline Armstrong," I said. "Nice combination. Uh—will you tell me whatever you remember about Tuesday evening?"

"Nothing new, I'm afraid. Mother and I talked it over and she told me what she'd remembered and told you. I don't think I can add anything at all. Except maybe what the picture was about."

I sighed. I could get mileage out of making her repeat it all, but it would be a waste of time and might annoy her. So instead I asked her what she thought of John Medley.

"I like him," she said. "A little on the fuddy-duddy side maybe, but he's nice. And a good neighbor."

I took the picture of Kurt Stiffler out of my pocket and showed it to her. I asked her if she'd ever seen him around the neighborhood, or anywhere else. While she was looking at it I got a sudden wild idea and when she handed it back with a "no", I was ready with my next question. I had nothing to lose so I asked her if she'd had dinner yet.

She looked at me wide-eyed a

second or two and then laughed. And said that she hadn't.

So I frowned at her and said, "I haven't even started to grill you yet, Miss Armstrong. But how about putting on a dress and letting me feed you a steak at the *Saddle and Sirloin* while I do it? And after that—do you by chance like to square dance?"

It turned out that she loved to square dance and was better at it than I.

8.

FRANK RAMOS

A bell is tolling in the belfry high above the church. Six pallbearers are carrying a coffin down the center aisle. I know only one of them, George Wicks, the foreman at the new high school building. He must have phoned Father Trent and offered his services. I memorized the faces of the other five. Later, after I get their names from Trent, Red and I will look them up.

The bell tolls. But not for me. I turn in my seat and look around to see if anyone new has come into the church since I last looked around. No, I see no one I had not seen before. Twenty-three, I had counted. Now the pallbearers make it twenty-nine. John Medley is not present.

Red Cahan sits across the aisle and farther back. We had agreed

to come separately and sit apart, the better to observe. Accidentally I catch Red's eye and he winks at me. I wink back but I don't feel good about doing it. Despite the fact that I don't believe in any of this pomp and ceremony and don't believe Kurt Stiffler, in that closed coffin going down the aisle, knows any of this is going on, or cares, or *can* care. It's all ridiculous. But aren't we all? Why did I waste five bucks of hard-earned money on flowers and then realize I had to send them anonymously because I didn't want Red, or Cap Pettijohn either, to know how foolish I was, sending flowers for a man I'd never met.

Hoffmann was there, of course. Father Trent had told me he was paying for the funeral. And the blond young man, Sid Carrier, who had worked in the office with Kurt. I recognized three workmen from the project. The Mexican woman who lived next door to the Stifflers. The other woman and one couple from the same building. Two reporters, one from the Star and one from the citizen. The Star reporter had sat next to Red. Those were all the ones I knew. I memorized the faces of the others and later I'd compare notes with Trent. I'd asked him to notice and remember.

The bell tolls. The pallbearers reach the front and put the coffin on the bier before the communion rail. The bell stops tolling and

there is silence in which we hear a jet plane somewhere in the sky.

I find myself thinking about Ernst Winkelman, the man I'd told Red about to show him that it was possible for a suicide to have an accomplice. For the first time it occurred to me that maybe his wife had been telling the truth in denying she'd taken him those capsules. What if someone like John Medley had known him, or known of him? What if John Medley himself . . .

A dog is screaming in agony from poison and is mercifully shot to end its pain. Why had Medley insisted on telling us of that episode? A man walks in the silent agony of bereavement and guilt, a man whose world has vanished in a shrieking crash that's left him nothing to live for—and he's mercifully put out of *his* pain by a shot he never felt . . .

I can't hold it, can't make it stick. But it's there, nagging . . .

How many others might he have helped out of life, cases that had looked like natural deaths or unassisted suicides?

Father Trent's voice is saying the Mass now, in sonorous Latin which I cannot understand. Yet the sound of his voice is soothing. How must that voice have sounded in the ears of Kurt Stiffler two weeks ago — only two weeks ago—when he sat in this very church, possibly in this very pew, listening to it and seeing four coffins down there against the

rail. Four coffins, one full size and three small.

An altar boy is handing Trent the little shaker on the end of a stick. Now with it he is shaking holy water on Kurt's coffin. Intoning mystery.

The mass is over and there is a pause and a slight stir about me. Next will be the funeral oration in English. I look around again. Had anyone come in late he would probably have waited in the hallway during the mass and be slipping down the aisle. But no one has come in. Why *should* I have expected Medley to come?

And now it is over, but we keep our seats. The pallbearers go again to the bier. The bell tolls again and the coffin is carried back along the aisle, passing so close to me I could reach out and touch it.

Some of us, about half, followed the hearse to the cemetery. Red and I in his car, the Buick, and he'd offered a lift to the reporter who'd sat next to him. It didn't take long at the grave, the grave that was alongside four other almost fresh graves.

After it was all over we went back to St. Matthew's. Father Trent gave us half an hour in his study. He gave us names and addresses. One of the addresses was in Nogales and was that of the couple whose wedding dinner Kurt had attended just before the accident.

We reported in to Cap and got orders to go ahead and follow up

on the leads we had. We spent the rest of the day and into the evening doing it. Learned nothing new, got nowhere.

9.

FERN CAHAN

Five of the boys were in the assembly room when I walked in. Four of them were batting the breeze about baseball and the fifth one was Frank. He was sitting alone in the corner looking like he'd lost his last friend. Not hung over, just glum.

I sat down on the bench beside him. I said, "Cheer up, pal. Even if it's Sunday and we're working, life isn't that bad."

He just grunted. Something was eating him all right. I wondered if he was maybe having family trouble. I met his wife once at the Policemen's Ball a couple of years ago. A very nice looking babe. Blond, and Anglo. They seemed to get along all right, but lately Frank never mentions her or talks about her. Never seems to take her around much; maybe that's what's wrong. But hell, I'm just guessing.

Well, if and when I get married I know my wife won't have that to complain about. Funny, three days ago I'd have said there was a chance I'd maybe get married someday but it seemed vague and way in the future. And now here

I am thinking about it seriously, very seriously.

Not that there's any doubt that I'm in love with Caroline. My God, it hit me like a ton of bricks. But getting married is still a hell of a big step to take. Especially on such short notice, although it doesn't really seem like short notice. It feels like I've known her for years instead of since Thursday evening. But I talked to her on the phone Friday evening, and Saturday evening I took her to a drive-in theater. Not that I saw much of the picture. Kissing her was like—well, I don't know what to compare it to because nothing like it ever happened to me before.

Yes, damn it, I'm in love. I guess I always knew that if I ever really fell it would be all of a sudden, bang, just like it did happen. So all right, I'll ask her to marry me. But maybe it's too soon; maybe she'll say no.

I had to talk to somebody or bust a gut. Maybe Frank could snap out of it if I told him what I was thinking about doing. So I said, "Frank, I'm thinking about getting hitched."

He did snap out of it. When he turned and looked at me he was so surprised he forgot that he was feeling sorry for himself. He said, "Isn't this kind of sudden, Red? I thought you were playing the field."

I told him it was sudden all right and started to tell him about it.

Just then Carmody looked in and said Cap wanted us.

He was busy with some papers when we went into his office and he told us to sit down a minute. I was feeling really swell; even starting to talk to Frank about it had shown me that my mind really was made up. I was going to pop the question to Caroline Armstrong and as soon as possible. We'd planned going to a baseball game tomorrow night but I'd see if I could talk her into taking a ride out onto the desert instead. Maybe it was going to take a lot of askings, a lot of persuading, and the sooner I start the better. Damn it, I *had* to have her or I'd go nuts.

Cap looked up suddenly. "Man was found unconscious in the alley back of Geechy Pete's tavern on Meyer at six o'clock this morning. Could have been slugged. No wallet or identification so he could have been robbed. Probably was, because he wasn't dressed like a bum. Ambulance took him to Benbow Emergency. Concussion, but not too serious; he's still unconscious but they think he ought to come around any time. You boys go over there and wait, be ready to question the minute he's conscious."

I said, "Okay, Cap. Think whoever slugged might be the one who shot Stiffler?"

Cap shrugged. "Could be. We'll keep it in mind."

Frank said, "Cap, you're not taking us off the Stiffler case, are you?"

"No, but there's nothing you can do on it today, is there? Probably tomorrow I'll have you canvass gun dealers, but you can't do that on a Sunday."

Frank said, "There's something I'd like to do and that we could do today, and that's to talk to Medley again. When we talked to him before, Cap, it was right after the murder and we didn't even have a definite identification, the autopsy report, or a lot of other stuff we have now."

Cap frowned at him. "Frank, I talked to John Medley, and told you boys about it. Take my word for it, there's nothing he can tell us that he hasn't told us. You don't, by any chance, still have that wild idea that *he* might have killed Stiffler, do you?"

"Yes, I do, Cap," Frank's voice sounded stubborn. "I think Medley's a psychopath or a fanatic, even if he doesn't show it. I think Kurt Stiffler's death was a mercy-killing."

Cap Pettijohn's face got a little red. "Frank," he said, "I'm beginning to think *you're* a little psychopathic. Get this and get it straight. I forbid you to bother John Medley. Even on your own time, if you have any idea of doing so. Is that understood?"

Frank said "Yes," very quietly, turned and walked out. I followed him and found him swearing under his breath in the hallway.

I clapped him on the shoulder and told him to forget it. I think

Cap's right, of course, and that Frank is screwy as a bedbug about that one thing. But I think, too, that Cap was too damned rude about it. He should have let Frank follow his hunch and convince himself it was wrong, as long as he didn't actually heckle or antagonize Medley in doing it.

The man was still unconscious when we got to the hospital, and didn't come around until almost noon. Anyway, we had time to kill and plenty of chance to talk. I was full of talk about Caroline, so I took advantage of it and bent Frank's ear. But he seemed interested and I think it helped him get his mind off his own worry, whatever it was.

The slugging turned out to be a false alarm. The man told us his name was Harvey Klinger and he was operator of a filling station in Benson. His wife was president of the local W.C.T.U. and he did no drinking in Benson, or else. But once or twice a year he broke loose, pretended a business trip and came to Tucson for a weekend bender. He always left his wallet and most of his money at a hotel, so if he passed out or got in trouble his wife wouldn't be notified and learn the truth. It hadn't been robbery. By the time he'd got into a fight with a drinking companion last night he'd spent what money he had on him. He didn't know the name of the man he'd got into the fight with and who had slugged him, but it didn't matter because he wouldn't

have preferred charges anyway.

We phoned Cap the no-news, and then had lunch and reported back to him.

10

JOHN MEDLEY

It was Tuesday evening again. At eight o'clock I heard the clock strike and I thought: a week ago this moment I left to go and get him, that pathetic German boy. He was like one dead already and he would never have been otherwise; his will to live was gone.

When I had read the newspaper stories of his horrible accident and the multiple funeral I had suspected that it might be so, but God had given me no sign at the time. Not until over a week later, the Sunday afternoon before the Tuesday evening when I had killed him, had the sign come.

It had been a pleasant afternoon. I had taken my pocket testament and walked the dozen blocks from my house to Himmel Park. It is my church, when I go to one. I belong to no denomination.

In Himmel Park I found myself a shaded bench from which I could watch the young people playing tennis and the children playing on the slides and swings, and then I took the testament from my pocket. I opened it, not at random, at The Revelation of St. John. If one part of the Bible is greater than the rest, it is that book.

I found myself reading the passage: "*And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed.*"

Have you ever wondered about the symbolism of the beast in The Revelation? To me, it is mercy, the mercy of surcease for which I long but which I am denied.

But I digress. I had just finished reading the words "should be killed" when I heard the name Kurt Stiffler spoken aloud. Not by a spirit voice but by a corporeal one. Nevertheless, it was a Sign.

The voice had come from behind me. I turned my head and looked over the back of the bench. A youth and a girl, both in their teens, were sitting on the grass just behind me. They had rackets and were dressed for tennis, waiting their turn on the courts.

The youth was blond and quite handsome. It was his voice I had heard. He was talking to the girl about Kurt Stiffler. He worked, it seemed, with Stiffler in the temporary office at the site of a new high school. He was telling her about Kurt's background before the accident and about his actions since. And every word he spoke added to the strength of the sign I had had, for every word described a man who *wanted* to die.

I listened, and when they left to go to the tennis courts I left and

went home. I prayed and I thought and I planned.

And so it was that a week ago this hour I went to Kurt Stiffler. He was pathetically easy to fool, for I had worked out a simple but clever ruse. I told him I was a friend of Mr. Hoffmann's and that Hoffmann had suggested I see him to ask a favor. I told him that tonight, at my home, I hoped to close a business deal with a man who was coming up from Mexico for the purpose and that another man, a German who had not been long in the country, was involved and would also be there. That although both of them spoke some English I was afraid of the possibility of some misunderstanding arising. So I had phoned my friend Hoffmann and asked him if he knew anyone who spoke both German and Spanish, and that Hoffmann had told me that he, Kurt, would no doubt be willing to help me.

I knew that, because he owed Hoffmann so much, he would not refuse, and he did not.

No one saw us leave his place and go to my car around the corner. I knew that no one would, for had not God ordered me to do this thing? He would protect me, as He has before.

In my house I told Kurt that the men would be coming at any moment and I tried to draw him into conversation to put him at his ease, but he was too unhappy to be able to relax, and . . .

A knock interrupted my recapitulation. I went to the door and opened it. Mrs. Armstrong stood there, a wide smile on her face. "Mr. Medley! Come over and have a drink with us. We're having a little celebration."

I went over with her. Mr. Cahan, the red-headed detective, was there, and Caroline, Mrs. Armstrong's daughter. And it turned out that the cause for the celebration was that they had just become engaged to be married. Quite suddenly, it seems. They had met only a little less than a week ago. Through the case Cahan was investigating? I wondered, but did not ask.

I congratulated them, and meant it; they seem like very fine young people and well matched—it may sound a bit catty to say it, but in part because they are both rather lightweight intellectually.

I found myself sitting on the porch steps, a drink in my hand, listening to their conversation, their plans. And envying them. For I shall never love again, and I loved deeply once.

I loved my wife more deeply than I can say. She was the most beautiful woman who ever lived, my Dierdre, and was at the very height of her beauty on the night, the eve of her fortieth birthday, when she died. That was eight years ago; we had been married over twenty years.

We lived in Chicago then, but we were in Los Angeles on a vacation. We had flown, but I had

rented a car for the duration of our stay, and that evening Dierdre wanted to drive. I let her. We had seen a play downtown and had had a drink and went to our car, and Dierdre had a sudden whim to drive to the beach and see the ocean by moonlight and of course I agreed. Neither of us knew the city at all well, but we knew if we drove west, we would inevitably hit the ocean at some point. But we must have lost our sense of direction somewhere for, as I learned later, we were heading north on Sepulveda into the canyon when it happened. The accident and the murder. The accident—so like Kurt's in some ways, so different in others.

Dierdre was driving fast. There seemed no danger; the road ahead of us was clear except for one car approaching us, around a curve. And it was not until it was fully around the curve and almost upon us that we could see that he was not in his own lane but in ours, heading straight for us and scarcely a dozen yards away, coming into what seemed inevitably a head-on collision. Would that it had *been* one; we would both have been killed instantly and mercifully.

Dierdre cut the wheel sharply. We missed the car, didn't even scrape fenders with it. But going at least fifty we went off the edge of the road, down a six-foot drop and into a tree.

Like Kurt, I was thrown clear. I struck ground with an impact that

almost stunned me, rolled and slid. But I felt no pain. I tried to get to my feet to run back toward the car, where Dierdre was screaming, but one leg went out from under me; it was broken. I crawled. The car lay on its side and Dierdre was most of the way through the windshield. Her face was almost—gone. An eye had been gouged out. An arm was almost cut off and blood pumped from the raw wound where glass had sliced away one breast. A big jagged piece of glass stuck from her abdomen and it was crimson from the blood that spurted up around it. And she was screaming, *screaming!*

My hand was on a stone. I used it and her screaming stopped. Then I myself was screaming my way into a blackness that should have been death, but wasn't.

I woke in a hospital with a broken leg and other injuries that would heal, and one that would not. The knowledge that *I* had killed her. Oh, I knew that she would have died anyway, in any case. From loss of blood long before help could have reached us, but that did not change the fact that I had killed her.

I was unsane, if not insane, for a while. I dipped into catatonia. I did not speak, even to tell them what had happened. Had I been able to speak, no doubt I would have told them the truth, for no punishment they could have given me would have mattered. Apparently there

was no doubt in the minds of the police that Dierdre's death was the result of the accident, however, for I was never questioned.

After six weeks in the hospital I was put in a sanitarium, physically recovered except that I walked with a cane for a while. Mentally I was still in shock, but I must have seemed normal outwardly for they released me after a while. I returned to Chicago and tried to take up the threads of life again, but I could no more live than I could die. It was then that I realized that I could expiate my crime only by finding God and serving Him.

It happened to me in northern Wisconsin. I went there to seek solitude under the open sky, but I wore hunting clothes and carried a gun, to avoid being questioned.

God led me to a doe with a broken leg, dying of thirst and hunger. And as I looked at the doe and her stricken eyes looked back, the voice of God said clearly in my ear, "Kill, John Medley." And I killed the doe, and was at peace for a while for this time I *knew* that I had killed on God's command and out of mercy. And I knew that this was to be my fate and my destiny, to serve God in this manner and to be the instrument of His mercy. And that thus and only thus could I expiate my guilt for having killed *without* God's word having told me to...

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was nine o'clock. What had

made me wonder? It was exactly a week ago this moment, with my living room clock chiming nine, that I had pulled the trigger. From behind Kurt's back. He had been looking out of the window at something—I forget what now—I was pointing out to him. He died so easily, never knowing even for a fraction of a second what was coming, feeling nothing.

But why, then, do I sit here dreading to go home and to be alone? How much longer, God, must I keep on? How many more times must I kill for You before You extend to me the mercy that through my hand You extend to others?

II.

FRANK RAMOS

Red was alone in the assembly room when I came in. His back was toward me and he was staring out the window. I asked, "Where's everybody?"

"Out on a hot one," he said. He turned and I saw that his face was beaming. "We're on stand-by." And then he stuck out his hand. "Frank, I dood it. I'm engaged."

I shook his hand. "Good boy!" I said. "Is it this Caroline you've been talking about, or is this a new one?"

He started to get mad and then saw I was kidding and grinned.

"What's the hot case everybody's out on?" I asked him.

"Hold-up at Fehrman's, hour and a half ago." He sat down and lighted a cigarette, waved the match out. Fehrman's is a super-market on Twenty-second, near the air force base. "Two guys held up the manager just as he'd opened the safe to give cashiers their starting change."

I said, "That's out of city limits. How come *we're* on it?"

"They drove toward town when they took off. May have gone right on through—they figure for out-of-town talent—but then again they might be holed up here. We're checking hotels and rooming houses in case they are. Cap got the word at home and called all the other teams and had 'em start right out from home without reporting in."

"You must have got down early to have all this," I said.

"Yeah. Happened to get in fifteen minutes early, and Cap was already here too so he told me to brief you on the deal in case we go out on it too."

"Brief away," I said. And he did. The descriptions of the two men were good, much better than you usually get. The description of the car didn't mean anything; nobody had seen it closely enough to give more than a guess on the make or model. The sheriff and the state cops were covering the roads out of town while we covered the likely hole-ups in town.

There were more details than that, but they don't matter.

After Red had finished he said, "Say, Frank, I'd like you to meet Caroline. How about tonight? You and your wife both. We're having a little get-together over at the Armstrongs, just a few people. How's about it?"

"Sure like to, Red," I said. "But for all I know Alice has other plans. I'll have to check with her first."

"Okay. Why not phone her now? If you can't make it that'll give me time to line up somebody else."

It put me on the spot. I knew taking Alice would be out because well, I'm getting better able to predict when she's going to be drinking and when she isn't. This morning at breakfast she'd been sullen and that's a pretty sure sign.

But I had no out on phoning, or at least pretending to phone. I went over to the phone we use for personal calls—it doesn't go through the switchboard—and dialed my number. The second I heard it ring I knew I shouldn't have because I didn't dare really talk to Alice with Red listening. Well, I'd just have to let her answer and play that the line was dead, then tell Red nobody had answered.

So when Alice's voice said "Hello," I didn't say anything. She sounded cheerful and if she'd started drinking I couldn't tell it from that one word, but I didn't dare take a chance. I just held the receiver to my ear. After a long moment, Alice's voice, softer and with a puzzled note to it, said, "Clyde?"

Another pause and then the phone clicked in my ear as she hung up. I don't know whether or not my face showed anything, but I was glad my back was toward Red. And I waited until I was sure my voice would be normal before I put down the phone and turned toward him. "No answer," I said. "Probably shopping. I'll try again later."

I sat down. I had to sit down, to think. I knew no one named Clyde. But Alice did, and she had expected a phone call to be from him. Did that mean what I was afraid it meant? What else *could* it mean? I tried to think of innocent explanations and I came up with a few possible ones but they seemed pretty far-fetched.

I'd trusted Alice completely, until this moment. I'd accepted drinking as her vice, but—

Suddenly I had to hold on to myself to keep from rushing into Cap's office and telling him—telling him *anything* as an excuse to take off, to rush home and talk to Alice, to find out. I *had* to know.

But no, I had to wait. It wouldn't be safe for me to go home now. If the answer was the wrong one I might do something I'd regret. To her, or to this Clyde, if I could find him. I had to wait until I was calmer, until I could think more clearly.

The way I felt now I might even kill myself. Or her. She'd be better off. Drinking was one thing, turn-

ing into a no-good tramp was something else. I could follow Mrs. Winkelman case. Ordinarily you I've got a box of sleeping tablets. I happened to be having a touch of insomnia about the time of the Winkelman case. Ordinarily you need a prescription to get what I have, but I have a druggist friend who'd sold me two dozen. The few I tried didn't help me and I still had the rest, twenty or thereabouts. I could easily take her out of all her present misery and the worse misery she was building up for herself. The rage was gone. I felt only pity.

I snapped out of it hearing Cap calling us from his office instead of sending word through Carmody. That meant it was something important and in a rush. We grabbed our suit coats and put them on as we hurried in.

Cap was still talking—or listening—to someone on the phone. He said, "Okay, Paul. They'll be there in a minute," and slammed down the receiver.

He started talking fast to us. "Paul Geissler, calling from the Carey. The hold-up men are there. Descriptions fit perfectly and the clerk remembers they left the hotel very early this morning and came back at what would have been the right time after the stick-up. They're in their room now. Paul says he and Harry didn't go in to take them because their room has a window on a fire escape and that ought to be covered too. You two

take the fire escape and Paul and Harry will take the door. Fast."

We made it fast. The Carey Hotel was only three blocks away so we figured we could make it faster on foot than by taking a car and having to find a place to park it. The Carey is a flea-bag — or, if you're being polite, a small, inexpensive hotel. The for-men-only type. Four stories and about a dozen rooms on each story above the first. Aside from a tiny lobby, the first floor is taken up by a hardware store.

Paul Geissler was in the lobby, talking to the clerk. The clerk looked scared half to death. He was a good-looking young man with wavy hair, the kind you'd trust with your sister but not with your kid brother.

Paul turned away from him and handed me a key. He said, "This is the key to two-oh-six, the room under theirs; it's vacant. You two go in there, out the fire escape and up a flight and get set. Harry's in the alley. He'll see when you're ready and come back here and we'll go up and take them."

I said "Okay," and Red and I went up the stairs. We let ourselves in two-oh-six, very quiet about it. We sat down on the bed and took off our shoes and then raised the window as silently as we could and let ourselves out on the fire escape. I spotted Harry Berg leaning against a light pole across the alley and gave him a nod.

We went up the steps and I crawled under the window above the one we'd come out of and stood up on the other side. The window was open. Harry was walking toward the street now. He knew we were ready.

We stood there, pressed against the wall, one on each side of the window, and waited. I don't know what Red was thinking but I was busy hoping there wouldn't be any shooting, that they'd give up easily. I hate guns and gun play. I didn't want to shoot anybody, unless maybe his name was Clyde, and I wanted still less to be shot at. In the movies and in stories people who are shot die easily; in real life, they seldom do. It would be my luck today if I got a bullet to get it where that one word from Alice had got me, in the guts.

We waited, maybe five or ten minutes, but it was more like five or ten years. Then, through the open window, we heard the knock, a loud one. And while Paul was calling out to them to open in the name of the law, Red and I drew our guns and looked in at the window.

There were two men in the room, tough looking mugs who fitted the description of the hold-up men perfectly. They were stripped down to shorts. One of them was sitting on the edge of the bed and the other was walking across the room with a bottle in his hand and seemed frozen in the middle of a step.

Maybe because at first glimpse it looked like a frozen tableau, I thought it was going to be all right. But then I saw there were two guns lying on the bed, unholstered—one a revolver and the other a Luger. Suddenly the tableau broke and the Luger was in the hand of the man who'd been sitting on the bed and he was on his feet pointing the gun toward the door.

I yelled out, "Drop it!" and he whirled to face the window, the muzzle of that Luger coming around with him. Maybe he wouldn't have shot when it registered on him that there were two of us at the window with guns on him. Maybe he'd have dropped his own gun. But then again maybe he'd have pulled the trigger. We couldn't wait to find out. Red and I fired almost simultaneously. And as though our shot was a signal Paul or Harry started shooting through the door and then the door burst inward and it was a frozen tableau again.

The man who'd grabbed the Luger and stood up with it was back on the bed again, lying on his back the way Red's bullet and mine hitting him had slammed him. The Luger was still in his hand but he wasn't interested in it. The other man had got as far as the edge of the bed; his knees were against it, but if he'd been going for the revolver on it he'd changed his mind. He had his hands raised high. The bottle he'd been carrying

was on the floor and whisky was gurgling out of it.

While Red and I were climbing in the window, Paul and Harry came on in. Paul gathered up the two guns. Looking down at the one we'd shot he whistled and said, "Beautiful shooting!" I stepped over and looked down. There were two bullet holes in the bare chest, less than an inch apart and both over the heart. I don't know whether Red had used his sights; me, I'd just taken a snap shot. And I didn't want to try to remember whether Red's gun or mine had gone off first. I thought I knew but I didn't want to be sure.

I remembered something, a sting in my right arm I'd felt when the bullets had started coming through the door. I said, "*Lousy* shooting, Paul." I started peeling off my coat. "Do you realize you guys were shooting toward the window when you got trigger-happy out there in the hall?"

Paul Geissler's face went suddenly white. "Frank, you didn't get —?" But he didn't finish the question because by that time I had my coat off. And there was a spreading spot of bright red on the sleeve of my white shirt, on the outside and about half way between the elbow and the shoulder. I hadn't felt any pain except a slight sting, but some pain was starting now.

I said, "Nothing serious. Couldn't have hit bone or it would have jarred me, and it didn't."

I started rolling my sleeve and he came over and helped me. His face was even whiter now. He said, "Jesus, Frank, *I* did that. Harry shot only once and that was into the lock of the door. When the shooting started I thought they were firing at us through the door, and I didn't stop to think that the window might be in line."

By that time we had the sleeve up and the wound wasn't as bad as I'd expected. I knew I hadn't stopped the bullet but I'd expected to find two holes, front and back. It was just a furrow, but a deep one, about as deep as it could have been without having made separate entrance and exit wounds. It gave me a little shiver down my spine to remember that Harry used a forty-five. If that bullet had been an inch to the left it would have shattered the bone and I'd probably have had a bad right arm the rest of my life.

I said, "Listen, Paul, I don't want Cap to get sore on this. Maybe we can rig a story. We could fold the mattress over that Luger to muffle the noise and shoot it once and—" I stopped as I realized it wouldn't work. The other gunman would be turned over to the sheriff's department since the hold-up had been outside city limits, and after he'd talked our story wouldn't stick.

Harry was holding my coat. He must have been thinking right with me because he said, "It wouldn't stick. And anything I get I got

coming. Red, get Frank over to emergency fast. He's bleeding plenty."

I got my wounded arm into the coat sleeve and started to get the other arm into the other sleeve and then, like a damn fool and for no reason at all, I fainted.

12.

ALICE RAMOS

The second I had said it I could have bitten my tongue out. But I'd been expecting a call from Clyde and I'd never thought. Frank had *never* called that early in the day. He always calls in the middle of the afternoon or late afternoon, as soon as he can tell me if he's going to work late or be home for dinner. But that had been Frank on the phone. I don't know how I know it was, but I know all right. The second I said Clyde's name, I knew it was Frank. But he must have suspected something already or why would he have called like that and said nothing, just let me give myself away?

Well, this tears it, I thought. Now I've got to leave today, right away. I've decided to anyway and there's no use having a scene first. I hate scenes.

Of course the first thing to do was to call Clyde, so I called him and talked fast explaining what had happened.

He said, "Baby, that's wonderful,

and I mean wonderful. Don't bother packing or leaving a note or anything. Just get the hell out of there fast. He might come home with blood in his eye."

I said, "Clyde, honey, I know Frank. He won't rush home. He's got to think things out first. He reasons things out."

"Okay, honey, if you're sure. Pack if you want, but travel light and just take what's worth taking. We'll buy you new clothes where we're going. Honey, I'm sure glad this happened. I've been getting sick of this jerkwater town for weeks and I've been sticking around only on account of you."

"I'll be ready in half an hour. Going to pick me up?"

"Hell, no. Why take a chance on that? Besides, I've got things to do. Commissions to collect, a bank account to close out, my own packing. Wait a minute, let me think."

I waited, and he said, "Call a cab when you're ready for one, Alice, and take it to the Pioneer Hotel—but be sure it's not followed. Maybe you'd better give some other address first, out on Speedway or somewhere, so you'll have plenty of time to make sure you're not being tailed. But when you get to the Pioneer take a room—uh—under the name of Mary Wentworth. And wait for me there. Inside the room, not down in the bar or anywhere. Got it?"

"All right, Clyde. When will you be there?"

"As soon as I can, but don't hold

your breath. It might be the middle of the afternoon. But I'll phone the hotel sooner, in an hour or so, to make sure you made it okay and are waiting for me. Geez, honey, I'm glad things are working out this way."

I was glad too. But suddenly I got worried that I could be wrong about Frank coming home and I hurried. I didn't take a shower or anything because I'd have a lot of time to kill in the hotel room and might as well do it there. And I didn't pack much, just one suitcase. It felt fine not to be taking along all the dresses and things I was tired of.

Writing the note was a little harder and I made some false starts on it before I decided just to make it short and sweet. I wrote: "Frank, I'm sorry but I don't love you any more and I'm going away with somebody else. Please don't ever try to find me; we just aren't good for each other and never would be."

And it was all true except maybe the "I'm sorry" part, and even that was true in a way. I wasn't sorry I was going, but I was sorry for Frank.

I did just as Clyde told me. First I gave the cab driver an address out on Speedway and watched behind us until I was sure no car was following us, and then I told him I'd changed my mind and wanted to go downtown to the Pioneer Hotel.

When we got downtown and

were heading west on Congress Street, we were just passing the alley between a little hotel called the Carey and a store when suddenly there was some shooting that seemed to come from the alley, and a lot of people started running that way. But we were past the alley by then and I couldn't see anything. I had the awfulest feeling, suddenly, remembering Frank was a detective and carried a gun and *could* be in whatever was going on, maybe even getting shot, and I asked the cab driver if he could let me off a few minutes and wait.

He slowed down the cab and looked around, and he said, "Lady, I can't unless you want to pay me off here and take your suitcase. There's no place I can park to wait."

So I realized that I'd been silly to think of it, and I told him all right, to take me on to the Pioneer Hotel.

13.

FRANK RAMOS

I felt foolish as hell for having fainted and asked the doctor why I had, from so slight a wound and when there hadn't been any shock at all."

"Mental shock," he said. "Reaction from suddenly realizing how close a call you'd just had. And did you have anything else on your mind?"

"Yes," I said. "I'd just killed a

man, for one thing. In twelve years as a cop, for the first time."

"You've been lucky," he said. "Well, that's it. I won't put you to bed but you'd better lie down on that couch and rest. Stay here for lunch, and after that I'll send you home."

"Are you kidding?" I asked him. "I'm okay now."

"I'm not kidding, Ramos. You lost quite a lot of blood on the way here. Enough to make you keel over a second time if you start walking around now."

I said okay and went over to the couch. He told me Red was waiting to see me but if I wanted to sleep he'd send Red away. I told him I didn't feel like sleeping, so to send Red in.

He wanted to know how I felt and I told him fine. And that I was stuck here until after lunch and after that, "Suppose Cap will want me to take the rest of the day off?"

"The rest of the day?" Red said. "Hell, Frank, I talked to the doc on my way in here and he says you're going to be off work at least a week, more likely two. That slug cut through muscle, not just skin. You're going to have a plenty sore arm for a while."

We batted the breeze a while, then Red left and I got to thinking. I got to thinking that I might be wrong about Alice and then I *must* be wrong. There were lots of explanations. For one thing, I might have got the wrong number; it

might not have been Alice at all. It had sounded like her voice but you can't identify a voice by only two spoken words, "Hello" and "Clyde?" I'd been expecting Alice's voice so any woman's voice that was even slightly like it would have fooled me. And even if I hadn't got the wrong number, there were other explanations equally simple and equally innocent. She knows people I don't know, no doubt has *friends* I don't know, partly because my job keeps me such long hours I don't take her out much any more. She can have friends I never heard of and could have been expecting a call from one of them, and a first-name basis doesn't mean anything these days. For all I know she could be on a first-name basis with the milkman, the laundryman and the newspaper carrier and could have been expecting a call on some business matter from one of them at that particular time. Yes, if it had been Alice, and if she had been expecting a call from someone named Clyde, I'd gone overboard to think what I'd been thinking.

Just before twelve, Cap Pettijohn came in, looking cheerful and chipper. He pulled up a chair alongside the couch. "Real job you and Red did over there. Congratulations."

"Thanks," I said.

"Now about this boner Geissler pulled, shooting through the door —"

"Forget it," I said. "Anybody can get excited when shooting starts.

And he's learned his lesson. If a situation like that ever comes up again I'd rather have him on the other side of a door than anyone else."

"All right, if you feel that way about it. Now another thing. Frank, this may sound funny to you, but maybe your getting shot, as long as it wasn't serious, is a good thing to have happened. You haven't been looking well lately—physically run down or worried about something, or both. Maybe part of it's my fault for working you too hard. But I don't think that's all of it, although the rest is none of my business.

"Anyway, I think you need a vacation. Now, and not in the fall when you're down on the list for one. And the doctor tells me you should have two weeks to get that arm in shape again, so let's call it two weeks' sick leave starting now. How does that sound?"

"Fine," I said.

"I'll get a check for you for your two weeks in advance so if you and your wife want to take a trip somewhere, you can."

"Thanks, Cap," I said. "We'll take one." I was thinking this might be even a better break for Alice than for me. If I could talk her into going somewhere with me, get her away from familiar surroundings, be *with* her all the time for two weeks, then maybe . . .

"Good," Cap said. "Take a good rest, Frank. And if you don't mind my suggesting it, lay off the drink-

ing. You've been doing it a little too much lately, haven't you?"

I let that go with, "Okay, Cap, I'll behave myself." And he said he'd send Red over with the check about one o'clock and Red could drive me home then if the doctor was ready to release me.

Cap left and a nurse brought me lunch on a tray. I felt a lot better after I ate it. Death wasn't a damn bit of fun, I decided. Living—and being happy living—was. I wondered how I could ever have thought about those pills.

Red came in with my check and asked if I was ready to take off, but I said I'd have to wait till the doctor came back to check on me and release me. He wasn't in any hurry and sat down to talk.

"You lucky stiff," he said. "Why couldn't *I* have got that neat little gouge. With two weeks off I bet I could talk Caroline into getting married now instead of when my vacation comes up."

"You wouldn't want a honeymoon with a sore arm," I said, grinning at him. "But if you're in that much of a rush to get married, why not see if Cap will give you your vacation now instead of later? There's nobody else unattached right now for him to team you with."

"It's an idea," he said. "I'll talk about it to Caroline tonight. I'd be out on a nice limb if I squared it with Cap first and then Caroline didn't go along with the idea, huh?"

I wished him luck. And finally talked him into not waiting for me.

At about half past one the doctor came in, talked to me a while, and told me I could run along, but to take it easy. I walked the two blocks to the bank and cashed the check so we'd have money for the trip, and bought travelers' checks with part of it. Then I took a taxi home.

I opened the door and called out "Alice!" and when there was only silence I knew, even before I saw the note, that she was gone and that I'd never see her again. And I knew that, deep down, I'd known all along that she'd be gone, even since that "Clyde?" and that I'd only been kidding myself, pretending to myself, trying to keep her *with me* just a few hours longer, by letting part of my mind tell another part that everything was all right.

I read the note, and then went out into the kitchen to see if there was any liquor, and there was. At least she'd left me that.

She'd left me something else too. Something I could use in the line of duty.

14

JOHN MEDLEY

Another beautiful afternoon. I had spent it watering my lawn and trimming the hedge. And now it

was mid-evening, and my doorbell rang. There was a small party going on over at the Armstrongs to which I had been invited but had declined, and my first thought was that someone from there had come over, either to borrow something or to make a final effort to persuade me to join them.

But when I opened the door I saw that I had been wrong. The man who stood outside was a Mexican and at first, in the dim light, I thought I did not know him. Then I recognized him—Cahan's partner, Frank Ramos.

He said, "Good evening, Mr. Medley. Do you remember me?"

"Of course," I said, stepping back. "Won't you come in, Mr. Ramos?"

Inside, in the full light, I saw that his face looked different somehow. There was something in it that reminded me just a bit of the look on that poor boy Kurt Stiffler's face when he had been here in this very room eight days ago tonight. No, Ramos' face was not as desolate and empty as that, but it was not the face of a happy man. And—was I imagining it or had he been drinking? Standing there, he seemed to sway just the slightest bit.

I gave him a chair and resumed my own, then asked him what I could do for him.

He paused a moment before answering as one does who chooses his words carefully. Then he said, "If you don't mind, I'd just like to talk to you a while. Not on police

business. In fact, Mr. Medley, you can lose me my job if you wish simply by telling Captain Pettijohn that I came here. I was forbidden to talk to you."

"I see," I said, although I didn't. "May I ask, are you feeling well, Mr. Ramos? You look a bit upset."

He smiled, but it wasn't too straight a smile. "I guess I am. I had quite a day. I killed a man. I was shot. My wife left me."

"You say you were *shot?*" Startling as the other two things were I picked that one because if it were true he shouldn't be walking around. "You mean wounded?"

He gestured with his right hand and then winced. "Just a flesh wound, upper arm. I'll get over it sooner than the other things."

I said, "I'm glad it's not serious. And I'm sorry to hear about the other things. The man you shot—was it in line of duty?"

He nodded. "He had a gun pointed at me so it shouldn't bother me; but it does."

"You'll get over it," I told him. "And your wife—perhaps she'll realize she made a mistake and come back to you."

"No," he said. "If she'd just run away from me, that would be possible. But she ran away with another man."

"Did you love her deeply?"

"Yes," he said. So simply that I knew that it was true.

Then he smiled again. "But I didn't come to unload my troubles

on you, Mr. Medley, nor ask you to help me out of them as you helped Kurt. I'll get over them and be whole again; maybe Kurt would not have."

He knows. Or is he taking a shot in the dark?

"You really think I killed that boy?" I asked him.

"Yes. Oh, I don't expect you to admit it. I didn't come here to try to trap you into a confession. And even if you told me the truth, it would be your word against mine if you denied it later."

I stared at him. "Then I'm curious why—But wait, may I offer you a glass of wine? Or have you been—?"

"Have I been drinking? Not for some hours. I started belting a bottle early this afternoon but I saw it wasn't going to help, so I stopped. It's worn off. Yes, I'll have a glass of wine, if you're having one with me."

"Of course. Sweet or dry? I have muscatel and burgundy."

He said he would prefer dry. As I came back from the kitchen and placed the bottle of burgundy and two glasses on the small table between our chairs I saw the plain little box. I poured the wine. Then I sat back down and we picked up our glasses. I sat staring at him wondering, how much does he know? Does he know about Dierdre? Has he traced me that far back, learned of the accident, and guessed the truth?

I said, "Mr. Ramos, will you tell

me exactly why you came here tonight? You suspect me of murder, yet you say your visit is unofficial. I believe you, but I fail to understand."

He took a sip of wine thoughtfully. "I'm going away tonight. I may never come back; that's something that I'll work out wherever I go. But I've got enough things of my own to think out and I don't want *you* on my mind. Purely for my own satisfaction — because I can't do a damned thing about it anyway—I want to know whether I'm right. I think after I've talked to you a while, I'll know . . . Do you mind if I speculate a bit?"

"Not at all," I told him. "You're a strange man, Frank Ramos."

He smiled and this time his smile seemed more natural. He was forgetting his troubles for the moment. He said, "I'm very ordinary. But I'm wondering why a man might think he knows God wants to use *him* as an instrument of mercy. It happened to me recently, Mr. Medley, and that's why I'm interested."

"Your wife—?"

"Yes. I think a man might want to have that very kind of mercy for himself when he's been hurt very deeply. He himself wants to die, but for some reason he cannot. Perhaps he even hopes to be caught . . . Why did you leave Kurt's body on your own property when you could easily have put it elsewhere unless you—your subconscious, at any rate—*wanted* the police to be led to you?"

This is a clever man. Almost I begin to be afraid of him.

My tongue wants so badly to loosen, confession would be so blessed a relief. Yet, I cannot. I cannot for thereby I would end my usefulness to God before He has signified that He is ready for me to come to Him. Or has He so signified; I am aware of the semi-opened box at my elbow.

Frank Ramos' eyes frighten me because they look at me kindly. He said, "But things start somewhere. Usually, things like this, in guilt. Mr. Medley, did you ever kill someone and you were not *sure* it was an order from God? Perhaps someone you loved?"

It was out of mercy! It was an order from Him! It was mercy, my mind screamed.

But not aloud for my hands were covering my face and hiding my eyes so he could not see the torture in them.

I could take no more. I lowered my hands and said, "I'm afraid I don't want to talk any more tonight, Mr. Ramos. I must ask you to leave."

He left very quietly, without protest.

I pace the floor, thinking. Why do I not admit to myself and to God that I did kill Dierdre selfishly—because I—I, John Medley—could not stand the sound of her screams and the sight of her mutilations? Perhaps if I confess *fully* to God, He will . . .

I pray best kneeling beside my bed, so I enter the bedroom and turn on the lamp on the night stand. In it—in the top drawer — are a dozen or more green capsules. I know what they are because they are the kind I took to that poor man with tuberculosis of the stomach. Of these I am sure. Frank Ramos' tablets perhaps were some kind of trick.

A deep peace comes into my heart, for yes the Sign I have waited for has come. Ramos knows, and it is only a matter of time now. It doesn't matter whether it's true about his wife or not, but I think it is because how else would he know about *me*? If God put it into Ramos' suffering mind and heart . . . and then sent him here. Yes, I'm sure of that now—God sent him here.

I shall pray and admit before Him the fullness of my guilt, and give my thanks to God. And be forgiven. But there will be time after I have taken them. I shall need a glass of water.

15.

WALTER PETTIJOHN

Frank Ramos stuck his head into my office and asked, "Busy, Cap?"

"Come in, Frank," I said. "Sit down. Back a day early, huh?"

"Yeah. Had some personal business to take care of. How's everything?"

"Quiet. Frank, you're looking fine." He was; he was looking better than I'd seen him look in a long time.

"I *feel* fine," he said. "Maybe I should get shot oftener."

"How's the arm? Sure you're ready to start work again?"

"It's okay," he said, and flexed it. "A little twinge once in a while, but it healed nicely. Yes, I'm ready."

"Where did you go?"

"Down to Guaymas. Just lazed around on the beach the first week, but I did some fishing the second. How's Red?"

"On his honeymoon. He wanted his vacation early and I gave it to him. He got married a few days after you left. He'll be back Monday. Say, Frank, you wouldn't have been seeing the Tucson papers down there, would you?"

"Nope. Been out of touch. Why?"

"Funny thing happened. John Medley committed suicide."

"The hell," he said. "When did it happen?"

"Probably the night of the day you left. His body wasn't found for two days, though. Red's mother-in-law, next door, got worried when she hadn't seen him around so Red went over and looked in the bedroom window and saw him. On the bed, but fully dressed. You know, Frank, I did some thinking and I wonder if you could be right about him. About his having killed Stiffler, if not some others. He *could*

have been a psychopath. I didn't spot him for one, but you can't always tell them."

Frank nodded, and did not seem surprised. "Did he leave a note?"

"No, he didn't. But there was one odd thing. We had to go through his papers of course before the inquest and we learned from some of them that he'd been married and his wife was killed in an auto accident seven years ago, not too long before he moved here. I wonder why he told us he'd been a bachelor, and I wonder if there was anything funny about that accident."

"Could be," Frank said. "But it's too bad he didn't leave a note so we could at least have written the Stiffler case off the books."

"Yes," I said, "too bad."

There was a short silence. "Frank — you didn't ask how Medley killed himself."

He looked at me and I thought, the way his face showed nothing,

that he was a better detective than I'd ever given him credit for.

"I know you're interested, Frank. He used sleeping pills."

"I'll be damned."

"The same kind they found in Winkelman."

His face showed almost nothing. "The other box," I said, "the box next to a wine bottle and two glasses we found out in the living room — they were a different kind. After I got the pathologist's report and was sure, I had that box destroyed. The fingerprints on it weren't Medley's."

Hardly a muscle moved, only a tiny flicker in his eyes. "You're the boss, Cap. Sometimes we'll have a talk about it, yes? Over a steak maybe?"

"We'll do that."

Frank sat back in the chair and sighed. "Well, at least he won't be killing anybody else, Cap."

"I guess that's the main thing, isn't it, Frank?"

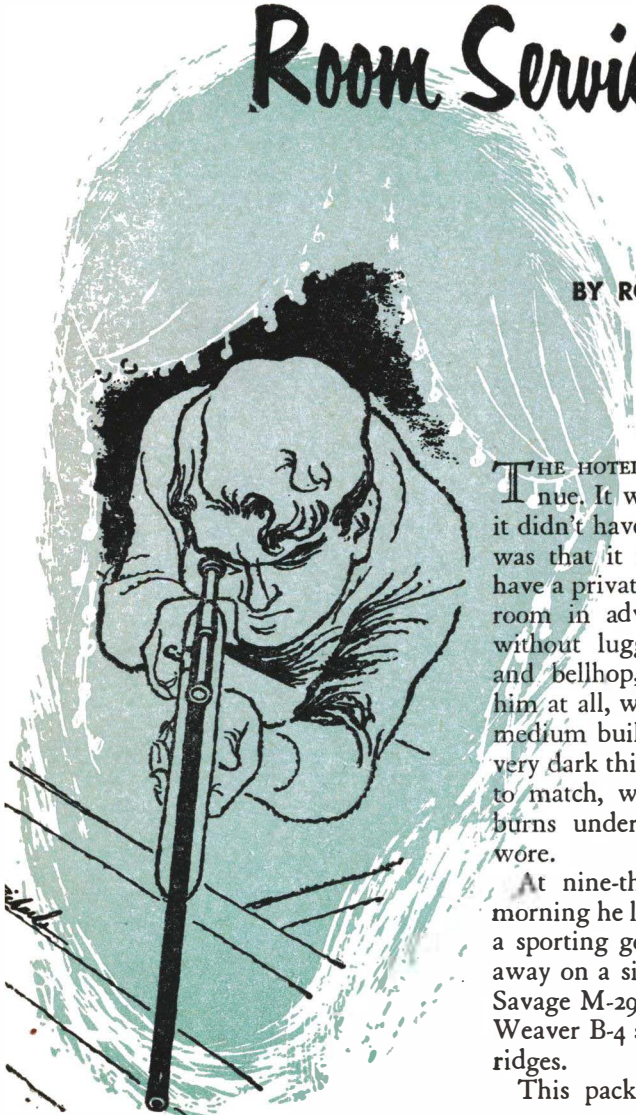
Excerpts from lyrics of songs of Tom Lehrer on page 74.
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He didn't need a fancy room for the job. Just one from which to put the rifle on-target

Room Service

BY ROBERT TURNER



THE HOTEL was on Central Avenue. It wasn't much of a hotel; it didn't have to be. All he required was that it face the street, that it have a private bath. He paid for the room in advance and checked in without luggage. The desk clerk and bellhop, if they remembered him at all, would say that he was a medium built man with grey eyes, very dark thick brows and mustache to match, with longish dark sideburns under the checked cap he wore.

At nine-thirty of that Saturday morning he left the hotel and visited a sporting goods store three blocks away on a side street. He bought a Savage M-29 rifle, equipped with a Weaver B-4 scope and a box of cartridges.

This package he carried to the

nearby bus station and in the privacy of a Men's Room booth, unwrapped the gun. He then placed the rifle under his shirt and trousers, the stock up under his arm, the barrel pointing down past his hip, along his thigh, and held it there with a hand thrust into the trouser pocket on that side.

With the long jacket he wore and moving slowly, carefully, there was only a barely noticeable stiffness to his gait when he left. The gun was completely hidden. He passed several thousand people lined up along Central to watch the parade. None of them paid the slightest attention to him. He was back in the hotel room by ten o'clock.

In the bathroom he shaved off the artificially darkened mustache and sideburns. He washed the dark shoe polish from his brows and the part of his hair that had been visible under the cap. He was once again a smooth-faced young man who looked a lot younger than twenty-five. His hair was thick and wavy and strikingly blond.

Next, he placed on the dresser a map of the parade route, torn from a local newspaper. It showed where the parade would pass at fifteen minute intervals. He studied this for the hundredth time and figured that it would pass the hotel—that is, the lead factions would—at about ten-fifty. It was ten-fifteen but his movements weren't hurried.

It took him five minutes to load the rifle, check the mechanism and,

standing by the window looking down, to adjust the scope.

After that he took from his pocket half a dozen pictures cut not too neatly from newspapers. Two of them showed a girl alone; she wore a swim suit and a Beauty Queen crown. She was about nineteen and startlingly beautiful, with a fine, supple body and silky, shoulder-length black hair. She had soft dark eyes and the kind of cute features that radiated what photographers called sweet sex.

In the rest of the pictures she was with a man. He was at least thirty years older. He was not especially handsome but there was a mature, arrogant animal attractiveness about him. The very way he carried his blond head bespoke wealth, influence and power. He and the girl were posed in these pictures against outdoor sport backgrounds. The man looked as though he was thoroughly enjoying himself. The girl didn't; she tried to look that way but didn't quite make it. In all of these pictures the girl was either clinging to the man's arm or holding his hand, timorously.

The last picture showed the same couple in formal wedding attire. In this one the girl for the first time looked radiantly happy and the man a trifle uncertain in his smile.

The youth in the hotel room studied all of these photos for some while, then he took the wedding picture and held it in his left hand and struck a match with his right

and applied the flame to a corner. The bright orange light flickered across his face, making it look even more young and fair and boyish. His features displayed no emotion of any kind. The fingers that held the burning piece of paper until the last possible moment did not tremble. He dropped the charred ash onto the floor and stamped on it. He began to whistle, then, no particular tune, just a sound.

In a few moments he stopped whistling and cocked his head, listening to the sound of parade music, faint, still a number of blocks away, but audible now. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his finger prints from the places in the room that he had touched. He put the razor back together and stuck it into his pocket with the cap and then put on the pair of rubber gloves he'd bought at a drug store.

He picked up the rifle and moved to the window, threw it wide. There were dingy green drapes hanging on each side of the window. Practicing, he found that he could stand back from the window and just to one side and he would be shielded enough by the drapes not to be seen from the street. Yet he could aim the rifle at anything across the whole width of the street at a slight angle to the window.

Now, with the window open, the parade music was louder. Tubas and French horns burped and oompahed and bagpipes sent out their eerie skirling. The sound of a

crowd's applause moved slowly nearer along with the first factions of the parade, still two blocks away.

In front of the hotel both sides of the street were now packed seven or eight deep with onlookers. Looking out the window, he could see at least ten policemen stationed along the block. Directly across from his window there was an office building but it was Saturday and a holiday and the offices were closed. There were a few people on the roof over there but the angle was wrong and they couldn't see him when he stood back and to one side of the window.

As the lead faction of the parade entered the block he left the window and walked to the dresser. He looked once more at the pictures of the young girl and the older man. He looked at them one by one and then picked them up one by one, crumpling them in his fist and then dropped the little wads to the floor.

Back at the window he saw that the parade was approaching the hotel. A color guard of marines in bright dress uniform was in front. Behind them at a discreet distance were three shining new automobiles carrying officials. All were convertibles. All had the tops down.

They were in the center automobile, the beautiful young woman and the middle-aged man. They weren't wearing wedding attire today, though. She was bareheaded and wearing a white angora sweater with glittering sequins emphasizing the sharp breastline. She wore a

pleated light skirt. She looked very young and vivacious and alive as she turned her head and her smile from side to side, slowly, waving to the crowds lining the street.

The man today wore a dark suit that made him look slimmer. The brilliant sun showed slightly, if you looked carefully, where he'd bleached the gray out of his thick blond hair. But his smile flashed brightly. He and the girl held hands tightly between them.

Just back and out of sight at the hotel room window, the Savage M-29's barrel raised, the rifleman squinted through the scope, lining up his target against the cross hairs. The band music, almost directly below, now, was deafening. A well manicured slim finger squeezed the trigger of the M-29. The sound of the shot was not noticeable in the hubbub of crowd sounds and the blended blare of many parade bands.

In the middle car leading the parade, the girl with the long dark hair slumped forward. In that position the hole under the thick hair at her left temple was not visible. It was at least several minutes before anyone discovered that she had not just fainted, and the parade was halted half a block further on. By that time the hotel room was empty,

except for the new rifle flung across the bed and the small crumpled wads of paper and the charred ash on the floor. The hotel fire exit led into an alley which ran out onto a back street.

That was ten fifty-one that Saturday morning.

At eleven-thirty, the blond young man from the hotel room was sitting in the trophy den—his favorite place—of his own home out in the suburbs. He was drinking a gin and tonic. He was quite relaxed.

From time to time he looked at the array of hunting, fishing and golf trophies lining the shelves and walls and the great number of photographs that accompanied them. He was in all of these pictures—taken on rifle ranges, golf and tennis club lawns, on fishing wharves and in front of hunting lodges—and in all of them he was varying younger ages, right up to the past year.

In all of them, too, a big, arrogantly successful looking middle-aged man, not quite as blond as himself, stood next to him. Their arms were always either locked together or about each others shoulders.

He waited there quite patiently like that for his father to come home again—to stay, now, he hoped.



IT WAS NEAR midnight and the streets were sullenly quiet. His heels clattered dully on the sidewalk as he walked along the row of cheap furnished apartments, looking up at the numbers on the dingy brownstones. He finally stopped and mounted the steps of the building he sought, glancing casually at the old man on the top step in his undershirt, searching for a wisp of reviving breeze. He scanned the names on the mailboxes in the dimly lit vestibule, then climbed the flight of rickety wooden stairs to the second floor, pausing at the landing and scrutinizing the shadowy cor-

Dry Run

BY NORMAN STRUBER



Pretty was a real gunman now, out on his first job. He knew, as he touched his .45, that nothing could go wrong . . .

ridor with its closed doors.

He was small and light framed, and young, the Palm Beach hat pulled low over his pale eyes. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his face and neck, softly cursing the humid heat, twitching his nose sourly at the stale cooking odors lingering on the heavy air. A fan hummed faintly through the walls, and the whimper of a child broke the stillness for a brief moment. One of the doors opened, casting a slab of yellow light into the hallway. A flabby man in sodden pajama bottoms stepped partly into the hallway, placed a milk bottle on the floor, glanced at him unconcernedly and yawned, and ducked back into the apartment. He stood in the shadows for a few moments and waited, listening.

He'd finally been assigned to a real job and he felt elated over this long awaited chance to break into the big-time. Vito wanted him as one of his regulars and all he had to do was prove that he was worthy of that trust. No more petty stick-ups, stealing cars, running from the cops. After tonight, he'd be on his way to a solid future.

All he had to do was pass this test, pull a clean job. A gun wanting to go to work for Vito had to try out on a dry run before being put on the regular payroll. Like trying out for a baseball team. Vito was the coach, and he wanted none but the best in his lineup. That's why his setup was still going

strong, while most of the others had folded and cut out when the cops threw the pressure on. The little Sicilian was a sharp brain, careful, on the ball. Nobody was going to get the chance to knock the pins out from under *him*. Nobody was even going to work up steam about it, without being given plenty of time to cool off in that big filing cabinet downtown.

All of Vito's boys stuck together, worked like a team, took orders without question. A guy had real security in an outfit like that, not having to worry about being ratted on. Then, too, Vito wasn't going to live forever. Everybody dies, even from natural causes. A guy who was hip, and ambitious enough, could shoulder his way in as top man some day. Sure, he mused, the guy who takes over from Vito has himself a mighty sweet setup. But a guy'd have to bide his time, learn the operation thoroughly before making his move. After tonight's job he'd at least have his start. He'd be in as one of Vito's regulars.

He'd be *in*, but good.

He adjusted his jacket so that the bulge under his left shoulder wouldn't show. "Make sure your suits are roomy in the chest," Vito'd said. "I don't want any of my boys advertising their trade." He grinned to himself proudly, remembering that he'd been referred to as one of the boys. He figured Vito was confident that he was going to come off tonight in grand form. "Give him

the money first, if you have to," he'd been instructed, "but make sure you get him."

He stuck his hand under the jacket flap, set the .45 loose in the holster, and flipped off the safety.

He walked to the door at the end of the corridor, lit a match to check the apartment number. Balling his hand, he reached out and knocked three times in rapid succession, paused, rapped twice more. He could hear the floorboards moan near the door, and then the deep muffled voice coming from the other side.

"Who is it?"

"It's me. Pretty," he whispered, his mouth close to the jamb. "Vito sent me."

There was a long silence before the door chain scraped noisily, and the lock clicked. Then the door creaked back slowly, gradually revealing nothing but black emptiness within. He stood there peering into the darkened room, aware of fresh drops of perspiration crawling over his face.

Easy, he told himself. *Play it easy.*

"Come on in," the voice said.

He sucked in a deep breath and moved in warily, his eyes darting back and forth in the darkness, his body tense. Suddenly a bare light bulb flashed into life overhead, glaring wildly across his eyes for an instant, startling, like a bolt of lightning. He blinked and spun around, his hand reflexing toward his shoulder at the sound of the door

clicking shut behind him. His hand hung in mid air as he stared at the weird looking muzzle leveled steadily at his middle. He recognized the silencer, knowing that it was standard equipment with most hired guns these days.

The man was at least six-three, and broad, with hard black eyes, and straight black hair that fell over his wide forehead and almost touched his shaggy brows. He let his meaty hand drop from the light switch.

"Pretty, huh?" the big man scoffed.

"That's right. You're Moran, aren't you?"

The big man kept looking at his bony acne-scarred face, a wry grin forming on his lips. "Yeah. I'm Moran." The dark eyes probed at him. "Pretty. That's real sharp. Who tagged that one on you, kid?"

He worked his jaw muscles, trying to control his anger. He knew it'd be suicide to go for his gun now.

"Vito," he said. "Vito calls me that."

"The little wop's got a sense of humor, huh, kid? Not much for brains, but that Vito's sure got a sense of humor." Moran kept smiling and let the gun sag a few inches, invitingly. Moran chuckled and then said, "Have you got the dough, Pretty?"

Pretty nodded, feeling his face flush. He resented being ribbed about his looks, and he figured on

placing at least one shot on Moran's grin before he left. Vito hadn't told him why Moran had to be taken care of, it was just a job, but now he had personal reasons for wanting to blast Moran.

"Let's have it," Moran ordered.

Sure, he thought. With pleasure.

He reached toward his inside pocket and caught sight of the silencer leaping up and the thick white knuckle pressed over the trigger. He froze, glaring at the gun and then at the menacing look on Moran's face. He swallowed, tried to hold his voice even.

"Hell, Moran, what're you so jumpy about? Don't you want your loot?"

He watched the big man, scarcely breathing. *The sonofabitch is sharp*, he thought. *Maybe once he's got the bread, he'll relax. Maybe he won't be so edgy then and I can make my play.*

"Cool off, will you?" he said.

Moran stepped toward him, tilting the gun up toward his head. "Take it slow, kid. Don't rip your suit."

Cautiously, Pretty slid his hand past the leather, slowly removing the envelope and handing it to Moran. Moran took it with his free hand, making Pretty turn around while he slipped the flap open and thumbed through the bills.

"Looks like the fifteen-hundred's all here," Moran said with satisfaction. "You can turn around now, kid," he added casually.

Pretty turned and faced Moran again, surprised that he'd been carrying that kind of loot. Fifteen hundred bucks, just for blasting a guy. He didn't think any gun ever collected that much for a job. Fifteen hundred bucks. Christ, *he* was going to kill Moran for nothing. Just for Vito. Just to prove that he was a capable gun. He wondered how much a job like this was worth. Plenty, he figured. Especially with the chances he was taking with a shrewd apple like Moran.

"Sorry for the big production," Moran said, "but I've got to be careful about guys that Vito sends around."

"That's okay," he said, expecting Moran to put the gun up now.

"No hard feelings, kid?"

"No."

Moran stuffed the envelope in his pocket, dropped his gun hand to his side. "How about a drink, Pretty?"

"Okay," he said, stepping with Moran to the cheap veneered table in the middle of the room. He looked up at Moran, his mind picturing the big man sprawled out on the floor, no more than a foot high in that position.

Moran poured into two glasses, watching Pretty out of the corner of his eye, his finger still wrapped around the trigger. "Bottoms up, kid," he said.

He picked up the glass Moran had poured for him. A double. Reluctantly, he brought the glass to

his lips and swallowed hard, avoiding Moran's gaze, not wanting him to see the tears that came to his eyes as the whiskey seared its way down his throat. He glanced down and toed the floor, waiting for the burning to pass, hoping Moran wouldn't ask him to have another.

Moran poured two more.

"You handled yourself great, kid. A guy's got to have nerve to come up here for Vito. I like a guy with nerve."

He forced a small smile. "I didn't think there was anything to worry about. I only came up here to deliver the loot."

Moran studied him seriously, picked up a lit cigarette butt from the ash tray. "Yeah. I know. I suppose Vito's got you snowed like all the rest of them."

He glanced up at Moran suspiciously.

Moran downed his drink, licked his lips. "Sure, he really must have snowed you good, figuring you was just a kid and didn't know any better."

What kind of a con job was Moran trying to pull on him, he wondered? Moran couldn't be wise to what he intended to do. No. He couldn't be. An experienced killer like Moran would never have let him live this long if he suspected the real reason Vito sent him.

"Snowed me about what?" he asked.

"You know. That horse manure about teamwork. Loyalty. All that

wind about keeping his boys out of trouble with the law."

"Everybody knows Vito's got a solid outfit."

"Who's everybody, kid? You and Vito? Did you ever talk to any of the others?"

"Nobody talks much about Vito. It isn't healthy."

"I'm talking about him, ain't I? And I'm feeding it to you straight, kid. I've been around a long time and I happen to be in the know. Vito makes promises that don't pay off, and the boys don't like being swung."

Pretty thought of all that gold he'd just turned over to Moran. "You got paid off, didn't you?"

"Damn right. That greasy Sicilian knows better than to try to hold out on *me*. He knows that, all right."

Moran evidently had no fears about Vito, Pretty was thinking. None at all, otherwise he wouldn't be talking like that. It could be that Vito didn't want anyone to know why it was so important that Moran got taken. Maybe Vito had reasons to be afraid . . . Moran was talking . . . getting at something, and he wanted to hear about it. Besides, Moran was still holding the gun. It'd be foolish for him to try anything now, he reasoned.

"How come you're feeding me all this info, Moran?"

Moran tilted the bottle into his glass again, sat down, laying the gun on the table in front of him.

"Are you really interested? Or are you just stalling around to hear me out, so you can go blabbing to Vito?"

"Vito don't own me. Whatever you give out stays between my ears."

"Now you're talking. I got a hunch you're just the guy I've been looking for."

"For what?"

Moran tossed his drink down, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "To gun Vito."

The words knifed through him, splashed against his brain. He felt a sudden chill, despite the stifling closeness of the small room. He'd never thought of Vito in that light before. A corpse. It was as if he'd suddenly realized that Vito was just vulnerable flesh, like everyone else. He felt himself trembling a little, fought to shake it off.

"Are you scared like the rest of them, Pretty?"

He didn't say anything.

Moran reached into his pocket and took out the envelope, counting off five one hundred bills. "Have I got the right guy?" he said, dropping the bills on the table.

Pretty eyed all that gold, not saying anything.

"Go ahead and take it," Moran said, pushing the money toward Pretty.

Pretty worked his fingers at his sides, tongued his lips. "No. I didn't say I'd do it." He looked down at the big man, frowning.

DRY RUN

"You're sure hopped up about Vito, aren't you, Moran? How come it's so important that Vito gets blasted?"

Moran stabbed a cigarette from his shirt pocket, lit it with the butt. "Okay, kid. No reason why I shouldn't let you in. I want to take over. It's all set with the boys, too. Only Vito's being stubborn about it."

"Why don't you do it yourself then? *You* scared?"

"No. Vito's always contacted me through one of the boys, and he'd get suspicious if I was to suddenly pay him a visit. But it'd be easy for you, Pretty."

He remembered that he was supposed to meet Vito alone tonight, to return the loot after he'd taken care of Moran. It would be easy, he thought.

"Why me?" Pretty asked. "Why not one of the others?"

Moran shrugged, pulled five more bills out of the envelope and stacked them neatly on the table with the others. "None of them have the nerve to do it. No ambition, either, I guess."

"What's in it for me . . . if Vito goes?" he asked, sounding out for the meaning behind Moran's mention of "ambition."

"You'd be my right hand, Pretty. Second from the top."

At least Moran was being honest, he figured, not trying to feed him any garbage about sharing the take as partners. He realized that he

was too inexperienced to just step in and try to run things. It was reasonable that Moran should want to run the set-up, with a good right hand man.

"Maybe after Vito's out you'd forget all about your promise," he said. "How do I know *you* ain't snowing me?"

Moran smiled knowingly. "We'd *have* to trust each other, wouldn't we, kid?"

Sure, he thought. Moran knew damn well he'd get *his* in the event of a double cross. Anyone that had the nerve to blast Vito wouldn't think twice about gunning Moran. He reached out and fingered the neat stack on the table, then picked it up slowly, a pleasant excitement surging through him at the feel of the clean crisp bills.

"What do you say, kid?" Moran asked anxiously. "Are you with me?"

He glanced at Moran. "It's risky. Damn risky. I don't know."

"The grand pays for the risk, kid."

"Not enough. I figure I'm entitled to at least fifteen hundred for this job."

Moran's smile broadened. "You learn fast, huh, Pretty?"

"Fifteen hundred, or no dice."

"You'll take care of Vito tonight?"

"Sure. For fifteen hundred."

Moran tossed the envelope on the table, looking at Pretty. "Okay, kid. But do the job right."

He picked up the envelope, thinking it was funny the way things turn out. After tonight, he'd figured on being set up good with Vito, then he'd gradually work his way up. Now, it was all going to happen very fast. He'd learn a lot being next to the top, and when he felt ready he'd make sure Moran went into retirement. Like Moran had arranged to retire Vito. That's the way it was done. All a guy needed was nerve and ambition.

He slid the rest of the bills into the envelope and stuck it in his pocket.

"Drink up, kid," Moran said, motioning with his hand.

"No thanks. I'd better cut out. Vito'll be waiting for me by now."

Moran stood up, towering over him, slapped him on the shoulder. "Yeah. You'd better be going. Good luck, kid."

"Thanks. I'll drop in later on."

"You do that."

Pretty started for the door, planning on meeting Vito with his gun drawn, not wanting to take any unnecessary chances.

"Say, Pretty," Moran called.

"Yeah?" he answered, turning. "Vito's going to feel awful bad about this, kid."

"Oh . . . sure," he laughed. "Awful bad. He's going to feel — —" He choked off the rest, seeing the silencer leveled at him again.

"Vito thought you'd pass the test for sure, kid. He's going to be awful disappointed."

"The *test*? . . ." he started, gaping at Moran. "But you said . . ."

"Rot in hell, you crummy bastard!"

Pretty jerked the .45 from under his shoulder, swung it around and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. He squeezed again, fran-

tically. Twice more. The gun wouldn't fire. It was the gun Vito had given him.

He stared at Moran, pleading, "No! . . . Christ, no . . . don't . . ."

Moran grinned, and then the gun recoiled in his hand with a deadly whisper.



Barreled Booze

A federal grand jury in Louisville, Ky., recently returned indictments charging failure to pay government taxes on whisky against 15 Nelson County men. Federal investigators said the men purchased 16,000 used whisky barrels, took them to farms in Nelson and Anderson Counties and obtained whisky from them by steaming the barrels. They estimated that each barrel steamed yielded almost a gallon of whisky, and the tax is \$10.50 a gallon.

Basement Bandits

In Chicago, Mrs. Lillian Gordon, cashier at the Regal Currency Exchange, opened the office and began counting out money for the day's business. Suddenly she saw the wastebasket move, and a man wearing a paper sack with eyeholes over his head arose through a hole in the floor. He had a gun in his hand. The man and a companion, who also emerged from the hole, seized \$6,000 while Mrs. Gordon watched in amazement. They disappeared through the hole.

Police said the bandits apparently broke into the basement during the night, cut the hole in the floor, covered it with the wastebasket, then waited for Mrs. Gordon to arrive and open the safe.

Sheep's Clothing

According to Upland, Calif., authorities, Henry Yahn, 27, was in the habit of wearing a choir robe and carrying a Bible when he went to church. He was recently arrested and charged with burglarizing four churches. Police accused him of taking over \$300 and several typewriters and movie projectors.



One Way or the Other

BY JOHN R. STARR

I HAD THE telephone to my ear before the echo of the first ring finished bouncing off the walls.

"Jordan," I identified myself.

"I just took a man up, Mr. Jordan. Two-three minutes ago."

"Good! Thanks, Charley. Say, Charley, was he blond?"

"Couldn't tell, Mr. Jordan. He had a hat on."

"But about six feet, tanned, with a scar under his left eye? A crescent-shaped scar."

She could have saved him. For a lousy seventy-five bucks in alimony she could have saved him

"He was about six and pretty tanned. Look, Mr. Jordan, I got to get back to the elevator, the buzzer is going off like crazy. Okay?"

"Sure, Charley," I said exuberantly. "You've made yourself five bucks. Thanks again."

"Okay, Mr. Jordan."

I cradled the receiver and lit a cigarette. Then I went to the bureau and poured myself a healthy shot of bourbon. I'd give him twenty minutes. Twenty minutes to get down to serious business with my wife before I called the house detective.

I took the drink over by the door so I could hear him if this was just a social visit and he decided to leave before the twenty minutes were up. This was my big chance and I wasn't going to muff it. I'd been two years trying to get grounds on Sally, two long, bitter years with Marion waiting tenderly, lovingly, patiently while Sally's separate maintenance ate up so much of my hundred a week we couldn't even go to a good night spot on Saturday nights. I nursed the whiskey, trying to speed the hands of the clock with concentration.

At 3:30 I called Branton. Minutes later his soft, obsequious knock sounded at the door. I let him in quietly. He smiled his oily smile and asked, "Still there?"

I had to bite my tongue to keep from wiping that smile off his face with my fist. I tried to sound worried instead of mad. "My God, Tom,

you don't think I'd have called you if he weren't."

Branton lit a cigarette and blew smoke rings. He seemed to be enjoying my discomfort. "Just checking, Brad, old pal," he said. "It's worth my job if he isn't."

"It's worth a hundred to you if he is. He's there all right." My fists clinched in anger. I'd spent a month cultivating that greasy little dick. He wasn't going to back out on me now."

"Okay," he said, shrugging. "Ready?"

"Sure."

We went into the hall. When he knocked on Sally's door, it was a bold, demanding rap, but it got no answer. He repeated it. There was a stirring in the apartment and Sally called weakly, "Just a minute."

Branton rocked on his heels, studying the ceiling. I wasn't as calm. For want of something better to do with my hands, I jammed them in my pockets. I was suddenly ashamed. I wanted to grab Branton and hustle him away from there before Sally opened the door, but the cool, sweet thought of Marion drifted into my mind and I steeled myself to go through with it.

Sally opened the door slightly. Her hair was mussed, her negligee gaping open like it had been put on in a hurry. She studied Branton in puzzlement, then she saw me. A hard film of hate glazed her eyes for a moment and when it passed, her eyes were full of fear.

“Wh-what do you want?” she stammered to Branton.

“House detective, ma’am,” Branton said officiously, flipping out his billfold to show his badge. “This gentleman filed a complaint about a wild party in this room.”

Sally glanced wildly over her shoulder then snarled at me. Her eyes never left mine as she said to Branton, “There’s nobody here but me.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Branton said. “I’ll have to come in to check.”

Sally started to delay, but she knew and I knew and Branton knew there was no other way out of the apartment. I’d lived there six months myself and the only window opened on a sheer wall ten stories off the ground.

Sally stepped aside. Branton barged into the apartment. Sally spat an obscenity as I passed her following him.

Branton made a thorough search of the living room, bedroom, kitchenette apartment. He was less sure of himself with each door he opened. When only the kitchen was left, sick, apprehensive dread had replaced the jaunty confidence in his face. His upper lip was tight and pale under the hairline mustache as he approached the pantry, the last place in the apartment large enough to conceal a man.

He laid a sweating hand on the knob and flung open the door. The pantry held a broom, a mop, a carpet sweeper and its walls were hung

with assorted pots and pans. Nothing else. Certainly not a man. Sally’s chuckle floated over us from the kitchenette door.

Branton tried to fry me with a glare before he apologized abjectly to Sally. She sneered, at him but mostly at me.

“Do your apologizing to the manager,” she told Branton, who seemed to dissolve before the threat. She put on a nasty leer. “Really, Brad, you should know me better than that.”

As Branton cowered before her, my fear turned to anger. I tried to snarl into that leer and failed, but I managed to talk.

“He was here, Sally, I know he was here,” I shouted. “I heard him come in.”

Her eyelids fluttered in virginal innocence. Branton slumped against the wall. He wanted out of there, but he didn’t have the nerve to push past Sally who was blocking the door.

“Why Brad, whoever could you mean?” she said with a simper.

I pushed past her then and headed for the exit, but I remembered it wouldn’t cost anymore to have the last word and I decided to have it. I halted in the middle of the parlor and swung to face her.

As I turned I saw the fingertips on the windowsill, fingertips strained white from the effort of holding Joe Barclay’s 185 pounds against the smooth brick wall.

Sally couldn’t misinterpret my

smile then. She knew I knew and she was scared again.

"Get out of here! Get out of here!" she screamed.

Branton trailed her into the living room. He was working up a get tough expression for me, but he wasn't going to hurry me. Not now.

"I'll go, Sally, when you tell me you'll give me a divorce," I said.

Her eyes asked me why I didn't just point out Barclay's fingers to Branton and I'd have it. I couldn't have answered that. I was on top and enjoying it. I could sweat it as long as she could. Branton's back was to the window. He couldn't see the fingers. Sally and I watched them, frantically seeking a better grip on the windowsill which was dark and slippery with sweat.

"I'm through paying seventy-five bucks a week so you can support Joe Barclay, Sally. One way or an-

other, I'm through supporting Joe Barclay after today."

"Go to hell," she spit at me.

Branton had had enough. He took me roughly by the shoulder and shoved me toward the door. I struggled with him. Superman couldn't have pushed me out of that room right then.

The muscles in Sally's neck stood out like guy ropes and her face was a mask of pain. It was hard to push back against Branton and watch the window at the same time. If I could hold him just a moment more, she had to break.

Then the fingertips disappeared from the windowsill. After a long moment the faint sound of a woman's scream climbed from the street. I quit fighting Branton.

"One way or another, Sally," I cried as he pushed me into the hall.

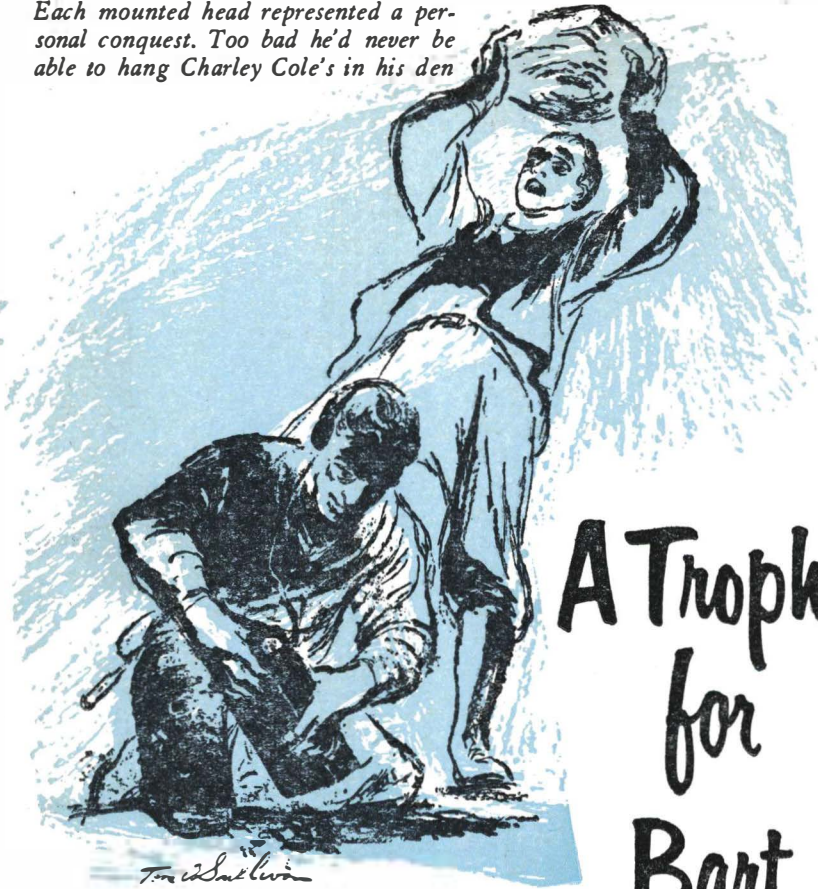
I may never get to marry Marion but it was worth it to see her face.



In Greenwich, Conn., Robert Drew, 23, appeared barefooted in city court when arraigned on theft charges. His only pair of shoes and socks had been identified as stolen with other articles from a country club. They were being used as evidence.

Police Sgt. Keith McKay, of Pasadena, Calif., reports that a woman recently phoned him and asked if she could paint her auto license plates pale pink to match the color of her car. When she was told that she couldn't, she replied: "That's ridiculous. I see cars with different colored plates almost every day."

Each mounted head represented a personal conquest. Too bad he'd never be able to hang Charley Cole's in his den



A Trophy for Bart

BY
JAMES CHARLES LYNCH

THIS WAS the hour Bart Owen liked best, the idle time before dinner after a good day's work. Whirling the ice cubes in the glass he held he relaxed and gazed possessively at the mounted heads adorning the walls of the den. Each one of those trophies represented a personal conquest and Bart thought it too bad that he would never be able to mount Charley Cole's head

with the others. Charley Cole had been his latest conquest. He had killed Charles William Cole less than twelve hours ago.

Grace, Bart's wife, came in and he smiled possessively at her. Grace was a conquest, too. A slim, graceful and beautiful woman with dark, shining hair. A woman who thought it a wife's duty to keep her husband happy, though Bart clung to a certain mental reservation about that. He felt quite positive that Grace's attitude was usually the case when a relatively poor girl married a relatively wealthy man. A man could always trust a woman to try and hang onto a good thing.

Bart stared speculatively at Grace now and wondered if she would change when they became real rich, thanks to Charley Cole. The soon-to-come wealth would be community property. Half of it would belong to Grace and the possession of security in her own right might change her. Well, if it did, that situation could be taken care of. Any difference in Grace would be quick to show. She was too naive a woman to hide anything from Bart Owen.

Bart raised his glass. "One before dinner, dear?"

"No thanks, darling," Grace murmured. She sat down on the ottoman in front of Bart's chair, curled her nice legs under her and frowned. "You know something, Bart. It *is* strange."

"What is?"

"About Charley Cole," Grace murmured. "He's not home yet."

Bart did not hesitate. He had it all figured out. "Charley go someplace?"

"He left sometime between seven and eight this morning," Grace explained. "About the time you must have started out to go surf fishing. Marie thought he had gone with you. She's worried."

"I don't blame Marie for getting worried," declared Bart. "Charley's making a uranium widow out of her, that's what he's doing. Ever since he bought that damned Geiger counter he spends every free minute prowling around the desert. He won't even talk about fishing any more."

Bart felt smug and satisfied with that play on words. Marie could go ahead and start worrying because she was really and truly a widow. A piece of uranium ore had made her that way. And Charley wouldn't talk about fishing any more. Charley wouldn't talk about anything. That's what happened to men who got greedy.

"I told her Charley probably hadn't gone with you," Grace murmured. "But I don't think she believes me."

Bart frowned and thought for a moment and then said, "Isn't that a rather strange attitude for Marie to take? Why should she doubt your word? She didn't *see* Charley drive off with me, did she?"

"Heavens no," Grace told him.

"Marie didn't even wake up until nine o'clock. She just thought that because Charley didn't take their car and ours was gone . . ."

"That's typical feminine reasoning," Bart muttered. "Charley could have gone away with any of the dozen uranium nuts he's taken up with since the bug bit him." A stray thought caught in his mind then and he stared shrewdly at Grace. "You don't think Charley went with me, do you? What I mean is, you don't think I'm covering up some date he might have made with another woman or something?"

Grace patted his knee, stood up and smiled at him, amused. "If he had gone with you he would have come back with you, darling. Especially if he had gone with you for that last reason. I'll see about dinner, now."

Alone again, Bart refilled his glass and smiled. There was nothing to worry about. Not a blessed thing. To further convince himself he reviewed all the facts.

Fact: Around seven-fifteen that morning, Bart Owen was stowing his fishing gear in the trunk of his car when Charley Cole came through the gate in the fence separating their back yards, and on into the garage.

"Hi there, Bart!" Charley said.

Charley was a lean, hard-bodied man of thirty-five, a top aircraft engineer and a man men liked.

Right now he wore scuffed field boots, khaki pants rolled up at the cuffs and a comfortably aged blue, wool shirt. A Geiger counter in a zippered canvas case hung from his left shoulder by a leather strap.

"The old desert rat in person," Bart said, grinning. "Where to today, son?"

"Red Rock Canyon, partner," Charley said beaming. "Why not come with me, Bart? Maybe we'll both be rich by tonight."

"Charley, for God's sake," chided Bart. "Stop dreaming. Practically every square foot of California has been gone over with a Geiger counter by now. You haven't got a chance."

"Not every square foot," Charley argued, stubbornly. "Has any one ever checked your back yard?"

"No," admitted Bart. "Why don't you do that now, Charley, and make it unanimous?"

"Never can tell," declared Charley as he started to unzipper the cover of his precious instrument.

Before Bart could get a cigaret lit, Charley's eyes grew wide and staring and he cried, "Bart! Look!"

The Geiger counter was wildly activated.

Fact: They found the source of attraction in a few minutes. Grace always accompanied Bart on his hunting trips because he saw no reason to be away from her for any length of time. Grace had always gone without protest. She loved the

deep wilderness and the high, wind-swept mountain slopes, but she had a horror about killing and taking life, even animal life. So while Bart stalked and shot down his game, Grace collected rocks. A wide shelf over the garage work bench was cluttered with hunks of stone she had picked up.

Charley held a piece of ore in his shaking hands. A small chunk of brittle, sub-metallic and greasy-looking substance with brownish black and dark green streaks.

"Pitchblend!" Charley said. And then his words ran on, repeated over and over. "We're rich, Bart! We're rich!"

Bart's heart began to pound furiously to the rhythm of Charley Cole's words. Then some pilot light inside him, one he didn't even know he had, touched off a roaring conflagration.

At first it startled him, but as the heat burned away all the pretense from his soul he liked it. It caused him to think with a never before experienced clarity and it made him feel savage. He felt like smashing his fist into the face of greedy Charley Cole, but instinct told him that would not be final enough to dispose of a man who was bound and determined to cut himself in on another's good fortune.

"So you think there's enough for both of us, eh, Charley?" Bart heard himself say.

"You said it, partner," Charley replied, enthusiastically. "There'll

be plenty for all if we can find the ore body this rich." His enthusiasm faded to worry. "But suppose Grace can't remember where she found this stuff? Go wake her, Bart. Haul her out of bed. Make her remember."

Charley's entire attention was focused on the chunk of ore in his hand and Bart stared at him, contemptuously. He would make Grace remember when the time came. She would remember if he had to drag it out of her. But Charley Cole would not be around.

"There's no reason to wake Grace," he told Charley. "I can put my foot on the exact spot she picked up that stuff."

"Lord!" exclaimed Charley. "And you've been laughing at me for hunting it. Why, man, you've been walking across millions and didn't even know it! And you might never have known if I hadn't come along and . . ." He paused and looked up, embarrassed. "How do you like that? I guess it's a miracle."

"Yeah," Bart muttered. "It's a miracle."

"How far away is it?" Charley wanted to know. "We don't want to waste any time. Any minute some fellow might come along and—"

"We're not going to waste any time," Bart promised. "The place isn't more than an hour and a half drive from here. Let's get going."

With that Bart walked around

the car and slid under the wheel. Now that he had made up his mind he wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. Like Charley had said, a fellow might come along any time. The hard thing about this whole business was going to be the interval of waiting until the hue and cry about Charley Cole died down.

Fact: The rest had been comparatively easy. With Charley sitting beside him and speculating happily upon the future, Bart sped across San Fernando Valley, raced out through Mint Canyon and down to the floor of the Mojave Desert. There he turned back toward the mountains and finally halted the car in a now dry, boulder-strewn arroyo.

"This is it, Charley," Bart said. "Arroyo Coyote. The place Grace picked up that stuff is right there under that cutbank."

Charley Cole climbed out of the car, his cheeks jumping nervously with doubt. "You sure, Bart? Hell, this part of the country has been gone over like a twice-picked cotton field."

"I know," Bart confessed. "The last time I was up here after coyotes I wouldn't have dared pull the trigger if I had seen one. It would have been like shooting down Hollywood Boulevard at noon time. But this is it. I'll show you."

Bart led the way over to where the east bank of the steep-sided

arroyo had been deeply undercut by flash floods that rolled down this watercourse in past seasons to waste away in the desert sands. Climbing the talus rubble until he was close under the tilted ceiling of the undercut Bart stooped and lifted up a fifty-pound boulder.

"It was right here, Charley."

Still dubious, Charley shrugged the carrying strap of his instrument off his shoulder and when he bent to unzipper the cover Bart brought the heavy boulder down savagely onto the back of Charley's head. Without making a sound the man went limp and fell face down. Just to make sure, Bart took out his complicated fishing knife, snapped open a slender blade and drove it deep into Charley Cole's back.

That done, Bart pawed out a shallow grave with his hands, rolled his neighbor into it, covered him and then stood back and hurled small boulders at the ceiling of the undercut until a few tons of loose stuff fell away, effectively covering all traces of the grave. No one would ever find it. Even future rains would never disclose what had happened here. They were already building a dam further up in the mountains to trap the flood waters that once went to waste down this awesome wash. And the eternal winds that blew alternately from mountains and desert would cover all the tracks around here in a few hours.

The rest was routine. Bart had

told Grace he was going surf fishing, so he did. He drove back through Mint Canyon, cut over to Ventura, on the coast, and back south to Zuma Beach. There he assembled his tackle and made a few casts. He did more than this. Drawing on his experience he left enough sign in a half hour to convince any expert he had been there all day. Not that he thought it was necessary, but it was good insurance. It always paid to think ahead. That is how a man came up with fine trophies to mount on the walls of his den while other men came home empty handed . . .

Satisfied, Bart refilled his glass and relaxed just as the front door chimes sounded. Grace came hurrying to the den door.

"That's probably Marie," Grace whispered. "You just stay put, darling. I'll take care of her." She closed the door behind her.

She came back in a few minutes, too quickly to have talked Marie out of anything. She wore a puzzled frown and two young men dressed in sport coats and slacks followed her. Two tanned and healthy looking young men.

"This is my husband, gentlemen," Grace said, gesturing. And then, "Bart, these men are investigators from the sheriff's office. Mr. Hyland. And Mr. Norwig."

Bart felt a momentary tightening of his muscles, but he kept complete control of himself. Rising,

he smiled and shook hands with the pair. Hyland was tall and lean. Norwig was a shorter, compactly built man with keen, darting eyes. Neither, Bart thought, seemed overly bright.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Owen," Hyland said apologetically. "But Mrs. Cole, your neighbor, reported her husband missing. She seems to think he drove off with you, this morning."

Bart's tenseness evaporated. "That's what Mrs. Owen tells me," he said. "Mrs. Cole, however, is wrong. I went surf fishing and I'm quite positive Mr. Cole did not go with me."

"You went alone?" inquired Hyland.

"That's right," Bart answered. "Of course, if you want me to come up with an alibi, just because Cole is late getting home, I can't. There were not many people on the beach. Certainly none that I knew or who knew me. About the best I could do is show you where I fished. And my tackle. It's still in the car."

Hyland shook his head. "I don't think that will be necessary, Mr. Owen. How was fishing? I haven't wet a line for months."

"Bad," Bart told him. "I didn't get a bite." And now, because he knew he had the situation in hand, he decided he did not want to talk fishing with a couple of yokels from the sheriff's office.

"Getting back to Charley Cole," he went on. "I think Mrs. Cole's

worry about her husband is a little premature. As long as we have known her she has always set too much store in that myth women call feminine intuition. Charley will find his way home."

"I don't know whether or not feminine intuition is a myth or not," Hyland said, glancing appreciatively at Grace. "But you're right about Mr. Cole. Mrs. Cole knows where he is now."

Bart Owen felt himself shrink up as if a vacuum pump abruptly had exhausted his energy and his ability to think. And into the vacant areas inside him rushed fear. "She what?" he heard himself say. "She knows where Charley is?"

"That's right," said Norwig. "He's in the morgue. He's dead."

"He was murdered," explained Hyland.

"Murdered?" cried Grace. "Oh, no! Not Charley Cole. Who in the world would want to kill him? He was a wonderful man." She stopped with a choking sound, pressed a fist against her lips and stared at Bart.

"That's the one point we're stuck with, Mrs. Owen," complained Hyland. "Why would any one want to murder Mr. Cole? Apparently he had no enemies. Even his wife can't suggest a motive."

"Motive?" said Bart, grasping at straws. "That's right. You have to have a motive in order to know which direction to look for a killer, don't you?"

He looked at Grace then and

what he saw in her eyes shocked him. Either this once the thing they called feminine intuition was working or she was betraying a guilt that would have given him an acceptable motive for killing Charley Cole.

"Grace!" he snapped, sharply. "Get hold of yourself. Good God, this is serious business. Let's help these gentlemen all we can."

"I'll try," Grace promised, pulling herself together.

Bart turned to the two young men. "It's hard to believe, I'll tell you that. As Mrs. Owen said, who would want to murder Charley Cole? Was he shot? Could it have been a hunting accident? He was always prowling around looking for uranium."

"It wasn't an accident," said Norwig. "It was premeditated murder. Somebody bashed in his head with a rock and then stabbed him in the back to make sure."

"Then he was buried," Hyland added. "Out on the desert in a place called Arroyo Coyote. That proves whoever did it tried to cover up his crime. We got a lucky break. A couple of highschool boys dug him up."

Bart said, straining for calmness. "How lucky can you fellows get? With hundreds of square miles of desert to play around in, two boys just happen to pick the right place to dig up a body for you."

"Oh, it wasn't all luck," admitted Hyland. "You see, these boys had

rented a Geiger counter and were out prospecting for uranium. They were working up this Arroyo Coyote, got a reaction and started to dig. That's how—Mr. Cole."

"You mean," Bart cut in, stunned. "You mean there's uranium where they found Charley Cole?"

"No," said Norwig. "These kids just thought there was." He dug a chunk of greasy-looking ore from his pocket and handed it to Grace.

"Why, it's mine! Grace exclaimed. "See the date I scratched there? Why did you take it from the garage? It was on the shelf there yesterday. I saw it."

"That's what Mrs. Cole tells us," Hyland said. "She said you were showing it to her. By the way, Mrs. Owen, where did you find that stuff?"

"Grace!" Bart shouted. "Don't tell them. It's none of their business where you found it. That's pitch-blend you're holding in your hand. Uranium. You understand, Grace? Uranium!"

Grace looked oddly at him. "I picked it up, let's see, about two years ago, when we were hunting in Utah. Where they made that big strike about a year ago. I suppose all the land around the place has been claimed by now."

"You . . .!" Bart screamed, leaping at her.

His hands had barely touched

Grace's soft throat when his head exploded. When he regained consciousness he found himself sitting on the floor, propped up against the ottoman. Steel handcuffs circled his wrists and a terrible, dull ache throbbled up from the base of his neck. Grace was pressing back against the wall, her palms held tight against her white cheeks as she stared at him with horror.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Owen," Hyland was saying. "We didn't find that piece of ore in your garage. We found it in Mr. Cole's pocket. That's what made the boys' Geiger counter react."

"That's right, Mrs. Owen," confirmed Norwig. "And it was a break for us, those boys finding Mr. Cole so soon after he had been buried. The wind didn't have time to blot out everything. We got some perfect casts of the murderer's footprints and of the tires of the car he drove."

Bart looked around at the heads mounted on the walls of the den. Each one represented a personal conquest over a dumb animal.

Fact: The district attorney's office collected another trophy of the chase. Of course they do not mount heads down there in the Hall of Justice. They file their trophies away in a manila folder in a steel cabinet.



Open Heart

She wasn't thinking of herself, Lara insisted. But the man brought her little daughter such nice presents...

BY **BYRCE WALTON**

SHE RAN back to the bathroom mirror. Hair wrong, all wrong, fluffed out the sides that way. Push it up higher in the front. There, that's better. No, no, that's wrong too. There were the tiny wrinkles appearing at the corners of her eyes. Mustn't think about them.



Move the off-shoulder blouse off a little more. There, that *is* better. If the obviousness of a strip-tease is ever really better. Bob was a funny fellow, sort of, or maybe just very conservative. He'd been here three times already without even so much as...

But then conservative fellows loved kids. That was the important thing to remember. Most of them were very eager, up to a point. Then they got extremely kid-shy. But not Bob. Bob seemed good, potential family-man material.

She finished the glass of bourbon and ginger-ale, and remembered it was her third, and Bob wasn't even here yet. Her face was pleasantly flushed, and her nerves were almost calmed.

Let me do the right thing!

The new peek-a-boo bra was effective all right. But daring for her. She felt self-conscious. Bob might realize she was really pushing. From that Bob might easily assume other things, her loneliness, her desperation, the aching hunger. That would never do.

It's not only for me. It's for Julia. Little Julia needs a father.

"Only let's not kid ourselves too much," she whispered aloud. "Let's not do that, Mrs. Lonely Hearts. You need a man too. In the worst possible way."

She turned quickly at the sound, knocking the empty whiskey glass onto the floor. Shattered glass tinkled in her ears.

"Bob, that you?" she called.

She'd forgotten about having those extra keys made for him. Another bold inspiration. The new and determined Lara, she thought wryly. Last night she had lain in guilty anticipation, vaguely expecting Bob to let himself into the apartment after midnight, after the doorman left. Going too far?

She heard the soft laugh from the living room. "Expecting someone else, Lara?"

Just a meaningless joke in passing. No ironic suggestive meaning at all, of course. No one else, naturally not. Oh God, please let there never have to be any one else again. Hope coming in and going out and not coming back. You got to feeling like an aging harlot after a while, one who never got paid.

And the shame of it. Little Julia sleeping in the next room.

I won't let you go, Bob. You're going to stay.

She ran into the living room, catching a glimpse of her body in the hall mirror. The wide hips and full mature breasts. She was attractive enough, all right. She had no doubt of that.

Bob smiled at her. He was a wonderful combination of dignified maturity and boyishness. Poised as he was, there was also a warming shyness as he stood holding the customary bundle of surprises for Julia.

She was standing close to him, feeling her breasts moving quickly,

and the fear pushing the ache up into her throat.

"Julia asleep yet?"

"Oh, no. I told her you were bringing her a surprise."

He'd always brought Julia very cute, original, thoughtful little gifts. Thinking of Julia's growing love for him, Lara felt the warmth deepen all through her. It was almost too good to be true, someone with a responsible job, a secure future, someone so presentable as Bob, someone who loved Julia so very much.

He was walking toward Julia's bedroom door. He opened the door, peered inside. "Hello, honey," he whispered. "How's my baby?"

He went inside and shut the door.

In the soft candlelight, Lara mixed two more drinks, then put some older popular records she particularly liked on the turntable.

She sat down, crossed her legs and smoothed the thin nylon down over her thigh. She leaned back slightly, put her arm up along the back of the couch.

"...open up your heart and let love in," the record advised.

The four shots of bourbon moved in her blood wringing a warm, lax, almost abandoned feeling. What did it matter now? Who could understand what was the right thing to do? The rules were changing too fast. What was right? What did Bob want her to do?

She would do anything, anything

he wanted her to, if she only knew what he wanted her to do. He seemed warm enough, but reserved. Very reserved. A man like that demanded a certain extra bit of prodding, but not too much. That was the thing, not too much. But how to know—

"Goodnight, Julia. Sleep tight, beautiful."

His shadow moved over her, like a feathery touch on her breasts. He sat down near her and his head was resting on her arm on the back of the couch.

The wild desire came to take him in her arms, kiss him. The desire had been growing, the desire to hold him, to feel him her own, really her own, never to let him leave, never let him escape into himself, until the desire was agonizing to hold him, to feel him her own, really her own.

Later she heard his voice, seeming to come from a long way off. "How about another, Lara?"

"Yes, yes, please."

She heard the ice clinking.

What was this, the sixth, the seventh drink? That didn't matter now. Whatever happened had to happen now. Now or never. For us, Julia. You and I, Julia, sweetheart.

"Lara, you're quite an eye-ful tonight."

The candles were sputtering. They were lower, much lower. This was a very strong drink. His face blurred as he leaned over her.

Her head felt heavy. Oh God, be honest, Lara, be forward if that's being honest, but just don't sit here and lose everything because you don't do anything at all.

She found his face, pulled his head against her breast. Without effort she would have cried then, cried out her heart to him. She felt his lean, capable, tanned hands on her then, and his breath against her throat. She didn't even know what he was saying, but like a long wave over her, love came to her lips in strange childish words, moist and tender. She twisted over, sought his face again with her hands. She buried her face close against his shoulder. She took his mouth and felt of his back and she felt herself falling, and tried to withdraw, thinking of Julia there in the next room, but could not, and she let her full length fall on the couch. She closed her eyes, feeling the dull throbbing in her temples . . .

She heard the clock ticking loudly, slowly. She lay with her eyes closed and knew that it was totally dark and a chill was in the air. The candles were out, out, dead. She knew that, without opening her eyes she knew it.

She knew it was dark. The candles were dead. She knew the evening was dead, too. The evening had never been alive. As dead as the others. She ran her hands down along her body in the dark, the smooth dress, the straight sleek feel of her stockings, her shoes still on.

"Bob," she whispered. No answer. It must be later, very late, early sometime in the late morning because there was this chill in the air.

He hadn't touched her, really. He had never even kissed her. How could you know, how could you understand any one these days? All the rules were changing too fast and you never could really seem to know any one no matter how hard you tried.

She had met Bob that Sunday afternoon in the park.

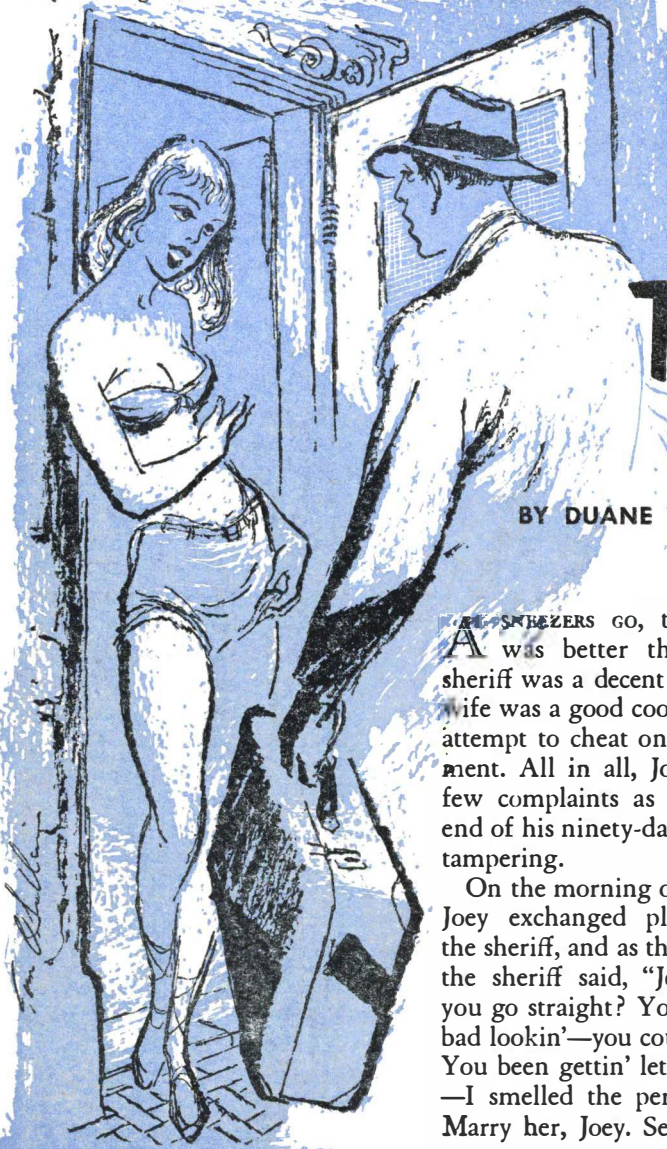
"Well, hello, beautiful." She had turned, flushed, but the man was bending over Julia, patting her blond, almost white curls. They became acquainted at once because of Julia. You tried too, Julia. Everything was Julia. How old is she? She's eight. She's so intelligent for an eight-year-old, isn't she? She sure is. She's such a beautiful child, Mrs. Thompson. Such pretty little legs. Her skin is like gold.

She sat up quickly in the dark, fear crawling coldly through her mind.

"Julia," she whispered. "Julia."

No answer. Lara ran to the door of Julia's room. The door was open slightly. She looked like a little broken golden doll lying among the brutally smashed toys. Lara fell forward on her knees and felt the blood under her hands, and when the police came she was still lying there, screaming and looking into Julia's dead and lonely eyes.

"It's the safest dodge there is, Joey. Only one thing, don't ever turn your back too long . . ."



One Way Ticket

BY DUANE YARNELL

AS SNEEZERS GO, this county jail was better than most. The sheriff was a decent sort and his fat wife was a good cook who made no attempt to cheat on her grub allotment. All in all, Joey Martin had few complaints as he reached the end of his ninety-day stretch for car tampering.

On the morning of his departure, Joey exchanged pleasantries with the sheriff, and as they shook hands, the sheriff said, "Joey, why don't you go straight? You're young, not bad lookin'—you could be a success. You been gettin' letters from a girl—I smelled the perfume in them. Marry her, Joey. Settle down."

"That," Joey said, "is exactly what I plan to do."

For once, Joey Martin was telling the truth. At 26, he'd seen the inside of too many jails, and while the larceny in his soul had no wise been dulled by all his incarcerations he'd planned a larcenous future somewhat more legal than his past.

Half an hour later, sharply dressed in a white linen suit, Joey Martin caught a bus for his destination, half a day's ride away. And as he settled back, he thought about Gladys Slocum, the woman with whom he'd corresponded during his brief stay as a guest of the county.

Wilbur Davis, Joey's recent cellmate, had put him wise to Gladys and her kind. "It's the safest dodge there is," Wilbur had explained. "You meet a dame through a lonely hearts club. So what if she's got a face like a hatchet? It's a community property state, ain't it? You marry her, live with her six months, a year, then you sue for divorce. In the meantime, you hock everything that ain't nailed down. It's better'n stealin' cars, Joey."

That same night, Joey had thumbed through one of Wilbur's bulletins from a lonely hearts club. He'd read descriptions until the words blurred. Finally, he'd written to this Gladys Slocum, who owned a farm.

"Don't pay no attention to how she says she looks," Wilbur warned. "They all make themselves sound like Marilyn Monroe. It's her prop-

erty that counts. A farm up in that country's worth plenty. Keep writin' her, Joey. And . . . uh, better tell her you're a man of means. That always helps. Oh yeah, one more thing. Now and then you meet a dame who's playin' the same game. She marries a sucker she thinks is loaded and some dark night she buries an axe in the back of his skull. Don't ever turn your back too long, Joey. Sometimes it ain't healthy."

Joey was unworried. There were hazards in all dodges, including, he'd heard, even legitimate marriages. As for Gladys Slocum, he supposed she was a lonely, frustrated dame who had inherited more property than brains. She'd hinted that men considered her attractive, but that most of them had minds like one-way streets. The men she'd met, she complained, wanted her either for her money, her looks, or both. But what she was really seeking was a man who would love her for what she was, a man willing to settle down on a farm and raise a family.

In turn, Joey made it clear that he was somewhat handsome, too, but terribly shy. Moneywise, he'd never have to worry. As for the simple life, Joey admitted he loved it, and he'd set the date for his visit to coincide with his freedom from jail.

It was mid-afternoon when Joey, fully fed and cleanly shaved, stepped out of the taxi in front of

the neat stone farmhouse three miles from where he'd left the bus. Gladys Slocum's name had been freshly painted on the mail box. Back of the neat red barn were acres of green rolling fields where scores of Herefords were grazing contentedly.

Joey smiled. If Gladys Slocum owned this layout, she could be knock-kneed and built like a barrel. Six months of his time would not be too great a price to pay for a share of this farm. And in the meantime, while he was selling off the Herefords, he could be lining up another dame through the lonely hearts club. In the back of his bill-fold was a long list of prospects whose names he'd selected from friendship-club bulletins.

He picked up his suitcase, walked jauntily up the path to the wide front porch. In the darkness beyond the screen door, someone was humming. Joey felt as excited as if he'd just found a new model car parked in an alley with the keys inside. He lifted a well-manicured hand, flicked dust from his coat, then knocked.

The girl who answered his knock was wearing peach colored shorts almost the exact shade of her long, trim legs. A thin halter barely covered her breasts. She was blonde, and it hadn't come out of a bottle. Her hair was long and soft, a shade somewhere between honey and wheat. Joey stared at the smooth curve of her shoulders, at the great,

mulberry colored eyes, the full mouth.

"I . . . I'm looking for Gladys Slocum," Joey stammered.

"You must be Joey," she said. Her voice was low and just listening to it was enough to make Joey's hormones sit up on their haunches and bay like wolves at the moon. "Come in, Joey. I've been expecting you."

Joey moved slowly inside, followed Gladys through a comfortable living room, a hallway, then into a pleasant bedroom through whose fluffy curtains bright afternoon sun was filtering. A huge, old-fashioned bed stood high off the floor, and after ninety nights on a steel cot, Joey found himself smiling in anticipation.

"You'll sleep here . . . for awhile," Gladys said and blushed prettily. "Later . . . if we decide we're right for each other we'll move into the big room across the hall."

Joey said, "After we're married of course." He wanted her to know he was a man of integrity and honor and that he was shy, just like he'd written her.

She nodded. "I can't understand what's come over me, Joey. I never felt free around men before. But your letters were so friendly that you already seem like one of the family. Funny, I don't even much care what the neighbors think."

Joey looked at her, decided his leg wasn't being pulled. He also decided he'd stumbled onto some-

thing beyond his wildest dream. Not only did this girl own a farm; she was also one of the earthiest chicks he'd ever met. Bucolic, maybe, just a touch plump—but after the hard, willowy type Joey had known this was a nice change of pace.

"Let me unpack for you," Gladys offered. She opened his suitcase, began to put his clothes away. They were new—he'd had a couple of good months between jail terms—and as Gladys worked, she exclaimed over every shirt, sock and tie.

"You dress beautifully, Joey. While Papa was alive I never got to meet many men, and the ones I did meet all wore overalls."

Joey's hands were beginning to itch and he plunged them deeply into his pockets. "You dress pretty sharp yourself," he said.

"I learned it on TV," Gladys said. "I bought a new set right after Papa died. I like the plays best. I was watching one the other afternoon—one about a girl who couldn't keep her husband. And do you know what, Joey? It was because she was always wearing an old housecoat around the house, hiding her beauty. But her friend from next door told her what to do and next day she had on an outfit like this and—"

"And now her husband won't even take time to go to the office," Joey said.

"Why, Joey!" she laughed. "You

saw the show!" Her forehead puckered thoughtfully and she asked, curiously, "Joey, do men really enjoy looking at a girl's figure? Do you think it's brazen of me to dress this way?" Gladys paused to examine the line of her hips where shorts met creamy flesh.

While Joey was trying to learn how to breathe again, Gladys removed a small metal lockbox from the corner of the suitcase. The lockbox was Joey's gimmick. He'd filled it with torn newspapers and he'd thoughtfully thrown the key away.

"Why, what's this, Joey?"

"I keep my money and valuables in there," Joey said expansively. "Just put it anywhere."

"Isn't it . . . dangerous, Joey?"

Joey shrugged. "Why worry? What's money and bonds and such when you're young and happy?"

She clapped her hands together. "Are you really happy, Joey? With me?"

"Clear up to here," Joey said.

"You're really serious about wanting to get married?"

"Cross my heart," Joey said fervently.

Gladys beamed, then murmured, "I . . . I know you're dying to see the farm. If we hurry, we can walk over it before dark."

"Why, I wouldn't want to rush anything," Joey said.

"You're not rushing," Gladys laughed. "Come on."

Walking over the farm had its

bad points. Joey hated exercise of any kind. He'd been known to steal a car for a trip across town rather than walk to the bus line. But when he considered that he would soon have an interest in this acreage, he decided to have a look at it.

They spent the rest of the afternoon walking. They toured the valleys and the timbered hills, and each time Joey looked in any direction, he'd see Herefords grazing. By oblique questioning, he learned the price of beef on the hoof; he estimated that by the time he'd sold off the last one he'd have enough cash to keep him for the next three or four years.

At dusk, they were returning, and as they came to the fence back of the barn, Gladys got her pretty shorts caught on a barb and Joey had to stand close to free her. Suddenly, he was aware of the animal warmth of her, of the smell of her freshly washed hair. Desperately he tried to control himself, but as he freed the fabric he instinctively pulled the girl up beside him. When he saw the look in her eyes, roman candles went off inside his head.

"Gladys—" he said hoarsely.

"Joey—"

It was like taking candy from a baby. Joey had been around and knew every osculatory trick in the book. Soon her mouth was warm and damp and the high velocity of her response tore the top of Joey's head loose. He felt an urge to let the situation continue indefinitely.

But she pulled away from him, finally.

"I'm a . . . a cad," Joey said, averting his eyes.

"Don't say that," Gladys cried. "I didn't expect to like you this much, Joey. But I do like you, a lot. You're—nice, Joey. Clean and nice. Papa was so strict with me. He made me believe that . . . that it was wrong to kiss a man. But it can't be wrong, not when I feel this way. When should we get married, Joey?"

"Tomorrow too soon?"

She blushed. "Tomorrow would be fine, Joey. You have money, too, so I know you like me only for what I am."

"I . . . I follow your reasoning," Joey said limply.

"I'll tell you the kind of life I want." Gladys whispered. "I want a handsome man, like you. I want him to wear good clothes. I want him to be here with me all the time. I want a family. Oh, Joey, so many men wrote to me, but I'm so glad I chose you!"

Joey smiled into the gathering dusk. This was going to be a pleasant setup. Gladys was his for the asking. The promise in her eyes had reminded him of glowing coals just waiting for a whiff of oxygen to turn them into a conflagration. Joey felt that he could supply the oxygen and if he waited later than tonight or tomorrow might at the latest to start he'd better buy himself another head.

He'd still sell the Herefords, and everything else, and in the end, when he tired of the life, he'd divorce her. But in the meantime, he'd live like a country squire. He'd wear tweed suits and a John B. Stetson hat. And he'd have a fintail Caddy to drive around the farm.

As they reached the barn lot, Gladys said, "I've got a hired hand. He lives on the adjoining farm and helps with the chores." She looked warmly up at Joey. "We'll keep him after we're married. I can't stand the thought of you getting old and bent like Papa."

"That's real thoughtful, Gladys," Joey said.

They were rounding the corner of the barn when Joey pulled up short. Before him was a mound of earth. Something stirred in Joey's memory.

"Say," Joey muttered, "that looks like a grave—"

"It is," Gladys said. "We buried a cow there last week." She took his arm. "We'll stop in the barn. I want to talk to the hired hand."

They went into the barn where the hired hand was working by lantern light. He was a big guy, unshaven, rough looking. He was pitching hay. But as he swung around, his eyes narrowed at the sight of Joey, and Joey had an uncomfortable feeling that he'd hate to meet the hired hand on a dark night.

"Sam," Gladys said, "let's look at that new feed."

Joey stood there while the two of them went into a feed room and he

listened to the mumble of voices. for a moment, then glanced curiously around him. Suddenly, his gaze was drawn to an axe hanging on the wall. It was a double-bladed axe. One blade was sharp and shiny. The other was covered with encrusted blood.

Again, something stirred in Joey's memory. He remembered something Wilbur Davis had said to him. "Don't ever turn your back, Joey, it might be dangerous . . ."

Joey frowned, lit a cigarette; the match shook so hard that he dropped it. Gladys came back, smiled at him, murmured, "Let's go up to the house, Joey."

Outside, he was still shaking. "You . . . chop a lot of wood. For fires, I mean?"

"Oh, we never burn wood any more," Gladys said.

"You cut fence posts, then?"

"Why would you ever ask a question like that?"

"I noticed an axe," Joey said. He took a long breath. "Looked a little bloody." He watched her out of the corner of his eyes. "Matter of fact, it looked like a murder weapon."

"Oh, that," Gladys laughed. "I used it to kill a chicken with last week."

"But I didn't see any chickens," Joey said.

"No," Gladys admitted. "They were too much trouble. So I sold them."

They walked into the house. "You

watch TV while I get supper," Gladys suggested. "I want my man to be comfortable."

Joey tried to smile, but his mouth was full of cotton. He dropped into a chair before the TV set. A few moments later, he thought he heard movement behind him. He whirled. She stood before him, slim, young, lovely, a rifle in her hands. She was looking at him, smiling. Joey wasn't sure of the smile.

"This jammed when I was out after quail yesterday," she said. "Would you fix it later?"

"Sure—" he reached for it. She swung it around and Joey's heart stopped beating. She gave it to him. He didn't know how to fix the gun, but he preferred having it in *his* hands.

"I . . . I'd better start cooking," Gladys said.

"Matter of fact," Joey said, wiping the sweat from his brow, "I'm not hungry."

She hesitated, a tiny frown on her face. "Joey, I'm going to say something, something I never thought. I'd say. You won't think me bold, will you? Honestly, Joey, I've never felt this way about a man before. It's . . . almost wicked. At least Papa would have called it wicked. But since we're to be married tomorrow.

"All right, Gladys."

Her eyes shone. And since we're alone and nobody will ever know— Oh, Joey, I'm going back to my bedroom—our bedroom—to change

into something I bought for our first night together. Then . . . then, after a few minutes, maybe you'd like to come see it."

He saw the promise in her eyes again, the fullness of her mouth. He saw the way her lush breasts were rising and falling; but the fires within him had gone out.

Earlier in the day, he'd thought this setup perfect. But, suddenly, it had become *too* perfect. Today, she'd shown him a farm, a beautiful farm. But suppose the farm were mortgaged? Or, even, rented? He couldn't forget the fresh name he'd seen on the mail box. Suppose she'd only rented this place for background, waiting for some wealthy sucker to wander into her lair. And now she had his fingerprints on this gun she said wouldn't work. . . .

He could hear Gladys fluffing pillows, drawing blinds. And he could smell incense burning. She began to hum, but to Joey, it sounded like a funeral dirge. She'd acted so damned innocent, so naive, yet she'd made love, if only briefly, with all the expertness of a twentieth-century Cleopatra. Life had taught Joey Martin many bitter truths, the most important being: Nothing was perfect, ever; there was always an angle, a gimmick, a trap, a dodge.

Joey got a bad case of ague. He'd bought a lock box and he'd said it was full of money. Hell, that was the answer! Look how fast she'd offered to unpack for him.

And that grave this afternoon. And the axe. He thought about the hired hand, recalling the way the man had glowered at him. The way Gladys and the man had talked in low tones, just beyond his range of hearing. Talked about what? About when would be the best time to split Joey's skull open? What else? They had to be in this thing together. Right now, Joey was willing to bet the hired hand was crouching somewhere in the back hallway, that bloody axe in his hand, just waiting. Or one day she'd take him hunting and—

"Joey. Have you forgotten me, my darling?"

Joey stood up and his knees were like milk. He swallowed hard. "Be right with you."

"All right, precious. But hurry. I'm terribly lonely."

It was ten miles crossing the room noiselessly, and every step he took, he imagined himself being stalked. At last, he reached the porch. He stood there for a moment, listening.

"Joey—" Gladys called again.

He ran for half a mile and then a milk truck came by and he caught a ride the rest of the way. Once in town, Joey bought a ticket across the state line, and he rode the bus until shortly after midnight, until he'd reached his destination. Near the bus station, Joey found a new Ford with the keys inside, and enough gas in the tank to take him to Chicago where he knew a hot car dealer.

At dawn, they nailed Joey cold,

and as they handcuffed him and led him off to the pokey. He knew that with his record, he'd be lucky to get off with two years. Yet, strangely, he was completely relaxed. Two years in the sneezer would be better than an axe or bullet in the back of the skull. . . .

Joey did his time the easy way. He kept his nose clean, gave the screws no trouble, was kind to his cellmate. He wrote a letter to his friend, Wilbur Davis, telling him about his one and only experience with the lonely hearts dodge. But Wilbur had been freed in the meantime and the letter was returned for lack of a forwarding address.

It was near the end of his second year that Joey began to dream about Gladys Slocum. He's awoken, shaking, just as their lips touched, and the memory would be so vivid that he could smell incense burning.

The more he tried to put her out of mind, the more she haunted him. In his dreams, he saw, again, every exciting line of her body. He saw the promise in her eyes.

Joey's freedom came on a balmy summer morning. He left the prison by bus, still driven by a desire, by need, to see her again. A man can get awfully lonely in prison.

It was dusk by the time he reached the path leading up to Gladys Slocum's stone house. He paused to listen. Inside, the lights were on, a radio played softly.

He crept up the path, started to circle the porch, then stopped. He

could see the outline of a man sitting on the porch, and despite the gloom, there was something faintly familiar about him. Joey crept closer, stepped on a twig, and when it snapped the man turned around.

"Who's there?"

"Wilbur," Joey gasped. And indeed it was Wilbur Davis, his old cellmate. Wilbur was wearing tweeds and a big hat. He was lounging back in a comfortable chair, his feet propped on the porch rail.

"Joey? Good lord, boy!" Wilbur said. "Come up and have a drink. Gladys is in the kitchen now, stirring up a fresh batch."

Joey said, dazedly, "Wilbur, I don't get it—"

Wilbur looked embarrassed. "To tell the truth, Joey, there's a lot of things I don't get. Two weeks after you left, I got out. Decided to run up here to see how you were gettin' along. But you'd flew the coop. Why'd you run out on a woman like Gladys for, Joey?"

Joey's gaze was pulled away by the sight of a Caddy convertible parked out by the barn.

"Poor girl," Wilbur said, "she was really broke up when I got here. She kept wantin' to know what'd happened to you. Hell, Joey, how was I to know? But I'll tell you one thing, you must of been nuts to take off. That girl wanted a man. She wanted one real bad."

Wilbur Davis sat back, and the ice rattled in his glass as he shook the last of his drink. "You could of

had it made," Wilbur said. "Car, clothes, plenty of money rollin' in from all them cows. Say, whatever got into you, Joey?"

Joey said, in a strangled voice, "Wilbur, listen, I—"

"You wait'll I call her," Wilbur said expansively. "We been married almost two years, now. Got us two kids. I swear, Joey, I just can't understand why you passed it up. Why, boy, it's a perfect life. Perfect wife, Gladys. Always doin' something for you, slavin' mendin' . . ."

From deep within the house, Gladys called softly, "Wilbur. Why don't we drink in here, darling. It's more comfortable."

The voice hit Joey like a club in the belly. He turned dazedly away. "Wilbur," he muttered, "I better get goin'. Somehow, I don't think I better see her."

He turned, then, went staggering down the path. A few moments later, a car came along and he caught a ride to town. He stopped off at the bus station and sat there, waiting, silently cursing that obsession of his for hell and back.

Then, philosophically, he reached into his billfold, studied the names and addresses he'd written there. Bertha Holderson—Pine Cone, Minnesota. The ad had said that she was young, attractive, that she owned a farm.

Joey sat there a long time, then slowly got up and walked to the ticket window. "One way ticket to Pine Cone, Minnesota," Joey said.



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