

MANHUNT



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THE LAST KILL

by Charles Runyon

LES COLLINS

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STORY NEW!

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DEADLY TRIANGLE



Mathematically a triangle is a useful form. Domestically it is abhorrent and can be eliminated by the squeezing of a trigger.

BY LES COLLINS

DEATH WALKED with the three through the scattered but thick patches of scrub oak and manzanita; the sun would soon set in the hills that surrounded San Jose Valley, ending a particularly hot summer day.

The feast-or-famine vegetation was typical of the California coast ranges. The clothes of the two men and one woman were typical hunting outfits. The dominant thoughts were atypical: one would die.

They seemed two of a kind, Frank Morriss and Jim Thomason. Two—but only one Pat. She'd married Frank.

At the mouth of a small valley, Frank halted. Nervously, he gulped from a canteen. "We'll find some up there." He lifted his chin in gesture at the head of the dry stream.

Pat and Jim followed his line of sight, up the steep hill. Dense brush thirstily sought what little

moisture remained close to the ground surface.

"What do you think?" Frank asked.

"Your party, Frank. You always were better at hunting than I," Jim Thomason said, with a quick, side-wise glance at Pat.

Frank, wiping perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve, grinned. "Yeah, but that was when I was in condition—"

"When we both were in condition." Jim patted a very slight bulge at his waistline. "Fifteen years is a long time ago, measured against hunting men."

"But today you're hunting deer, remember?" Pat asked impatiently. "And they won't bring up any 88's or SS reserves." She softened then. "The hearth grows cold, men, and despite your talk, the wheelchair isn't waiting. Believe me, 34 is not ancient."

"I'm 35 today!" Frank objected. "Have you forgotten so soon?" Pat hadn't, of course; the new Winchester Special in his hands was a reminder.

"She was complimenting you, dope!" Jim said. "Anyway, this practical female wants us to shoot the deer instead of waiting for them to die of old age. What is your Estimate of the Situation, Segeant Morriss?"

The tall man smiled appreciation at the old standard joke. It had begun on a snowy night in France when Jim, a new replacement

scared green on his first patrol, had asked the tough, experienced sergeant the question. Jim didn't know the sergeant's experience was all of two months and that Morriss was equally scared. His reply—"The Situation calls for us to run like hell!"—drew the men together afterwards, when they could laugh about it.

"If we go around the hill on either side, swing down and take 'em from behind, they'll move in this direction," Frank said, "Pat, hold the spot. We'll flush 'em, and they'll come right at you. Just shoot the males, though—What's wrong? Why the strange look?"

"I can shoot only one more male," she said levelly, "The game warden—"

"All right, all right! Shoot only one more, then." Frank turned to Jim, who was mopping his brow. "The troops are falling apart! What's bothering you?"

"Nothing. Too much sun, maybe."

"When didn't you have this reaction, Jim? Always scared before and after—but I'd have no one else beside me during a fight. Forget the flip-flops in your stomach, and take the west side. I'll go east."

"Like Hannibal at Cannae!" Jim was suddenly enthusiastic. "Double envelopment; you always were a good tactician—"

"And you always did read too much," Pat interjected dryly. "We haven't an awful lot of time left."

Frank nodded. "True, we haven't much time left at all. Let's move out."

Patricia Morriss sat on a fallen tree trunk, ideally placed at the mouth of the valley. From here, she could shoot anything that came down. Anything?

I guess I should have kissed him, she thought, I should have. At least, I could have said goodby. Yes, I could have kissed off 11 years of marriage. Frank, why did you force me to this? Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery . . . am I a monster? I begged you, but you wouldn't give me the divorce. Why was it always a fight between us, even to this?

She watched her husband's retreating back until he was gone, striding boldly around the hill. Jim had already disappeared. Jim, smarter than Frank, much more easily manipulated—Jim would do it.

Funny, but she'd never noticed before how they'd leaned on Jim. Always knowing, but never recognizing how he'd helped, they just assumed he'd be standing by. There were hundreds of incidents—did Frank and Jim remember?

The dance that evening so long ago: both men entered together. For a few moments, as she watched from across the floor, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, eyeing the setup. Jim spotted Pat before Frank, approached, hesitantly

asked for a dance.

She accepted—and immediately sensed weakness in Jim. When Frank cut in, she knew she was right. Frank was the strong personality in the team. They danced twice more; he wouldn't give her up, even when Jim returned. She was so beautiful in those days.

The three wound up at the punch bowl, arguing, then drinking. The sorority punch was properly spiked; Frank and Jim grew thick-tongued.

Finally, there came the inevitable question and Frank's answer: "The situation calls for us to run—like hell. You start out." She spent the rest of the evening with Frank. As most returned veterans, he was more mature than the campus boys; the type she wanted, he would be a good husband.

Pat called the moves; for two years, she was with both men. It seemed as though the duo had become a trio. Jim was dangled enough to arouse Frank's competitive instinct. And then, one evening just before graduation, Pat sensed a crisis.

When they arrived in San Francisco, less than an hour from campus, Pat noticed fitfulness in her escorts. Frank was impatient; Jim, tense. She suggested Ernie's for dinner, and both growled; didn't she know by now that the budget was restricted?

Jim intervened, cut off a potential argument, deftly pushed them

to one of the North Beach spaghetti joints—the kind infamous for poor, if plentiful, food. Their somber mood continued during the meal until, with startling suddenness, Frank abruptly proposed to Pat.

This, then, was what had caused their edginess: Frank had transmitted his excitement to Jim, who must have known instinctively what was coming. Jim had reacted, and Pat picked up the mood from both of them.

It was her decision: Frank or Jim? No decision, really. Poor second-best Jim! She'd known he loved her, and she said so. But it was to be Frank. Jim had colored, smiled sadly, and said, "I guess, sergeant, this is one situation where I run but you can't."

There followed the usual maudlin scenes. Pat wondered briefly why men acted in such fashion; they were silly. Jim had the role of Good Sport and Good Friend; he played it beautifully the rest of the evening, actually for the following 11 years.

It was only a few months ago that she asked Frank for a divorce. The marriage had gone bad. For one thing, he was ungrateful. He'd been set up in business with some of her father's money, yet lately he'd stubbornly refused to do what she wanted. Frank argued with her constantly. When Pat bought the house as a surprise for him, he was displeased that he hadn't been consulted.

And why should Frank want children so much? He suggested them several times, even though she replied that children would ruin their fun, and could come later. Another thing: why didn't Frank arrange to be home the once or twice she'd have dinner guests? Obviously, he had no use for her friends and was humiliatingly blunt about it.

He'd even begun to work late, much too late, at the office.

Frank, Pat discovered, had become completely intractable. It was shocking that he wouldn't give her the divorce; instead he suggested they try to work out their differences. She knew it was hopeless.

The next day, she lunched with Jim. He could always be counted on; it was surprising that even with his weak personality, he had become successful in advertising.

She was sure Jim still loved her; he was sympathetic about her marital problems—sympathetic and properly upset, but with a calculating look. They began to see each other with increasing frequency. Fairly soon, they were entangled—the usual entanglement of a disappointed suitor—and she suggested what had to be done. It was almost as though she were hypnotized, and she hated herself while planning this hunting trip.

Hunting trip? Pat was suddenly back in the present. Surely both men were on the hilltop by now, and she had to look as though she

were waiting for deer. "Happy birthday . . ."

Jim Thomason left first, trudging toward the red sun. He glanced once, quickly, over his shoulder, but the others were already out of sight.

I hope she kissed him, he thought, she should have. Born, married, died—11 years. A rotten world, a rotten life . . . and I have to take it. I'm a monster, or is human life really that important? Frank, why didn't you give her the divorce? You always were better at tactics than I; unfortunately, I was always a better shot.

Jim paused to check the 30.06. The bolt action was smooth; Remingtons were made with integrity. He loaded the magazine, but kept the chamber empty. Then, cautiously silent, he continued through the brush. It was like France, except then Frank was on his side.

France, Frank, the football team—the night we met Pat. I remember how we arrived, stood shoulder-to-shoulder in a post-adolescent bravado that covered basic shyness. My first sight of Pat: she *was* beautiful from across the room.

How did I beat Frank to her? He was much faster than I at the quick size-up. My feelings as I approached Pat: this was The Girl, I thought over and over.

Finally, after walking through molasses for a million years, I was

asking her to dance. You accepted, Pat, but what happened? The moment you were in my arms, the wonderful, youthful, haze disappeared. Was it a foreboding, a preview of today? Later, at the punch bowl, when Frank said, "The situation calls for us to run like hell, or we won't start out," I think I realized even then—

The dry underbrush crackled up ahead, alerting Jim. He was gripping his rifle too tightly, sweating too much. Deer, for sure; Frank was right. Quietly, he worked the bolt back and forth, putting a cartridge in the chamber. Perspiration stung his eyes, and he wiped it away. Annoyed, he knew he had to relax, move slowly.

Move slowly? I did, for two years. Until that night in the city. We were all tense; there was some silly quarrel about where we'd eat, ending as usual at North Beach—sure, Italian food, romantic setting, night-life of the nongods. And everyone snapping at everyone else.

We'd almost finished when Frank suddenly dropped his fork. This would be uncomfortable; I knew what he was going to do even before he proposed, and it was obvious Pat accepted. But—I remember now!—my feelings were a strange mixture of relief and sorrow.

I must have spoken aloud because Pat started talking; told me I loved her. Did I? Yes, with reser-

ventions.

Somewhere, appropriately, I said, "Sergeant, this is a situation where I run but you can't." It was supposed to be funny, but Pat didn't like the sound of it. Guess Frank didn't either.

During the evening, I managed to express my loyalty to both of them. Or perhaps not—Pat was talking quite a bit.

She was always a good talker, but she failed when it came to the divorce. These 11 years were good years, fun years—why this sort of an ending? From that day a few months ago, when Pat called and invited me to lunch, the pattern seemed obvious and inevitable.

She told me the whole story; in her words, Frank's infidelity, gaucherie, stubbornness, and the rest. I felt sorry for both of them—and for one second, I saw Pat as I had that night we first met.

Funny, but with one break in your armor, you leave yourself wide open. I don't like to think about what happened next, Frank; it was betrayal. Unplanned, but still betrayal: of you, of Pat, of me.

So I am responsible for what today brings—

Today? *Now.*

Jim was excellently positioned. "Happy birthday!"

He brought the rifle up, aimed, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

Frank Morriss watched Jim walk toward the sunset, then swing out

of sight around the hill. Silently, he turned to Pat, a mocking look in his eye.

"I'd better take off myself."

She nodded, deep in thought.

Frank began the long walk to and up the east shoulder of the hill. I wish she'd kissed me, he thought, or maybe I should have kissed her. I gave her the chance; I gave Jim one, too—and now . . . He shrugged. Thou shalt not kill, true, but what *is* the solution? I can't lose her to another man. God! despite everything, I still love her.

Frank stopped suddenly, instinctively, at the buzzing noise. A small, Coast Range rattlesnake was coiled on guard, less than six feet away. Shaking its tail, its head and neck upright and poised for a strike, the rattler glowered malevolently at him.

Though the snake wasn't really a threat, Frank felt the usual chill at the back of his neck. He eased to a stoop, his fingers fumbling for, and finding, a heavy rock.

By then, the snake had buzzed angrily a few more times and uncoiled. It glided regally eastward, an imperious look proclaiming its victory. Frank, gripping the rock, could have thrown it accurately enough to break the rattler's neck. Instead, the man let go, hardly hearing the dull thud of rock against soil.

Snake, why should I kill you? You're as frightened as I, so today we are brothers. You don't kill a

brother—or someone as close as a brother. Stay alive, snake. I am older; I came to life 13 years ago, so I'll be the one to die soon.

Came to life! Jim and I hit that dance with only one thought: available, makeable, age-of-consent females. We couldn't know the dance would not be over for so many years.

I'm sure I saw Pat first—and stood, stunned. By the time I'd recovered, Jim was already talking to her. How could the son of a bitch do something like that?

Hold it! Am I talking about Jim? The guy who picked off the mortar squad when the rest of us were hugging holes in the ground, too frightened to move. Jim's a friend; besides, I could always talk him into doing what I wanted. Pat danced with me the rest of the evening.

OK, we *should* have run like hell, and maybe today wouldn't be here. I couldn't leave her, Jim. She was like a picture that I'd made up and never thought could exist. Bells going off in my head, alarm bells, telling me to get away. Instead, I stayed, with my guts churning. I wanted to strangle you when you spoke to her; I floated when she gave me her full attention. Pat was man-hunting; I vowed she'd stop as of then.

She nearly did, too. My only competition for the next two years was Jim. Always there, always forming the trio. Damn you!

Couldn't you see?

No, not even the night I proposed. That restaurant you dragged us to—tawdry, run-down, covering dirty wallpaper with a blanket of "atmosphere." You knew, and you wanted to stop me.

Without realizing it, Frank worked the lever of the carbine. Then, hooking a strong thumb over the hammer, he pressed the trigger and gently, slowly released the hammer. The Special now had a cartridge in the chamber, and could be fired quickly. There'd been little noise: a *click-snick* of the assembly, barely audible, gave Frank godlike power. He moved on.

You lost, Jim; I won. And so we were married and I lived unhappily ever after. Pat is headstrong; domineering without ability to dominate; add her father's money. It took me a long time to realize I was a kept patsy—pushed around at her whim, too puppy-dog grateful to know it.

As soon as I caught on, the marriage went sour. She didn't want kids; actually, I was acting in that capacity, and she couldn't stand it when I showed independence. Suddenly, she wanted out.

Conveniently enough, Jim, in all that time you never married. Why?

Divorce? The hell I'd give her one! Maybe it was time for her to grow up. I suggested it in that battle we had.

Well, you don't argue with chil-

dren, you tell them. The divorce was out. I'd matured. Finally had control of the business; next, I'd control my family . . . including the kids she'd bear me.

Pat said it was a fine curtain speech, but unfortunately I was too weak. Was I? The next few months would tell.

Then came the shock of the day when I accidentally discovered she'd been seeing Jim! My best friend! And my wife . . .

"I loved you both. But: It's my birthday."

Frank aimed carefully.

Two almost-simultaneous shots echoed in the canyon, disturbed a circling hawk, frightened a doe, made no impression on the omni-

present manzanita, and very quickly dulled to nothing in the late-afternoon winds of the Coast Ranges.

A voice from a thousand miles away: "Run like hell?"

An answer, tremulous as though aged: "No, not from this one. We'll tell them it was a hunting accident."

Unconscious habit, born in days of fear that were never expected to return, with greater intensity drew them shoulder to shoulder. Pat, sprawled back over the fallen tree, lay unmoving where two tiny motes had pushed her. The bullet holes, like two bleeding close-spaced eyes, were an inch and one-half apart.



It's the Law

Collected by Floyd Hurl

In Vermont

there's a law that says a woman may not walk on the street on Sunday unless her husband follows twenty paces behind her with a musket on his shoulder.

In Mason, Georgia

it is illegal for a man to put his arm around a woman without legitimate reason.

it's against the law to shoot camels.

there is a court decision that states: "Where a rooster chases a hen he is actually dealing with his legal wife."

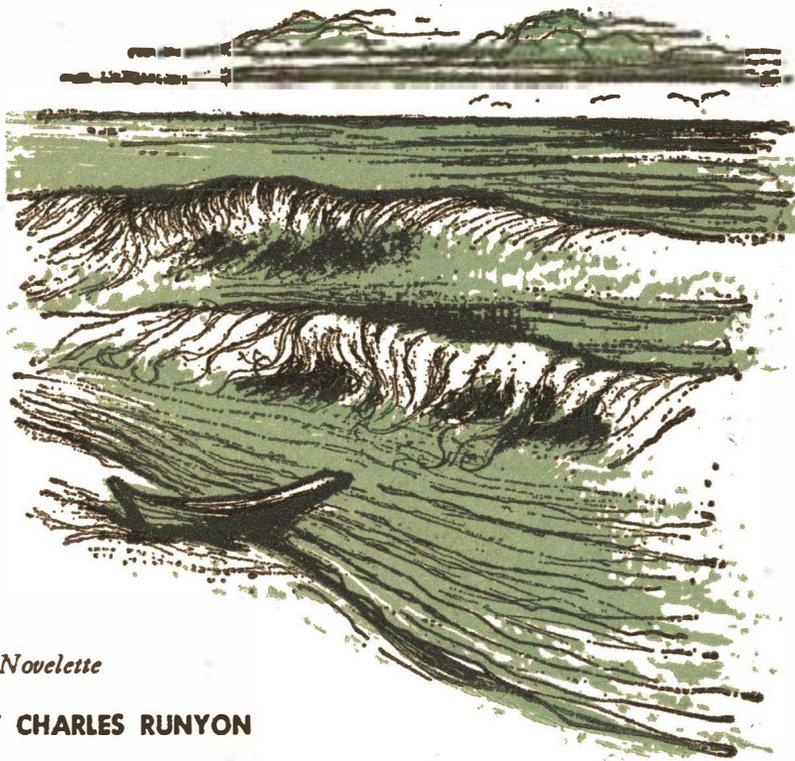
a law prohibits the display of men's and women's underclothes on the same clothesline at the same time.

it is mandatory that any animal on the street after dark prominently display a red tail light.

a local statute forbids barbers to eat onions between the hours of 7:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M.

THE LAST KILL





A Novelette

BY CHARLES RUNYON

The "Organization" had it's big eye on Johnny Quill. Johnny knew he had to make this kill by the rule book . . . but he hadn't counted on the woman.

THREE HOURS out of New York International Airport, Johnny Quill rose from his seat to learn which of his fellow passengers he had to kill.

He walked down the aisle of the *Viscount*, carrying his shaving kit in his left hand. The empty space below his armpit made him itchy

and nervous; he'd hated to leave his gun behind when he went through customs.

But he'd have to get used to the emptiness; this would be his last job.

At the spigot, he drew a cup of water and looked back through the cabin. The passengers seemed half-

alive, sunk in midflight lethargy. In the nearest seat, a fat man in a flowered shirt cleaned his camera lens with a camel-hair brush. Johnny wondered, was he the man the Organization had sentenced to death? Or was it the black-haired girl with the purple eyelids, whose fingers made typing motions while she slept? Or one of sixty others . . . ?

Johnny tightened his jaw and drew another cup of water. If he looked long enough, he'd begin to think of them as people. He had to think of them as machines, one of which he'd be assigned to turn off. It had helped before . . .

He crushed the cup in his bony fist and pushed open the door of the lavatory. It was empty; his contact hadn't yet arrived.

Plugging in his electric shaver, he stooped to the mirror and began shaving his lean face. His light blond beard was not yet visible, but the shaver's hum would cover the sound of conversation.

He wondered if he looked like the businessman he'd claimed to be in his passport. The gray suit was conservative enough; the maroon tie sufficiently bland. The white scars bunched along his jaw could have been trophies of college football; the thin nose could have been broken in a gentlemanly brawl. Yes, he'd pass . . .

The door opened and a bald, sticky man squeezed in. He looked like he'd just boarded a rush hour

subway. His cheap suit was rumpled, his tie twisted.

"Quill?" he asked.

Johnny nodded, wrinkling his nose at the odor of sweat which had filled the cubicle. "Make it short, huh?"

The stocky man scowled at Johnny's image. "I oughta see some identification."

"You saw the signal. I don't drink two cups of water because I like the stuff."

The man's scowl dissolved into a thick smile. "You must be Quill. They said you were a big, independent bastard." He sobered abruptly. "Okay. She's in the second seat from the rear, left side. Dark blonde, wearing a brown wool suit and a white blouse."

Johnny's hand tightened on the shaver. He'd never had to kill a woman before. "What did she do?"

"I'll get to that, Quill. She's only half the package. Her husband is the other half."

"Oh?" The back of his neck prickled. This was beginning to sound like a nasty one. "Isn't he sitting with her?"

"He's sitting in hell for all we know. He pulled out of our operation in Montana three years ago. We've been watching the woman ever since, waiting for him to get in touch. Last week she bought a ticket to Trinidad."

Johnny turned. "Trinidad's a jump-off. He could be in Central or South America."

"I doubt it. She can't go far past Trinidad without making contact. He cleaned out their bank account when he left, and she sold her old car to buy the ticket."

"Considerate husband. Is he dangerous?"

"To the organization he's poison. Knows too many names. To you . . ." The stocky man shrugged. "He hasn't played in your league. Spent all his time on the gambling end. Started in Montana, was working in Havana when that caved in on us. They moved him back to Montana and he finally joined the bottle a day club. About the time we decided he wasn't a good risk, he disappeared."

"What about his wife? Didn't he have enough sense to keep her out of it?"

"Until he left, yeah. But he must've got a message to her telling her where he is, and he might've told her some other things. I think you'd better hit her, too."

Johnny's jaw tightened. "I don't give a damn what you think. What're the orders?"

The stocky man scowled. "Just make sure she isn't dangerous."

Wonderful, thought Johnny. Ten more years and they'll let me wipe my own nose. How do you make sure of someone unless they're dead? "They have names, these two?"

"Howard and Norma McLain. But they'd probably change them. Here's a photo."

Johnny took the two-by-three studio portrait. The man had curly black hair and big moist eyes. Lush-type, thought Johnny, the kind who marries a woman because he wants a mother.

The woman took his breath for a second. Her pale eyes jumped from the photo and pierced him with sharp intelligence. The forward set of her jaw told Johnny she probably wore the pants in the family; the smooth, wide slope of her shoulders hinted that she'd fill them beautifully.

What a waste, he thought. What a helluva waste.

He shredded the photo and flushed it into the Atlantic. "You say you watched her for three years?"

"I helped."

"She have a lot of friends?"

"Hell! She never even smiled at the butcher."

Thoughtfully, Johnny unplugged his razor and returned it to the shaving kit. The job might be slightly interesting, after all. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. I get off in Burmuda and you'll be the only one watching her. Don't lean on her. If she gets scared, she won't make contact."

"Don't be elementary." He zipped up the shaving kit. "You better go now, before they start thinking we're a pair of queens."

The stocky man started out, then paused with his hand on the door-knob. "Oh. Cantino's your contact

in Trinidad. He'll send a man to help you."

Johnny frowned. "Everybody knows I work alone. What's Cantino in for?"

"Orders." The man's thick smile appeared again as he backed out the door. "Somebody up there doesn't trust you, Quill."

The door closed, and a chill climbed Johnny's spine. He thought of the money he'd been stuffing into the bank in Zurich for nearly two years. Tough, if they found that. The organization looked at secret bank accounts the way wardens look at hacksaws.

He was sure of one thing; he had to do this job by the book.

He left the lavatory and walked to the magazine rack at the rear of the plane. Norma McLain sat with her knees pressed together, small hands folded in her lap, staring out the window. As Johnny passed her seat, she rubbed her palms against her cheeks in a tired gesture, revealing the red crescents of her lower lids.

He took a copy of *Country Life* and returned to his seat. Norma McLain didn't look like a wife bound for a joyous reunion with her husband. She reminded him of a rabbit with its foot in a trap.

And that's two of us, doll, he thought.

Tailing a woman on an island-hopping flight had its own built-in problems, Johnny found.

In Bermuda, Norma McLain spent the twenty-minute layover in the ladies' room, while Johnny chain-smoked in the waiting room and eyed everyone who came and went. Her ticket to Trinidad might be a red herring. She could meet her husband anywhere, even in a ladies' room.

But she came out when the flight was called. She walked to the plane with her chin high, turning her head as though looking for someone. She still wore the brown wool skirt, though many of the women had changed to light summer clothing. Johnny wondered if she had anything else.

He followed her up the ladder. Skirts were short this fall, he thought, observing the rhythmic exposure of first one white thigh, then the other. Inside the plane, he noticed that her perfume smelled like violets.

He was edging past her when he heard her ask the stewardess about a short, bald man in a rumpled suit. He froze, realizing she meant his contact.

"That was Mr. Sentara," said the stewardess. "He terminated at Bermuda."

"Oh." Relief was evident in her voice. "Thank you."

Johnny walked to his seat and sat down heavily. Obviously she'd suspected the man. She had more brains than you'd expect to find in so fancy a package. He'd have to handle her like a thorn bush.

His resolution was strained during the thirty-minute stop in San Juan. The woman seemed bent on touring the entire vast terminal at a heel-clattering pace. Johnny followed, jostling adults, wading through streams of children, and beginning to understand the slob's rumped, sweaty condition. Norma McLain was a tough woman to tail.

She returned to the boarding gate when the flight was called. Not wanting to stand behind her a second time, Johnny left her powdering her nose in the line and hurried out behind the customs counter, ignoring the curious looks of the customs men.

He'd been in his seat two minutes when he smelled violets. "How'd you manage it?" she asked.

Johnny stiffened, then twisted to look up at her. "Manage what?"

She leaned forward slightly, her full breasts weighting the fabric of her blouse. Her voice was taut. "You were behind me in the boarding line. Now you're here."

With a sinking sensation, Johnny remembered she'd been powdering her nose. She'd caught him in the mirror, sure as hell. Too damn smart.

"I came through behind customs," he said, forcing a smile. "They hardly ever shoot people."

She didn't move. Her face was blank, but her eyes kept sliding toward the corners. Scared, John-

ny thought. If I don't calm her down the whole operation will fold.

He widened his smile and took a card from his breast pocket. "I'm Johnny Quill. Management counselor. Chicago."

She looked at the card without taking it. Johnny knew the business cover was good; he carried check stubs from a half-dozen small firms which fronted for the Organization; plus income tax receipts and cards to show he contributed to the United Fund like any solid businessman.

"I'm traveling alone," he added. "If you're not busy in Trinidad . . ."

That seemed to convince her. The taut lines of fear smoothed out, leaving her face beautiful. She smiled. "No thanks, Mr. Quill. But I'll remember you if I need any management."

She went to her seat and Johnny sank back weakly. He couldn't risk having any more contact with her. There was an old saying: A man who kills one acquaintance is more likely to be caught than one who kills a dozen strangers. Getting caught in the West Indies meant there'd be no Organization lawyer at his cell next morning with a writ and a bundle of cash.

And that meant hanging.

In Barbados, he cabled Cantino to have his man at Piarco airport in Trinidad. During the last short hop, he kept his nose in *Country*

Life and didn't look at Norma McLain.

He was watching the Trinidad customs man probe the innards of his luggage when a voice sang out beside him. "Carry your bags, sir?" Without pausing the voice whispered: "Cantino sent me."

Johnny turned to face a young man with straight black hair falling over his flat, Carib face. He wore a ruffled shirt open to the navel, Belafonte-style.

"Try the woman in the brown wooll skirt," said Johnny.

The young man flashed a white grin. "Saw her already, Chief. If you need a drink, try the slophouse across the street."

He bounced down the counter to where Norma McLain was handing her suitcase to a cadaverous Indian porter. The kid shouldered the Indian aside and grabbed the handle. The Indian clung. The kid jabbed his elbow into the Indian's stomach, and he doubled over, retching dryly.

The kid grinned at Norma, shouldered the bag, and walked toward the door. She hesitated a second, then followed, carrying her jacket over her arm. Her white blouse had pulled loose on the sides, and the small of her back showed a dark shadow of perspiration. Johnny dreaded the time he'd have to see her again.

Johnny finished customs, checked his baggage, and found

the sleazy rumshop the kid had mentioned. Choosing an isolated table in the corner, he drank one lime squash and then another, sensing the violence that seemed always to swirl about the island like an invisible, odorless gas.

An East Indian stood at the bar fondling the gold ring in his ear. A pigeon-chested man with tattoo-blackened forearms sat three tables away complaining in French to a shaven-headed man in a dirty t-shirt. Two bearded men across the room argued in the harsh accents of Caracas.

Johnny felt the pressure build up inside him, washing away the fatigue of the twelve-hour flight. He always felt it before a hit—a taste of pennies in his mouth, the quick, fluttering heartbeat and the stretching of the skin across his cheekbones.

He saw Cantino's man pause in the door, dark eyes bouncing about the room like a little black balls in a glass. He walked over to Johnny's table, leaned forward, and spoke in the soft Trinidad sing-song.

"She's in the airport hotel, room 114. She catches a Beewee flight north in two days."

Johnny sipped his lime squash, feeling let down. The operation was dragging. "Who's watching her now?"

"The desk man. I gave him five bucks. Beewee money."

"What if she goes out the back?"

"No, man. The place is surrounded by a chain-link fence and three strands of barbed wire. One gate and the parking lot man watches that. I gave him five, too. If she walks out he sends a kid ahead to tell us. If she rides out, he delays her at the gate and sends a cab ahead for us. Good?"

Johnny nodded. The kid was sharp and eager to please. He reminded Johnny of himself at twenty, though he wondered if he'd been so obnoxiously bright.

"You were told to stay with me?"

"Yeah."

"Sit down. What's your name?"

The kid collapsed into a chair, adolescent-fashion. "Albert. I'll take rum."

"You'll take lime squash or water when you work with me." Johnny saw him look down, smiling at his hands. Albert would be hard to work with, he decided; too wild, too eager, too wise.

"What's north of here?" he asked.

"More islands," said Albert. "Her plane takes her to Grenada, but she asked the desk man about Laborie."

Johnny waited, then said impatiently: "Don't make me drag it out. How does she get to Laborie?"

"From Grenada she has to make other contacts. Maybe she gets a native schooner, or a freighter, or if she's lucky she gets a deck ticket on one of Geest's banana boats. That'll take her to a smaller island, St. Vincent. Then she has to

hire a launch or a fishing boat for Laborie, twelve miles out."

"You know the islands," Johnny admitted. "What's on Laborie?"

Albert looked pleased. "I'm the only man Cantino trusts out in the islands whether it's rum, women, or dope. They're like my back yard. Laborie?" He paused to give Johnny a sad look.

"It's the end of the world, man. I never set foot on the island. We always unload onto native boats. About two thousand people live there. They fish, smuggle, raise some bananas, a little copra. No electricity. No roads. Mostly shingle shacks, some houses and rum-shops. One building they call a hotel . . ."

"Anyone in the hotel?"

"Rats, mostly. Some Canadian bought it two or three years ago and let it go to hell. They say he's a rummy."

Johnny felt the skin tighten on his face. Montana bordered on Canada; a man could slip over the line, take on a Canadian identity, then fly south. And the time checked. "You don't know the guy's name?"

"Mac something. Uhhmm . . . McLennon?"

"Close enough." Johnny felt the pressure building up again. Finding the man was half the problem; now he wanted to finish it quickly. "Can you get us out tonight?"

"If you don't mind the smell, I can get a boat."

Johany nodded. "And get me

a gun. I had to travel clean."

Albert looked down at his hands. "Cantino said you should make it look like a local job. We don't use guns here."

Johnny felt his nostrils burn with anger. "Why doesn't Cantino mind his own business?"

Albert half-smiled, still looking at his hands. "I guess he's got his orders."

Johnny looked narrowly at the kid. Someone was twisting the screws—sending him weaponless to an island where he'd stand out like a naked bather in Grant Park, tying a wild kid on his back . . .

"Albert," he said tightly. "You're supposed to spy on me, aren't you?"

Black eyes narrowed a split second, then flew wide. "Oh, no, man."

"Don't lie to me, kid. How do you report?"

Albert's lips tightened, and he said nothing.

Johnny shot his foot out under the table, found the rung and kicked up and out with all his strength. The chair sailed backward and crashed to the floor. The kid landed on his back and slid halfway across the room.

The rumshop was silent as Albert rose, his face a dirty gray. He shot a scared look toward Johnny, who hadn't moved. Then he brushed his hands over his white trousers, picked up the chair and carried it back to the table. By the time he was seated, the Indian was

fondling his earring and the two Venezuelans had picked up their argument.

"I didn't enjoy that," said Johnny. "But I can't work with a man I don't trust. Now . . . give me the story or get out."

"Okay." Albert spoke in a low voice, looking down at his hands. "I report every day by telephone or cable. Where we are, where we plan to go. If I miss, they come looking. They figure you might run."

Johnny's fists tightened. "Why?"

"Cantino says you been ratholing cash. It's a good sign."

Johnny leaned back slowly, feeling trapped. They'd sweat him first, he decided. What they finally did would depend on how he handled this job. He'd be watched like a chain-smoker in a gunpowder plant.

"Okay," he said. "The gun's out. What do they use here?"

"Knife, electric cord. Best is a bicycle chain, then you dump the guy in the road and they call it hit-run. Happens all the time."

"Except that Laborie has no roads." He leaned across the table and drew Albert's shirt apart. He'd noticed the scar when the kid fell; now it was revealed as a puckered furrow slashing across his chest from right shoulder to left rib cage. "How'd that happen?"

"A brawl down in San Fernando. Fella tried to give me a heart operation but he stood too far

away. He didn't get another swing."

He sounds proud as a kid with a new car, thought Johnny. He's hard for a kid—and the pratfall hadn't bothered him at all.

"I meant the weapon, kid," said Johnny.

"Oh. Cutlass."

"They use 'em in Laborie?"

"It's universal, man. The handy-dandy all purpose tool for cutting bamboo, cane, firewood, wives and other guys."

"Okay. Here." He drew his baggage check from his pocket. "Get my bags and a cab."

Albert took the check and bobbed up. "What about the woman?" Cantino says you'll have to take her out too."

"We'll see. The man comes first."

Albert nodded thoughtfully. "You take your time with her, huh?"

"Get the bags, kid."

"Okay. But when the time comes . . ." His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "Let me do it, huh?"

Johnny felt the hair prickle on the back of his neck. "Get the goddam bags. Now."

He watched the kid go, feeling a faint sickness in his stomach. Everybody seemed to want the woman dead; now they even wanted to kill her for him.

In room 114, the telephone rang. It was the desk clerk again, asking

Norma if she needed anything.

"No." her voice rose. "I told you I'd call if I did."

"Yes, madame."

"Has anyone asked about me?"

"No, madame."

"If they do, you're not to tell them anything."

"Yes, madame."

She hung up, her nerves jumping. She wasn't sure the five follars she'd given him would buy his silence. She was beginning to hate Trinidad with its close, heavy air; its quick-moving people with their weird, sing-song English. Her skin crawled as she thought of the young porter who'd flaunted his horrible chest scar. In some strange way, he seemed to mutilate her body with his black, bouncing eyes.

She sagged into the chair at her dressing table and rubbed her eyes. Her lids felt gritty. She needed sleep, but she couldn't unwind after twelve hours in the air. Leaning closer to her mirror, she could see tiny lines crossing and recrossing the skin below her eyes.

She stood and stripped off her blouse and skirt. The suit was unwearable now. Too bad her good summer things had worn out first. Those she'd bought were cheap and looked it. She thought of her furs and jewelry and furniture, sold for the sole purpose of staying alive. Sometimes even that had seemed a waste . . .

She lay down on the bed in her slip. The noisy air-conditioner blew

cool air across her body. She debated spending the entire two days in her room; having her meals sent up, reading . . . It would distract her from the worry of seeing Howard again. You never knew what three years would do to a man, especially to Howard, with his leaps of enthusiasm and plunges of despair. Once he'd told her, "A dependable man would bore you, Norma." And she'd answered, "Then please, Howard, bore me now and then."

Was that before or after the nightclub? Somewhere in there; the nightclub was youth's Big Dream, except that he'd lost money and a friendly guy had offered to help him if he opened up a little casino in back. From then on, the organization had owned him.

In the three years since he'd disappeared, she'd begun to wonder if they'd killed him. He'd always thought they would, eventually. Then a week ago she'd received a note with a West Indian postmark. The note had said: *Laborie, B.W.I. Howard.*

That was all. Now here she was, four thousand miles from home and nearly broke. She wasn't even sure he meant for her to come. Oh, God . . . She sat up and lit a cigarette. If he sent her away, she'd divorce him. Thirty was too old to be alone.

Suddenly she had to know.

She lifted the phone and got the desk clerk on the line. "You re-

member I asked about Laborie? Is the airline the quickest way to get there?"

"No, madame. A Grumman float plane is available for charter during daylight hours only. It will deliver you to St. Vincent."

"How much?"

"The fare is arranged with the pilot. I believe it usually runs something over two hundred dollars—Beewee."

"Hold on." She cradled the phone in the hollow of her shoulder and counted her money. Sixty—plus the refund on her return airline ticket. She could charter the plane and have enough left for cigarettes and a meal or two. After that . . .

"Better be there, Howard," she whispered, then said aloud; "I'd like to go tomorrow. Can you make arrangements?"

"The pilot cannot be reached until eight tomorrow. I'm off duty."

"Oh. Well, call me at six in the morning."

She hung up, stripped, showered, and slid naked between the cool, tingling sheets. As she switched off the light, her thoughts drifted to the tall man who'd gone behind customs in San Juan. He'd called himself a businessman, but there was something hard and exciting about him. She wondered what excitement he was finding in Trinidad.

The *Zinia* was built high, like a

Mississippi river boat. Johnny shared the enclosed top deck with a dozen passengers, some barrels and boxes of cargo; and thick diesel fumes which boiled up from the engines below.

Within two hours he had a thumping headache. It wasn't eased by the red-skinned man who sprawled on the wooden crate beside him and harangued Johnny about his tropical bird stuffing business. Between pulls on a quart of Mount Gay rum, the man tried to persuade Johnny to find him a stateside market for his birds. Johnny began to regret his businessman cover.

Albert, meanwhile, ranged the ship like a member of the crew, talking in their burbling French-African patois. It reminded Johnny of men talking with their heads under water. Around three a.m., Johnny had just fallen asleep with his head against a coil of rope when Albert shook him.

"Got something to show you, man."

Johnny followed him down the ladder and onto the open bow of the ship. The open sea looked like crinkled tinfoil in the moonlight. The ship was plunging, and a southeast wind whipped Johnny's shirt against his body. He watched Albert pull a long, broad-bladed knife from between two crates. It curved backward like a cavalry saber.

"Here's your cutlass, chief," said

Albert proudly, holding it out by the point.

Johnny grasped the blade and flipped it, feeling the handle smack into his palm. A spiral of black tape was wrapped around the handle. "Nice balance. Where'd you get it?"

Albert's eyes gleamed with pleasure. "Found it in the crew's quarters."

Johnny felt a quiet anger rise inside him. He held out the cutlass, the point nearly touching Albert's stomach. "Put it back."

"Hell. No, man—."

Johnny touched the point against Albert's skin. The kid sucked in his belly and jumped back, clapping his hand to the spot. "Jesus!"

Johnny spoke softly: "Don't go out on a limb without orders from me. How'd you expect to get that through St. Vincent customs?"

Albert, looking sheepish, lifted the cutlass from Johnny's hand. "I guess I can learn things from you."

Johnny felt a touch of pity for the kid. "You'd be better off learning to drive a taxi. Now take the cutlass back."

At nine a.m. the *Zinia* anchored in the shallow harbor at Kingstown, St. Vincent. Johnny and Albert reached shore in a bathtub-sized boat. A ring of mountains trapped the air and a white, blazing sun brought it to oven-heat. By the time Johnny had been filtered through customs, sweat trickled

down his back in a lukewarm stream.

"Can you run a launch?" he asked Albert.

"Anything that floats, I can handle," grinned Albert. "If you want, I'll have one at the long jetty in an hour."

"Do that," said Johnny, and walked out into the cobbled streets of Kingstown.

He bought ten cans of Argentine beef, a tin of ship's biscuits, a half dozen cans of evaporated milk, and a pair of Japanese binoculars. If his plan worked, he'd go ashore in Laborie only once.

In a general merchandise store, he bought a cheap cardboard suitcase, a pair of black trousers, a black long-sleeved jersey, and a pair of black silk stockings. When night came, he hoped to be as invisible as the piano player in a strip-tease show.

"Wrap all this stuff together," he told the clerk.

The Indian went to the rear of the store and Johnny carried the suitcase to a wooden rack containing a gross of cutlasses, fresh from Manchester and smelling of cosmoline. He looked around quickly, then jerked out a cutlass and slid it into the suitcase. Now he had one that couldn't be traced.

Johnny walked back to the waterfront and found Albert pacing the deck of a thirty-foot ex-Navy launch which looked as though it had been caught in a crossfire at

Leyte Gulf. Gray paint peeled off its sides and many of the cabin ports were broken.

"Best I could do, chief," Albert said as Johnny came aboard. "Thirty bucks a day and skin-diving gear goes with it."

"It'll do. Get your cable sent?"

"Yeah."

"Fine. So your skin is safe for another day."

"Chief, I gotta—"

"I know." Johnny stooped to enter the seven-by-twelve cabin. It was barely furnished: a wooden bench along each side, wheel and compass at the forward end; one-burner stove and water keg aft. He dumped his load on one of the benches. "Let's go."

The short-keeled craft rode the heavy sea like a cork. Albert, fighting the wheel, said the waves came from a hurricane somewhere out in the Atlantic. Johnny found a steel file, tried to put an edge on the cutlass, filed the skin off three knuckles, and quit.

The sea calmed when they entered the lee of Laborie. The island rose from the sea as a single steep ridge. Tall grass clothed its upper slope, combed and parted by the endless wind. On the shore, coconut palms and breadfruits brooded over black shingle shacks.

The boat nosed into a horseshoe bay fringed by a beach as white as salt; as empty as Death Valley. Johnny pointed to a weathered, two-story building which stood a

quarter-mile from the village.
"That the hotel?"

"Yeah."

"Drop anchor."

Johnny squatted on deck and raised the binoculars. The hotel seemed near enough to touch. A half-dozen rattan chairs stood empty on a wide gallery. A ping-pong net sagged on a table, and a copy of *Reader's Digest* lay open on the floor.

The dreamy peace made Johnny's chest ache. "The guy wasn't all stupid," he said. "He picked a great place."

"A great place to die," said Albert.

Johnny grimaced. The kid was a crepe-hanger, probably giggled at funerals.

For an hour the hotel stood as quiet as a bar on Election Day. Then a woman came out and walked across the narrow beach. Her features looked European, but she walked like a West Indian, with shoulders back and pelvis thrust forward. Beneath a white terrycloth robe her legs were a light toasted brown.

Johnny pegged her tentatively as a Creole from Martinique.

At the water she dropped the robe, stood for a moment while the sun bounced off her bright orange bikini, then ran into the surf with a squeal that reached Johnny as the squeak of a very small mouse. He wondered whether she lived in the hotel or only worked

there; either way, she'd complicate the operation. He'd hoped to find the man alone.

Fifteen minutes later the woman came out, peeled off her bathing cap, and shook down a two-foot cascade of black hair. Johnny caught his breath as the peeling continued. The bra dropped to the sand; the pants joined them, following a downward jerk of her hands and a convulsion of her lips.

As she toweled herself with the robe, Johnny wondered why she'd even bothered with the bikini. Maybe bikinis were an island status symbol, as mink coats were at home. She was mighty go-to-hell about her nudity, the way she tossed the robe over one shoulder and sauntered up the steps into the hotel.

But there was no sign of the man he'd come to kill. Johnny ate his bully beef and biscuit without lowering the glasses. The day crawled into afternoon and the island curled up in the sun and slept.

Around two, Albert examined Johnny's cutlass and said it would not cut an overripe mango. Johnny told him to sharpen it. For the next hour, the screech of the file slowly tied his nerves in a knot.

Finally he lowered the glasses. "I don't aim to shave him, kid."

"Man, you could." Albert brushed the blade lightly over his forearm, leaving a patch bare of hair. He grinned. "Where you figure to cut him?"

Johnny raised the glasses. "You don't plan that close, kid."

"You wouldn't let me . . . ?"

"Hell, no. You'd louse it up."

"Noooo, man—"

"Shut up." A man in shorts had stepped out on the gallery. A bushy R.A.F. moustache curled back against hollow cheeks, and red blotches marred his features. But the large wet eyes and curly hair marked him as Howard McLain.

He slumped into a rattan chair, propped his feet on the railing, and raised a glass of something which looked like black Martinique rum. Johnny had drunk it once; nearly 150-proof, the stuff had gone down like velvet embedded with fish-hooks. Howard McLain was drinking it like Pepsi-Cola.

Two more years, thought Johnny, and I wouldn't have had to kill him.

The woman came out and sat down. She wore a red dress made of bandannas. Sitting beside McLain, she looked less European than she had on the beach. She lit a cigaret and held it out to McLain. He took a drag and returned it, absently caressing her leg. Their movements had a dreamy lassitude which to Johnny was unmistakable; they'd just gotten out of bed.

Well, that made it rough. No doubt they slept together at night. He felt a surge of sympathy for the dark-blond woman coming four thousand miles to join her husband.

Johnny turned the glasses to the

main village, marked by a wooden jetty which pointed a long finger into the bay. An unfinished schooner lay on the grassy savannah, its ribs bleaching in the sun like bones of a giant whale. Behind the savannah stood two stores, three rum-shops, and a square, concrete building which looked new.

A word above the door made Johnny's heart stop: POLICE.

"Albert," he said tightly, "why didn't you say there were cops here?"

"What?" Albert grabbed the glasses and looked. "God, that's something new. I swear, I don't know." He turned to Johnny, his face worried. "What does that mean? You can't do the job?"

Johnny smiled grimly and took the glasses. "Means we have to be twice as careful, that's all."

A quarter-hour later, a young negro policeman left the little building and walked across the savannah. He wore a white pith helmet and a short-sleeved white jacket with corporal's stripes on the sleeves. Near the unfinished schooner, he sat down on a fallen palm trunk, lit a cigaret and took off the helmet. Two of the workmen joined him and they talked, laughing often. The policeman unbuttoned his jacket.

"I think he's the only one here," said Johnny.

"How do you know?" asked Albert, who'd been breathing down his neck.

"No cop gets that friendly with the citizens unless he's the only one in town."

The corporal finished his cigaret and returned to his building. At five, he locked the door and walked down a sandy path toward the rear of the village. Johnny sighed. Now, if nothing happened to stir him up

The sun dropped into the Caribbean. Darkness came like a blanket thrown over the island. Dim lights appeared in the rumshops and someone lit an oil lamp in the savannah.

Johnny watched the hotel, where Howard McLain and the creole woman sat playing cards across a bar of split bamboo. A Coleman lantern enclosed them in a cone of light. They didn't talk; just laid down the cards and picked them up in pairs, counted the score and dealt again. The game, Johnny decided, was Concentration.

He hoped they'd go to bed before the moon came up. But he couldn't wait much longer.

Albert came out with a plate of food and Johnny waved it away. He'd never been able to keep food on his stomach before a hit. I'll get ulcers, he thought, if I stay in this business.

The two were still playing cards when the luminous dial of Johnny's watch showed eight p.m. He went into the cabin and started pulling on his dark clothes. "I'll swim to the hotel, Albert. Gotta make it be-

fore moonrise. Give me time to reach the beach, then go in and tie up at the jetty."

"What? They'll see me."

"They've been seeing us, kid. Ten to one the cop's got a description of the boat. If you stay out here, someone's bound to remember we were here at the time of the killing. The cop'll start looking for us. So you go in and mingle. Tell the people you're working for an American businessman. Tell 'em I'm on board asleep, and we're heading back to St. Vincent when I wake up."

"Sounds good."

"It stinks." Johnny jerked off his shoes and socks. "Too damn many complications. I like to pick the time and the method. This time they did all that for me."

The kid was silent as Johnny slid the cutlass into one of the black stockings. "Hey. How'll you get back on the boat?"

"Swim. I'll shed these clothes, so if I'm seen, I'll just be taking a dip. Here. Tie this on." He turned to let Albert tie the cutlass to his back. One thong went around his neck, the other around his waist. The blade lay flat along his spine.

"If it goes right," said Johnny as he pulled the other stocking over his head, "we'll be in St. Vincent before they find the body."

"What about the guy's wife?"

Johnny felt a twinge of annoyance. He didn't want to think about the woman. "Don't worry about

her. We'll be back in Trinidad before she catches her plane."

He walked out on deck and eased himself over the side. In the water he paused, clinging to the splashboard. "We'll make it, kid. Just keep doing as you're told."

He pushed off and swam toward the two dim squares of light which marked the hotel windows. After a minute, he noticed that the lights kept moving to the right. A powerful current was sweeping him toward the open sea. He altered course and aimed for a point halfway between the village and the hotel. He was not a strong swimmer and the clothes hampered his movement. He reached shore a hundred yards beyond the hotel, then dropped to the sand and drew in great gulps of air.

After a minute he untied the cutlass and walked toward the hotel, staying under the palms which fringed the beach. He could hear the launch moving toward the jetty. Albert was following orders.

He crept along the side of the hotel and found a window which gave him a view of the lobby. The pair were still playing cards. A sand crab scuttled across Johnny's foot and he jumped. The cutlass ticked the building.

At the bar, McLain rolled his head. "Whazzat?"

"A manicou," said the woman.

"Go look around the building."

She closed her eyes a moment, then rose. Johnny crouched low as

her bare feet slapped across the lobby. He reversed the cutlass and gripped it by the blade. He didn't plan to kill the woman unless he had to.

A minute passed and the woman didn't come. He straightened and saw the glow of her cigaret on the beach. She stood there smoking, looking out to sea. After a time she flipped away the cigaret, went back inside, and crawled up on her stool.

"A manicou," she said, picking up her cards.

"You went all the way around?"

"Oui. As I do three times each night."

McLain took a long drink. "Some night I'll shoot that damn possum."

The play continued. Between each hand, the woman filled McLain's glass. He sagged lower in his stool and twice he dropped his cards. The third time he dropped them, the woman lifted the lantern off the hook, draped his arm over her shoulder, and struggled upstairs. The light reappeared in the third window from the front, then it dimmed slowly and went out.

Johnny stood up, feeling a tight band of pressure around his chest.

The woman screamed. A shrill note of terror descended abruptly to a choking gurgle.

Johnny dived under the gallery, his heart pounding. He heard bare feet cross the gallery. Then came a series of faint splashes as someone ran into the sea.

Ten minutes passed. Johnny heard only the sound of his own breathing and the soft whisper of the surf. He crawled from beneath the gallery, swearing under his breath. He found matches in the lobby and walked upstairs, knowing with a cold, certain anger what he'd find.

It was worse than he'd expected. He let one match burn down to his fingers and had to light another.

Howard McLain lay on the bed, arms and legs flung out in the posture of drunken sleep. His head lay several inches from his shoulders. The blade had passed through his neck and gashed deeply into the coconut straw mattress.

He found the woman on the other side of the bed. She'd just begun to undress; the red bandanna dress clung around her waist, glistening like wet soot in the matchlight. The cutlass had struck at the base of her neck and sliced down to the center of her chest. The taped handle still protruded from between her breasts.

It was the cutlass Albert had stolen from the deckhand.

Anger sickened Johnny. *The stupid, kill-crazy kid.* The man's murder was messy, the woman's was senseless. Both were needlessly brutal. Someone should hang for this, thought Johnny.

But he knew that if they caught Albert, they'd have a noose for him, too.

He walked slowly to the wom-

an, careful not to step in the blood. He jerked the cutlass from her body and replaced it with the one he'd stolen in St. Vincent. He walked downstairs and out on the beach. He pulled the handkerchief off his head just in time.

When his violent retching ended, he swam twenty yards out in the water and dropped the cutlass. He swam further and discarded the jersey, the trousers, and the silk stocking.

He could see the faint light on the savanna. He swam toward it, but seemed to make no progress. No matter how hard he swam, the light moved away. Then he remembered the current. He shifted course and swam at right angles to it, not knowing where he'd hit the beach. Soon he didn't care, just so he reached land.

It seemed an hour before his fingers touched sand and he pulled himself up on the beach. The darkness was absolute; he could barely see his feet. When he could walk, he made his way in the direction of the village by following the shifting, luminous line of the surf.

He knew he'd passed the hotel when he saw the light in the savanna, still nearly a quarter-mile away, but not visible from the hotel.

Suddenly he bumped into something warm and black. He threw out his hands and touched what felt like two large, soft breadfruits. A woman's voice asked: "*Ki sa chache, blanc?*"

Johnny's heart jumped, and he thought: She might have seen me leave the hotel. He slid his hands up to her bare shoulders toward her throat, and the woman laughed with the deep liquid sound of oil pouring from a jug.

"Man, you going the wrong way."

Nearly someone else laughed. Another voice joined in, more distant. God, he couldn't kill them all.

He dropped his arms and walked around the woman. "Pardon me," he said.

"Parn' *me*," she repeated in a voice heavy with sarcasm.

A moment later he sidestepped another shape. "*Vini, blanc.*" said the woman. "Come."

He walked on. The moon came out, revealing more people on the beach ahead of him. Never again would he wonder what people did at night on these small islands.

Then he thought: What the hell am I doing here? I must be in shock, walking around in a pair of shorts like it was Sunday afternoon at the beach.

He needed an alibi. And he suddenly wanted to know what the first woman had said in her broken French. It could have been something about the hotel.

He whirled and walked swiftly back. He found the woman sitting with her back against a coconut palm, her legs drawn up under a gray shapeless dress. In spite of the dress, Johnny decided she must be

the one, because the beach was empty further on.

She didn't look at him as he sat down beside her. But she moved her legs to make room.

"What was that you said before?" asked Johnny.

"I ask, 'What you lookin' for, white man?'" Her voice lacked the boldness of before. Johnny wondered if she was bold only in the darkness. Her round face looked almost adolescent in contrast to the obvious maturity of her body.

"Do you have the time?" he asked.

"No, '*sieur*."

He glanced at his watch and subtracted a half hour from its reading. "Nine o'clock. What's your name?"

"Millicent."

"And you wonder what I look for?"

She laughed softly. "I gave you a joke. I know why a man walks at night." She stood up and pulled at her dress. "Come away from the beach. My small sister pass this way soon."

An hour later Johnny strode onto the launch and pounded on the locked door of the cabin. Albert's voice came from within, high and frightened. "Who is it?"

"Johnny."

The door opened a crack. "Man, I began to wonder—"

Johnny kicked the door. Albert sprawled backward onto a bench,

his mouth gaping. Johnny slammed the door and locked it. He turned to Albert and said softly, "I wondered too, kid."

Albert looked at the locked door, then stared at Johnny's face. His eyes were bright, his lips loose and wet. "I wanted to help, Chief. I thought you'd have trouble, so I swam out and sneaked in the back way and waited upstairs in the hall. When they came up I couldn't stop—"

Johnny stepped forward and smashed his fist into Albert's jaw. The kid fell sideways and lay like a bag of laundry. Johnny jerked him to his feet and hit him again. The kid sprawled face down on the floor.

"I want the truth, kid." Johnny's throat hurt as he tried to keep from shouting. He rolled the kid over with his foot. "The truth, kid."

Albert twisted his head and spat a mouthful of blood on the deck. "Cantino said . . . make sure the job was done. I figured . . . do it myself . . ."

"You did a lousy job, kid," said Johnny. "A sloppy, lousy job. You left me cold without an alibi. You killed two people, so they'll look twice as hard. And you left a souvenir behind."

"The cutlass?" The kid sat up, supporting himself with his hands. "Nobody saw that, Quill. I stuck it in my pants leg when we went through customs."

"You figure the guy from the

Zinia wouldn't report it missing? You think they wouldn't remember that you were in both places?"

Albert's eyes widened in terror. "Jesus, you gotta cover for me, chief. You know if they get me, they'll get you—!"

Johnny slapped him. His rage had faded, but the kid was getting too loud. "They won't trace the cutlass to you, kid. Get up and clean up. We've got to get out of here before somebody finds the bodies."

The kid had just finished mopping the deck when three loud knocks sounded on the cabin door.

"Who is it?" asked Johnny.

The answer rolled into the tiny cabin. "Police."

Johnny caught his breath and whispered to Albert. "Anybody see you swim to the hotel?"

The kid's face was the color of an oyster. "I don't think—"

"You sure as hell don't. Go to the wheel and be ready to move out."

The pounding at the door was repeated. Johnny said peevishly: "I'm getting my pants on. What's the trouble?"

"There's been a murder, sir. I have to ask some questions."

Johnny swore to himself and jerked on his trousers. How had the bodies been found so soon?

He slid the steel file into his pocket as he walked to the door. The cop had sounded polite. A cop isn't polite to someone he's about to arrest for murder, Johnny thought—but you couldn't trust a cop.

He opened the door. The corporal stood bareheaded, his jacket unbuttoned. He stepped inside with a faint, apologetic smile.

"Sorry to disturb you," he said in precise, unaccented English. "Someone killed our hotelkeeper, Mr. McLleno, and his . . . ummm, maid of all work, a woman named Lena."

"Good Lord!" Johnny hoped he sounded shocked.

The corporal lowered himself to the edge of the bench. "The cutlass is a frightfully vicious thing, isn't it?"

"I imagine so. Was that the weapon?" This cop is sharp, thought Johnny. I must remember to know only what he tells me about the killing.

The corporal nodded. He unzipped a plastic case and drew out a pad and pencil. "May I see your passports, please?"

Johnny took the green folder from his suitcase and gave it to him.

"I'll also need your boatman's."

Albert came forward with his passport, keeping the battered side of his face turned away. The corporal made notes in his pad as he thumbed through the folders. Johnny thought he looked more like an insurance man filling out a questionnaire than a cop.

"Mr. Quill," said the corporal as he handed back the passports. "Have either you or your boatman been ashore this evening?"

Johnny's nerves tightened. "Albert hasn't. I went for a swim and walked on the beach."

The corporal made a note and regarded his pad thoughtfully. "I suppose I should ask now if you saw any suspicious individuals, but I've learned that all we islanders look suspicious to a stranger." he smiled. "May I ask what time you took your walk?"

"Eight-thirty . . . until about ten."

"You must have gone a good distance."

"No, I . . . met a girl on the beach. I spent the time with her." He paused, and the corporal waited with an expression of polite interest. "She said her name was Millicent."

"Millicent Henry." The corporal nodded. "Yes. You would naturally meet Millicent." He made a note in the pad. "I'll have to ask you not to leave the island."

Johnny took a slow, deep breath, amazed that he was being trusted. He hoped Millicent had been too preoccupied to doubt his word about the time.

He watched the corporal zip up his plastic case and rise to his feet.

"Have you any leads?" asked Johnny.

The corporal frowned. "One theory so far. That it was a professional killer from the states."

The words hit Johnny like a fist in the stomach. He wanted a wall to lean against.

"The theory," added the corporal, "came from Mr. McLennon's widow. She's the one who found the bodies."

Something pinged in Johnny's mind. McLennon's widow . . . that meant Norma McLain, his wife. The woman Johnny had left in Trinidad. *How did she get here so soon?*

With an effort, he brought his thoughts under control. "Do you think she's right?"

"I can't say. The woman was on the verge of hysteria—with good reason, certainly. She rode the Goose — that's our seaplane — from Trinidad to Kingstown. Then had a devil of a time getting out here. Turned back twice by heavy sea, finally persuaded a fisherman to make the trip. Then, finding her husband decapitated . . ." He shrugged. "Now she says they're after her."

"Oh? Why?"

"Something to do with a letter her husband left for her. We found it under his mattress."

Johnny caught his breath. He wanted to kick himself for not searching the place. Now he'd have to deal with Norma McLain whether he wanted to or not.

He watched the corporal open the door. "Where is the woman now?"

"With Mrs. Gantry." The corporal turned, frowning. "Why do you ask?"

Johnny wondered if he seemed

too interested in the woman. It couldn't be helped. "I might be able to help her."

The corporal looked thoughtful, then nodded. "Yes. It might soothe her to see a countryman, at that. Mrs. Gantry lives in the yellow house at the edge of the savanna."

After he left, Johnny started pulling on his shirt.

"You gonna take care of her now?" asked Albert.

"On the island? Don't be an idiot. I might as well do it in the police station." He sat down and jerked on his shoes. "I'm going after the letter. If I get that, maybe I can scare her into keeping quiet."

"That won't satisfy Cantino."

Johnny's jaw set. "To hell with Cantino." He rose and walked toward Albert. "And you, why didn't you tell me about that seaplane?"

Albert blinked up at him. "I didn't know, man, I—"

"Don't lie, kid. You knew she was coming. You thought she'd be with her husband, and you'd get a chance to kill them both. Right?"

Albert looked down, his face set in sullen defiance. Johnny felt an overpowering urge to wrap his hands around the kid's throat and see the bright, dancing eyes film over. But there were more urgent things to do.

"Listen, kid," he said softly. He lifted Albert to his toes by the front of his shirt. "I plan to bring the woman back here. If you lay a finger on her, I'll kill you."

The yellow house was the kind of toy mansion they like to build in the Indies. Johnny crossed an ornate, pillared gallery in one step and stooped to go through double doors which had looked majestic from a distance.

Mrs. Gantry was a huge, light brown woman with a bald spot on her crown. Carrying a kerosene lamp, she led him down a tiny corridor and knocked on a door. When no answer came, she turned to Johnny and whispered; "The poor thing's terrified. Hiding someplace, I should imagine."

She pushed open the door. The tiny room had space for little more than the massive four-poster bed and a wooden washstand. The bed was rumpled, but empty.

Mrs. Gantry set the lamp on the washstand. "You wait. She'll come out directly."

Alone, Johnny browsed around, too nervous to sit. The bedsheet was still warm, smelling faintly of violets. On a rung of the washstand hung a bra, slip and panties, still damp from washing. Beneath it lay a flowered skirt and a cotton blouse, both stiff with dried salt brine. She'd had a rough trip.

Under the bed he found her cardboard suitcase. The letter would be there unless she'd taken it with her. He was reaching for it when he saw a curtain move on the opposite wall. He straightened.

"Mrs. McLennon?"

Her voice came through the cur-

tain, low and taut. "Who are you?"

Johnny sat down on the bed and smiled toward the curtain. He had to play this cool. He couldn't carry her down the street screaming and kicking. "I'm Johnny Quill, from Chicago. The corporal thought I might be able to help."

The curtain parted and she stepped out. She wore a nightgown of white cotton which covered her body like a tent, leaving only her head visible. A loan from Mrs. Gantry, Johnny decided. Her grey eyes had looked tired on the plane; now they were haunted.

"You're the one from the plane," she said in a flat voice. "I never did believe you were a businessman."

Johnny reached for his hip pocket. "I can prove—"

"Your papers don't mean a thing. I know how the organization works."

Her words were strong but her voice trembled. Johnny wished suddenly that he'd really come to help her.

"What is it you're afraid of?" he asked gently. "You think I came to kill you?"

She drew a deep, shuddering breath and rubbed the skin under her eyes with the palm of one hand. "You came down from New York on my flight. You followed me in San Juan. Now we're both on one tiny island, and my husband has just been killed. You expect me to believe that's a *coincidence*?"

She isn't sure, thought Johnny.

She wants to be convinced. "Of course it's a coincidence," he said. "I know nothing about any organization."

Seeing a flicker of doubt in her eyes, he stood up. "I came in through the front door. Does a killer do that?"

"Don't come any closer!" She held out a chipped, rusty butcher knife. Johnny decided she must have borrowed it from Mrs. Gantry. The way she held it, the knife was about as dangerous as a broken stick.

Johnny laughed. "You really think I came to kill you?" he took a step toward her, then stopped less than an arm's length away, his hands at his sides. "All right. Then you can kill me."

She stood frozen. Beads of perspiration appeared on her forehead. The nightgown clung, moulding itself to the shape of her body. One thing was obvious, she couldn't have the letter on her.

Johnny smiled. "If we're just going to look at each other, I think I'm getting the best of the bargain."

She dropped her eyes for an instant. Johnny gripped her wrist and took the knife from her lax fingers. He threw it on the bed.

She clawed at him with her free hand. He caught it and imprisoned it behind her. He held her right against him and looked into her wide, frightened eyes. "I could kill you now, couldn't I?"

She nodded once, slowly. He

bent his head and kissed her lightly. Her lips were hot, dry and lifeless. After a moment they moved, slowly at first, then hungrily. Her body pressed against him, warm and trembling.

He released her hands and she drew back. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright.

"Did you come for that, Mr. Quill?"

"No. But it makes the trip worthwhile." He reached for the drawstring at the back of her neck.

Suddenly she twisted away. "No!" She looked at him with a dazed expression. "I don't know what's got into me. The . . . excitement, maybe. But I don't want that." She pressed her palms to her cheeks and ran her fingers through her hair. She plucked at her gown, erasing the sharp details of her body.

Then she looked at him, her eyes speculative. "You gave me a chance to kill you. I suppose that proves something."

Johnny nodded. "I hope so."

"I have to trust someone. Do you have a gun?"

"Only a speargun in the boat. Why?"

"I don't feel safe here. Mrs. Gantry thinks I'm cracking up. So does that cop."

"Hmmm . . . I suppose I could anchor out in the bay, away from the island somewhere . . ." He saw interest flicker in her eyes, but he couldn't afford to appear eager.

"It'd be uncomfortable. Nothing but wooden benches."

"I wouldn't care if I slept on nails."

"There's only two blankets. One for me and one for my boatman."

"I'll borrow one from Mrs. Gantry." She raised her hands to the drawstring. "Turn around so I can dress."

Johnny turned his back. "You'd better tell the corporal you're going. I don't want him to think I'm kidnapping you."

"I'll tell him."

Johnny listened to the snap and rustle of her dressing. He wished he knew what he'd finally have to do with the woman. Whatever it was, it'd be a damn sight harder to do, now that she seemed to trust him.

Norma McLain snapped awake, her nerves jumping. She stared around the moonlit cabin. Johnny Quill lay on deck, his narrow face pointed at the ceiling. Albert lay on the opposite bench, his knees drawn up against his stomach.

One of them was faking. One of them had stood over her just a moment ago, looking down. He lay awake now, waiting for her to doze off. *Which one?*

She swung her feet to the floor and drew Mrs. Gantry's blanket around her shoulders. She shivered. Albert? She didn't trust him. After Trinidad, it had been a shock to find him here. Even with his

eyes closed he made her flesh crawl. She thought Johnny felt the same way; certainly there was hostility between the two, and she felt sure the tall man had been responsible for the dark, swollen lump on Albert's jaw.

Was it Johnny? She looked at him as he lay with his feet together, his hands crossed on his chest. He looked, she thought, like the carving on an Egyptian sarcophagus; at times he seemed almost as cold and remote. There was no question of trusting Johnny; she needed his strength. She was flat broke and four thousand miles from home. She didn't trust him, but that meant little; she couldn't trust anyone until she delivered Howard's letter.

Her hand flew to her waist. She felt the envelope under her wool skirt, still tucked in the waistband of her slip, pregnant with her husband's revenge.

Even after death, she thought, Howard leaves the dirty jobs for me. She pictured his tight scrawl across the bottom of the envelope; *In the event of my death, please forward.* And the letter itself:

"In three years my premonitions have grown stronger instead of weaker. Each morning I wake up surprised to find that I'm alive. Each night I go to bed feeling that I've stolen a day and must pay some horrible penalty for the delay.

The delay will end soon, I think, and that's why I sent for you. Since I'll be dead when you read this, I

ask you to serve as my hands. I've written all I know about the organization, its methods, and its people. Take it to the authorities, not in the Islands, but in the States

The six-page letter had made her feel that she was gazing into a cesspool. Bombings, fires, bribes, murders, and nearly fifty names. Howard had a good memory for names. The letter would blow a gaping hole in the organization; it was like having a hand grenade tied to her stomach.

But it was Howard's last request and she had to carry it out if she intended to live with herself. He was weak and erratic and unfaithful and maybe he'd deserved to die. *Oh, God . . .* Her mind recoiled from the horror she'd found in the hotel. It might have been her lying in that pool of blood instead of that poor girl of Howard's . . .

She caught her breath as Albert moved. She watched him rise to his elbow, gaze at her for a moment, then drop his head. He began to snore.

She sat still for several minutes, waiting for her legs to stop trembling. Then she spread her blanket on the floor and lay down beside Johnny. She tried not to touch him but the gentle rocking of the boat kept pressing her against him. She couldn't relax; it had been too long since she'd lain beside a man.

She jumped as his arm slid around her. "Please don't.

"Why did you come down here?" he asked.

"Your boatman watches me. He's been watching me all night."

She felt him turn. "Albert! Take your blanket and sleep out on deck."

Oh, Lord, she thought, he's jumped to the wrong conclusion. She lay tense as Albert stumbled out, swearing in patois.

"Better?" asked Johnny.

"Couldn't you . . . push him overboard?" Her voice sounded strange and distant.

"A good boatman is hard to find." He laughed gently. "Come here."

Slowly, she gave in to the gentle pressure of his arm and turned to face him. I must be the worst kind of bitch, she thought. This is only my first day as a widow . . .

Daylight pressed against her eyelids when she awoke. Her mouth was dry and her bones ached from sleeping on the deck. Inside, she felt a sweet relaxation which had been missing for three years.

She opened her eyes and saw Johnny working at the little stove, wearing a pair of green swim trunks.

"Where's Albert?"

He answered without turning. "He took the dinghy to the village for supplies."

"Oh." She relaxed, feeling the prickle of the blanket against her skin. Oh, Lord, I'm naked. She put her hand to her stomach and

caught her breath. *The letter . . .* She groped under the blanket and found the woolen suit wadded at her feet. The letter was crumpled in the side pocket.

She took a slow breath. Have to keep my head, she thought, and stop behaving like a love-starved widow . . .

She pushed down the blanket and stretched, forcing her fingers through tangled hair. "Johnny, could I have my suitcase?"

She watched him pull it from a compartment beneath the bench and thought: It's nice to have a man around.

He set the suitcase beside her and she saw that his face was drawn, his lips tight.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

He's lying, she thought. Maybe it was no good for him. She watched him set a basin, soap and towel on the bench. "Did I do something wrong?"

He shook his head. "You can wash up on deck. We'll eat when you're done."

He went back to the stove. Troubled, she dressed in shorts and a blouse. She rolled up the letter and shoved it inside her bra.

On deck, she took a deep breath. The air smelled fresh; the dawn sky showed the fluttering streamers of a thousand state fairs. Goats bleated in the hills, and a fleet of pirogues pulled a net across the bay. The men were standing up, flailing

the water with long, narrow oars. Even the hotel looked quaint and peaceful.

Norma wished she and Johnny were alone. She wished she'd never found the letter.

They were finishing a silent breakfast when Albert came aboard and dumped a bag of supplies on the bench. "Chief, the corporal says your alibi checks out. You're free to go."

"Okay. Get started."

Norma stiffened, feeling a tremor of fear. She didn't want to be left alone again. "Johnny, you aren't leaving?"

He picked up the plates and carried them to the rear of the cabin. "We're taking a little cruise down through the Grenadines. You come too. You'll enjoy it."

"But the murder—"

"Let the cop worry about it."

She heard the engine start. Albert spoke behind her. "The corporal's got a new slant, anyway. He says it was a love-killing."

She whirled. "But I told him—!"

Albert grinned. His jaw bulged as though he'd stuffed his cheek with hard candy. "He says a professional would've used a gun. Not a cutlass. Too untidy."

"The fool! They're smart enough to make it look that way."

Albert shrugged. "All I know, he's rounding up all the guys who ever scored with the woman. Seems like there was several."

"Oh!" She felt her cheeks burn

with anger. "Turn around. I'm going to the village."

Albert grinned his swollen grin.

She whirled. "Johnny!"

Johnny shook his head. "You gave him your story. You can't do any more."

"I can show him—" She caught herself. Her voice trembled as she said, "Will you take me to the village?"

"I'm sorry," said Johnny. "You'll have to stay with us."

Panic seized her. She whirled and threw herself at the wheel. "Turn, damn you!"

Albert, still grinning, brushed her away with his arm. She whirled and ran past Johnny, out on the afterdeck. She screamed, but the fishermen with their paddles were between her and the village. Nobody could hear her.

She put her foot on the railing.

Strong hands gripped her arms and pinned them behind her back. "That's a hard way to go," said Johnny.

She kicked back with her foot and twisted. The buttons popped off her blouse and a strap broke. The letter fell out, struck the railing, then rolled off into the sea. She caught a glimpse of it swirling in the wake of the launch, then it was gone.

She heard Johnny's voice in her ear. "They wouldn't catch half the men your husband named, Norma. The rest would be after you."

She stopped struggling. Her

breath came in short, sobbing gasps. "Your name wasn't in it, Johnny. I looked."

His voice was flat. "Usually I call myself Aquila."

Aquila. She remembered it. Havana, Miami, Chicago, Las Vegas. *Oh God, so many, many murders*

... Suddenly the strength drained from her body. The landscape tilted, and she felt herself falling . . .

After a long time, Albert's voice filtered down through a cloud layer:

"Chief, we could slice her wrist and roll her overboard. The sharks wouldn't leave even a fingernail."

Sickness coiled in her stomach. Johnny's voice grated like boots on gravel. "She lost the letter. We can scare her into keeping quiet. No need to kill her."

Albert laughed. "Chief, there's something they didn't tell you. She's been on the list all along. We just wanted to take her and her husband at the same time."

Her muscles drew tight but she didn't move. She felt the deck pressing against her back and heard the rush of water past the boat.

After a moment, Johnny spoke in a tight voice: "I thought you found her husband too easy. How long have you had him spotted?"

"Two years." Pride sounded in Albert's voice. "This way, neither one has time to scream to the cops. Clever?"

"So clever I want to throw up. Get back to the wheel."

"In a minute, chief. I sent a message this morning. They know we've got her. I report from St. Vincent at midnight tonight. If she ain't dead, you are." He laughed. "You ain't a big man with the outfit anymore, chief."

Johnny's voice was barely audible: "I'll take care of her. Get back to the wheel."

She heard Albert's footsteps fade into the cabin.

She opened her eyes. Johnny sat on his heels beside her. His face was tired, and deep lines cut from his nose to the corner of his mouth. His eyes flicked over her. "You've been listening."

She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "Could you do it, Johnny? Could you kill me?"

He looked out to sea, his lips tight. "I go into it like a mechanic. They aren't people to me. Just machines I've got to turn off."

"Even after you make love to them?"

He scowled down at his hands. "Maybe that was a mistake."

She tasted bitterness in her throat. "I should've saved it. Maybe I'd have something to bargain with now."

"Bargain with Albert?"

The thought gave her the sick shudders. Then she remembered: He doesn't want to kill me. It's Albert's fault. She sat up, bracing her back against the cabin.

"Kill him." She whispered. "Get rid of him and run." She leaned forward, holding her blouse together. "I'll go with you, Johnny, anywhere you want to go."

His mouth twisted. "Albert's insured. You must have heard that."

"You know how they work. You could kill them as they come."

He gripped her shoulders and pushed her gently back against the cabin. "Norma, listen. You think they'd stop after one try?"

"We'll hide! You're twice as smart as Howard."

"They'd look ten times harder. Hell! They've got a hundred kids like Albert who'd bust a gut to be able to say they took out Johnny Quill. I'd be lucky to last a year."

She knew she was losing, but she couldn't give up. "We'd have a good year, Johnny." She gripped his arms and dug in her fingers. "I'd make it good, Johnny. I'd make it the best year you ever had."

Gently he removed her hands and placed them in her lap. "They'd make you regret every day you stayed alive. You think you're safe, then one day somebody whispers in your ear in a crowd. You pack up and run like hell. A month later, somebody writes on your window with soap. You run again. You start getting phone calls at three in the morning, but there's nobody there when you answer. You go nuts, Norma. Christ! You think your husband enjoyed his last two years?"

She set her jaw. "It's better than dying."

"I know a guy who didn't think so. He tried to leave the organization and start over as a garage mechanic. A year later, a laundry truck ran over his oldest boy. The next month, his seven-year-old daughter drowned in a rain-filled excavation. He had a wife and two other kids. He shot himself to save them."

"We wouldn't have kids, Johnny." It was a feeble, last-ditch try, and she knew it was no good.

"That wouldn't matter. One guy fell in love with a model and ran away to Arizona. Six months later a man came through the neighborhood handing out samples of face cream. His wife tried it. Her face came off in chunks. The guy spent three months looking at a face like spoiled hamburger. Then they shut up the house and turned on the gas."

She clapped her hands to her ears. "Don't tell anymore! God, Howard was weak, but you . . . How did you get into this slimy mess?"

He sat back on his heels and studied his hands. "In Detroit a bright kid goes to work for General Motors. In Cicero, Illinois, he works for the mob. Simple. To climb out of a snake pit, you use the first ladder you see." He raised his eyes to hers. "I've regretted it several times. Never so much as now."

She wanted to cry, but her eyes

felt hot and dry. "But you're going to do it."

"Would you rather Albert did?"

She shuddered. "Johnny, I don't want him around when you . . . when it happens. Promise me."

"I promise."

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the cabin. There was no way out. She opened her eyes and saw a distant cloud brushing the sea with a long, curved feather of rain. The world was a wonderful place.

"Johnny, let me be alone for awhile. I'll try to get used to the idea of . . . dying."

It's the right kind of day, thought Johnny. Spray beat against the cabin ports like felt-covered drumsticks. The sea looked like the Dakota badlands.

At the wheel beside him, Albert complained: "Noon already, chief. Don't forget I report at midnight."

"We'll make it."

"Hell, you've already passed up half the Grenadines. Why so choosy? You ain't gonna build a house on the island."

"What's that one?" Johnny pointed to an isolated blob of land to the east.

"Tobago Cays."

Johnny squinted and the blob resolved itself into five islands, none covering more than five acres. "Anybody live there?"

"No. No water. Too isolated. A millionaire brewer owns 'em."

"Let's take a look."

Albert twisted the wheel and spoke cheerfully over his shoulder. "You gonna have a quiet place to die, baby."

Johnny set his teeth. "I hope I'm along on your last ride, kid."

"Man, I'll sing all the way."

Johnny walked back to Norma, who sat on the bench with Mrs. Gantry's blanket around her shoulders. She swayed with the boat as though her body had no life of its own. He lit a cigaret and put it between her light, bloodless lips.

She spoke without looking up, her voice dead and flat. "Is this my last one?"

"Not yet." She believes she's going to die, thought Johnny. That was good; because it would help convince Albert. If Albert wasn't convinced, then she'd be killed in spite of all he did to save her. By someone.

The cigaret fell from her fingers and smoldered on deck. He ground it out with his heel and strode forward.

One of the cays stood more than a mile from the main group. It was a low sliver of sand with a cover of bush and one solitary palm.

"Petit Tabac," said Albert.

"People ever go there?"

"Every Friday. Fishermen dry their catch for the Grenada market."

Friday. And this was Wednesday. "That's the one," said Johnny.

A vicious current ripped past

Petit Tabac, its boundaries marked by a series of whirlpools. The sea rolled in upon the island like a carpet being shaken, tearing itself to pieces on a fringe reef of beige-colored coral.

Albert frowned as they dropped anchor. "This ain't good holding ground, chief. The tide'll shift in an hour and she'll drag her anchor."

"Take us ashore in the dinghy. You can come back and stay with the launch."

Albert looked at him curiously. "Why don't you do it here and throw her to the sharks? They're all around."

"I'm doing it my way."

The kid hesitated, then grinned. "I get it. You want her alone on the island. When's my turn?"

"You don't touch her."

Albert's eyes narrowed. "You aint gonna stop me. Don't forget I gotta report at midnight."

Johnny spoke through stiff lips. "Two broken arms wouldn't keep you from reporting. Now pull in the dinghy. I'll get the woman."

In the cabin, Johnny packed Norma's suitcase. She was fingering the cloth of her blouse like someone counting a rosary. She didn't look up, and that suited Johnny. He didn't want her to ask why he was throwing in canned beef, water flasks, skin-diving gear and a roll of bills from his wallet.

As they stepped in the dinghy, Albert pointed to the suitcase. "What's in there?"

"Her clothes, stupid. I bury them with her."

Albert grinned. "No, man. You're gonna maroon her and make me think you killed her."

Johnny's stomach tightened. "You think I'm crazy?"

"I think you're too damn touchy about the woman. I won't believe you've killed her until I see the body."

Johnny forced himself to relax. This was serious. "Suppose you watched me kill her? And bury her?"

Albert looked confused. "You mean . . . from the launch?"

"Sure. Use the binoculars."

He frowned, then nodded. "Okay. But don't get outa sight."

They had to jump out of the dinghy beyond the surf line. Johnny struggled through waist deep froth carrying the suitcase and dragging the woman. He climbed to the top of the sandpit which formed the western tip of the island.

"Sit down," he told her. "Keep your back to the launch."

He found a conch shell and dropped to his knees beside her. Using the flange of the shell, he began scraping out a trench at right angles to the launch. "Now listen. I'm going to put you in this hole—"

"Johnny, for God's sake, *don't make me sit here and watch!*"

"Shh. I forgot to tell you. I'm not going to kill you. Don't turn!"

Her voice trembled. "I don't un-

derstand. You told Albert . . ."

"I'll just pretend to kill you." As he talked, he kept enlarging the trench. "You'll have a face mask and the snorkel tube when I bury you. You'll be able to breathe. After we leave you can crawl out and . . ."

She began to make noises halfway between laughing and crying. Her shoulders jerked and a stream of tears ran down each cheek. He kept working, the sun hot on his back. After a couple of minutes her sobs tapered off.

"Here's the rest of it," he said. "I've put food and water and seven hundred dollars in your bag. You've got two days to wait for the fishermen."

"What if they don't come?"

Smart girl, he thought; already recovered enough to ask practical questions. He darted a glance at the launch; saw Albert on deck with binoculars trained on the island.

"They shouldn't skip more than one week," he told her. "You can stretch your food supply by living off the sea. At low tide you get whelks off the rocks just below the waterline. They look sorta like snails, only bigger and rounder. You can pick up white sea eggs too. Don't mess with the black ones or they'll stick a poison spine in you."

"Water?"

"Go without until you're damn sure you'll die if you don't get a

drink in the next minute. Then wait another hour. If it looks squally, spread all your clothes out on the ground. When it rains, wring them out in the cans. If it doesn't—"

"I die of thirst."

"No." He paused to swat at the sandflies which were making a meal of his leg. "Dig a hole in the beach back of the waterline. It'll fill slowly with water. Then filter it through silk. It'll taste like the runoff from a sewer but it's wet. Any more questions?"

"Yes. The fishermen come and I go off with them. What happens then?"

Before answering, he set aside the conch shell and lay the suitcase into one end of the trench. There was still room for her.

"Go to South America, Europe, anyplace. Let your hair grow long, bob your nose, get fat or skinny, whichever is easiest. But don't come back to the States."

"Oh Lord . . . Won't I see you again?"

"Not unless you want us both dead. If this is to work, I have to stay with Albert and follow it through until he reports you dead. Then I've got to go back to work as though nothing had happened."

"More killing . . ."

"It can't be helped." He turned, gripped her shoulders and pushed her gently back onto the sand. He leaned over her, speaking through stiff lips. "I'll strangle you now.

Kick and scratch and fight like hell. You won't have to pretend, because I really have to hurt you."

"Wait . . ." Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glistened. "Johnny, I wish . . ." She raised her hand slightly as though to touch his face, then let it fall to her side. "All right. I'm ready."

She put up a convincing defense. Johnny was breathing hoarsely when he finally rolled her limp body in the blanket. The backs of his hands were raw and a long scratch burned on his shoulder.

He lay her in the trench, picked up the conch shell, and began to cover her with salt-white sand. He hid the trench with his body as he worked. Pelicans screeched at the tip of the sandspit and the surf thundered its age-old attempt to destroy the island.

When only her head remained uncovered, he opened the suitcase and took out the face mask and breathing tube. Then he paused, looking down at her.

Hair clung to her damp forehead. Sand encrusted her neck like sugar on a butter sandwich. Her mouth looked swollen and red as blood. He pressed the back of his hand against her lips and felt them move slightly.

"Remember to breathe through your mouth," he said. His throat hurt when he spoke. "Give me . . . an hour to get Albert away."

"All right." Her eyes half-opened. "Goodbye, Johnny."

He nodded once, unable to speak. With numb fingers, he put the mask on her face and inserted the breathing tube in her mouth. Covering her head was the hardest job he'd ever done. Sweat poured from his body as he leveled off the sand. He set the conch shell over the end of the breathing tube, hiding it from the launch.

For a minute he listened to the hollow, even sound of her breathing. She'd make it, he decided. She wasn't the panicky type of woman.

He turned to walk to the water—and froze. Albert was pulling the dinghy onto the beach.

Johnny felt a vise clamp his chest. "*What are you doing here?*"

Albert grinned and shouted up to him, "Thought you'd want a ride, chief, after the fight she put up!"

Johnny walked toward him, his face stiff as sun-dried cowhide. "I could've swam."

"Yeah. Well, I thought I oughta check the grave too." He lifted a speargun from the dinghy.

Johnny felt something cold crawl up his back. He stopped. "You saw me kill her. Isn't that enough?"

"You don't know Cantino, man." Albert walked forward with the speargun cradled in his arm.

Johnny bent his knees, waiting tensely for Albert to get near enough. He'd have to kill him now; there was no other way to save the woman.

Ten feet away, Albert raised the speargun and pointed it at Johnny's stomach. "Wait right there, chief. Just in case you pulled something I didn't see."

Johnny stared at the barbed shaft as Albert edged around him. The gun was set; the rubber tubes which could drive the shaft through a thirty-pound barracuda quivered gently in the wind. His stomach drew into a knot. He'd have to wait until the kid started digging; he'd rush him then regardless of the risk.

Albert stepped onto the grave and kicked away the conch shell. The breathing tube protruded from the sand like a miniature periscope. Albert's jaw dropped. "Well I'll be damned!"

He started laughing, sucking the air through his teeth. "Man, you oughta win a prize. You had me fooled."

Still laughing, Albert aimed the gun at a point just below the breathing tube. Johnny's breath stopped. He was afraid to rush the kid now; it might startle him into pulling the trigger. Three inches of sand wouldn't keep the shaft from going through her neck.

"Albert! You only get one shot!"

Albert squinted at him. "So?"

Johnny took a step toward him. "After that I'll kill you with my bare hands."

Albert swung the gun back to him. "You want if for yourself, big man?"

Johnny took another step, feeling the sweat break out on his neck. "You still only get one shot."

Albert's lips pulled back from his teeth. "And you get it right in the belly, man!"

Johnny dropped to his knees on the last word. He didn't hear the gun. He felt a knifing pain in his shoulder and saw a bright red stream flowing down his chest. The world went dark for an instant and he fell forward, catching himself with his hands. He squinted up at Albert, struggling to focus his eyes.

"That . . . was your last shot," he croaked. "Now you're a dead man." He started crawling forward on his hands and knees.

Albert raised the speargun over his head. Suddenly the sand moved beneath his feet. He staggered backward, staring at a pair of small white hands emerging from the sand. He dropped the speargun and ran.

Johnny tried to push himself to his feet. The earth spun and he fell forward on the protruding end of the shaft. He saw a red splash of pain, then only blackness . . .

He awoke to feel warm sand against his back. He raised a hand to his shoulder and felt a hole just above his collarbone. The shaft was gone and the bleeding had stopped.

"Don't touch it, Johnny."

He opened his eyes. Norma was kneeling in front of him, tearing

her white cotton blouse apart at the seams. Sand glistened in her hair.

"Albert . . . got away with the launch?"

"No. He upset the dinghy trying to get it through the surf. Then he tried to swim out."

He winced as she dabbed at the wound. "Tried?"

She nodded, wrapping the bandage around his shoulder. "The sharks must have been waiting around the launch. He only screamed once."

She finished and sat back on her heels, looking at him. "I'm afraid the launch is gone anyway."

"Gone?" He struggled up on one elbow. He saw the launch squatting low in the water two hundred yards offshore. Foam swirled over her decks and around the cabin. He reconstructed the chain of events: The tide had changed and she'd dragged her anchor. The current had carried her onto a submerged reef. Now she looked as though she was there to stay.

"The dinghy was washed ashore," said Norma. "I'll row out and get your clothes."

"No. Leave them." Johnny leaned back and closed his eyes. Cantino's men would come looking. They'd find the launch wrecked with his and Albert's gear aboard, and they'd think both had been lost. He couldn't have planned it better. He felt a wild hope his luck had turned.

He opened his eyes. "Would you still settle for a year?"

"Yes." She said it quickly. "Or a month, if that's all we get."

He smiled. "We may have longer than that. There's a larger island

about six miles west of here. A few shacks. Cows on the hills. Could you row us there?"

"Yes." Her eyes glistened and the tears made small paths in the grime on her face. "Oh yes, Johnny!"



STATEMENT

REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, JULY 2, 1946 and JUNE 11, 1960 (14 Stat. 208) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF MANHUNT, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1960.

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MICHAEL ST. JOHN
Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this
1st day of October, 1960.

[SEAL] RICHARD T. GREENE,
Notary Public

(My commission expires March 30, 1962)

JANUARY 20th, my room.
I have decided not to put Dear Diary any more, because there's not enough lines anyway and putting Dear Diary only takes an extra line. It is not worth the trouble. As always, it was a lovely birthday yesterday (my 8th!) with lovely presents from everyone. Mama

this very one I am writing in. Poor Jack wanted to play with the dolly of course, but Papa wouldn't let him and shouted very hard. I wonder if Jack will ever be too old to cry. 17 seems to me quite old enough already. Henry is only 14, and he never cries, but Patsy is 11 and Teddy is 4 and they cry lots.

BLOOD

Jack, dangerous? Of course not! After all, he was her favorite brother.

BY LEWIS BANCİ

gave me a new party dress, and Papa gave me white and yellow shoes to go with it, and Teddy gave me a set of pencils (but I bet Mama got them) and Patsy gave me two coloring books and Henry gave me a dolly with red hair that comes out all over everything. Jack as usual gave me a diary, which is

I try not to, to make up for Jack. Anyway, the other thing I want to say is it's starting to snow now. Papa has gone to town. I'm not supposed to know why he went, but I heard him and Mama talking about it. He went to arrange for Jack to get put away. Papa said it's for everyone's good and Mama cried a lot but

then agreed yes he could get dangerous. I think it means Jack will go away soon and I don't like that because Jack is my favorite brother no matter how much he cries. Maybe I should tell him where Papa went and why. I hope it snows lots.

January 21st, my room.

Two things. First, Papa is not back yet and the snow is still coming down! It was just like night all day long. Jack says it will be over the roof soon if it does not let up soon. I hope he is right because we have a three story house and I love snow. The second thing is that Mama fired Mrs. Wagner and will have to do the cooking herself now. Henry says the prospect does not appeal, and Jack laughed and told him to be nice. This is one of Jack's good days, which is not so unusual as Henry claims. Henry also claims that's why Mama fired Mrs. Wagner, because she was talking about Jack and said he is dumb like a fox on his bad days. Henry even says Mrs. Wagner said Jack chopped Scooper up but Papa said poor Scooper got hit by a car when he was chasing a cat and Papa ought to know. Jack keeps pestering Papa and Mama for another dog, but they are not agreeing to anything. Even if I thought it was true about Jack and Scooper, Jack would still be my favorite brother, because I'm his favorite sister. And a diary is my favorite present. I hope Papa

isn't going to have Jack sent away. He's so nice, on his good days.

Jan. 22nd, the dining room.

Along with not putting Dear Diary any more, I have decided to put Jan. instead of January. Which will not save space since you have to use a whole line for the day anyway, but it is easier and means the same thing, so where is the difference? It is not snowing quite so hard any more, but it is still snowing some. Mama says Papa must be stranded in town and will have to stay at the hotel, and Henry said why couldn't he call up, so Mama said the phone lines are probably down. If the light lines go down too, then we'll have to use candles. I hope so.

Jan. 23rd, my room.

Mama says it's been a long time since she cooked herself, but she is starting to remember how all over again. Henry said he wished she'd hurry up about it, and Jack knocked him down right on the floor, which made Patsy smile and me laugh, only now Henry seems to have a black hatred for the both of us girls. It's all right with me, I am never going to ask Henry to help do my homework no matter how high Henry's marks go in school. And speaking of school, Mama says we are missing too much of it, so she has started reading to us in the mornings. Yesterday Jack recited the whole list of

presidents by heart, but today he couldn't remember them at all, so we played house with Teddy while Mama and Henry and Patsy did sums. For supper we had chicken only Mama burnt it and Henry said again he wished Mrs. Wagner was here. He knew it was all right because Jack wasn't listening to anyone right then. Mama said that all cooks were ingrates.

Jan. 24th, my room.

Today was terrible. Jack took the scissors and cut all the buttons off Henry's clothes and then tried to cut the head off Henry's canary Chrissy, but Mama saw him in time. What excitement, Mama got so mad she locked Jack in his room. And he jumped out the window. Henry said too bad the snow was there or he would have broke his neck. We watched while he got up and wandered around in the snow. Mama was crying like anything and kept saying I don't know what to do. Henry suggested letting him freeze and I tried to knock him down like Jack did, but he weighs too much for me. Then Jack came up to the window where we were and Mama opened it and tried to pull him in, but he pulled away and ran out to the woodshed. I could see his face getting blue already from the cold, and so could Mama because she cried some more and then locked us all in our rooms and said she was going out to get Jack. That was this afternoon.

She's not back yet and I'm getting awful hungry. It must be past supper time by now.

Jan. 25th, the kitchen.

I stayed in my room like Mama said to, but Henry didn't. I heard somebody walking out in the hall and I called Mama through the door, but it was Henry. He said Mama was gone too long and he was going out to see why. He sounded 'scared, and I said he ought to stay in his room, but he went down stairs. I can't see the woodshed from my window, so I didn't know what was happening until I heard somebody coming up stairs later on, and then the key in the lock and what a surprise. It was Jack who opened the door! He looked cold as anything, and said let's get Patsy and Teddy and have some supper. He had the keys to all the rooms and we got Patsy and Teddy who were both in Patsy's room. Patsy wanted to know where Mama and Henry was, but Jack wouldn't say. We went down to the kitchen and Jack made a great big supper for us without burning a thing. We had hot dogs.

After supper Pat and me washed the dishes and we put Teddy to bed and then the three of us played parcheesy until we got tired. It was lots of fun, only Patsy kept asking where was Mama and Henry. Jack finally said they went to town to find out what happened to Papa,

and he was to take care of us until they got back. Patsy said when would that be, and I wish she hadn't because it set Jack off again on one of his bad spells. He just sat there and cried and cried and cried. I hope Mama won't be long.

Jan. 26th, my room.

Here's a puzzle. Patsy is gone too. When I woke up she already left. Jack said he didn't know where she went, but we found a note on the kitchen table, from Patsy. It said she was going to try to walk over to the Jensen's house. I don't think it was a smart idea, because they live way down the road, and the snow is awful deep. Jack was just wonderful today and he played hide and seek with Teddy and me all morning. After lunch he read to us and then we played some more parcheesy, only that wasn't so good because Teddy is too little for it. We put Teddy to bed right after supper and played Old Maid six times. It was just like playing house all day, for real. Now I am going to bed. Mama should get back tomorrow. Anyway, I hope so. It would be nice if someone came to call on us, but the snow is coming down again, so I guess that's out. I bet one really good hot day would melt everything. But you can't expect a hot spell in Jan., I suppose.

Jan. 27th, the kitchen.

Nothing happened all day, ex-

cept the snow stopped again. We used most of the fire wood so I told Jack I was going out to the woodshed for some more. He got real excited and nasty and went out to get it himself. He said if I put one foot outside the house I'd be sorry. If Mama doesn't come tomorrow I'm going to start worrying.

Jan. 28th, my room.

No Mama, but we played the loveliest and noisiest games all day long, I clean forgot about worrying. It was nice not having any one yelling at us to stop.

Jan. 29th, my room.

At last the storm is really over and the sun is out good and strong. It would be nice to go out and play, only Jack says we can't because the snow's too deep. So we played hide and seek again. Jack was having a bad day, but he wanted to play anyway. That's when Teddy got sick. I was It and Jack and Teddy ran to hide. After a long time (because I count slow) I went to find them. I looked all over except Teddy's room because the door was locked. Jack finally came down stairs and said Teddy fell down and hurt himself and he'd have to stay in bed for a while. I wanted to go up and see him but Jack said he needs lot of sleep, so I didn't. The best part of the whole day was we stayed up until midnight! We were listening to the

radio, and Jack was talking back to it. He was very funny, and we both laughed a lot.

Jan. 30th, the kitchen.

Jack has been very bad all day long. He started crying right in the middle of breakfast and now it is after supper and he is still crying. I spent the whole day with my coloring books, coloring.

Jan. 31st, the living room.

Jack started out real good today, but right after lunch the phone rang. I ran to answer it, but Jack beat me to it. He stood there with his hand on it but he didn't pick it up. Finally it stopped and we played Old Maid again. Jack was the Old Maid five times and I was the Old Maid two times. I wish we answered the phone. It might have been Mama.

February 1st, my room.

As soon as I woke up this morning I remembered about Teddy. I tried to open his door but it was still locked, so I woke Jack up, but he said Teddy needed more sleep. When I said he might be hungry Jack said to fix him some cereal and he'd take it up. I did, with lots and lots of sugar and gave it to Jack. I watched from the hall. Jack unlocked Teddy's door and put the tray inside real quick and locked the door again. He looked at me kind of funny when he saw me, but I didn't say anything be-

cause I thought he was going to have a bad spell. I can sort of tell when they're coming. But he was all right in the afternoon and went out to the front yard to make a snow man for me to look at. Watching him in the snow was almost as good as going out in it myself, only I knew I couldn't when I saw it came up to his waist line. On me it would have been over my shoulders. When he was about half done, the phone rang again. I knew Jack wouldn't want me to answer it, but I thought it might be Mama, so I picked it up, only I waited too long because it stopped ringing just before I touched it. I decided not to tell Jack about the phone, in case it would make him mad.

Feb. 2nd, my room.

When Jack came in from making the snow man, he was soaking wet and he changed all his clothes. I was hanging up the wet ones on the kitchen chairs when the bedroom keys fell out of his pocket. I wanted to take them because he might have a bad day and not remember where he put them and we'd have to break Teddy's door down to get in to feed him. Papa sure wouldn't like that. Right then the phone rang again and I ran for it, only Jack was all changed by then and beat me to it as usual. Just like before, he wouldn't answer it. I told him he was mean since it might be Mama, and he

said to look out, I might fall down and get hurt like Teddy. I went into the kitchen quick and took the key to Teddy's room and then gave him the rest of them. He never missed Teddy's key.

Feb. 3rd, Teddy's room.

7 A.M.

I got up real early this morning and went down to the kitchen and took all the food I could carry and brought it up to the hall outside Teddy's room. I don't think Jack's been giving Teddy enough to eat. Just when I unlocked Teddy's door, Jack came out of his room, so I had to slam the door real quick without even turning the lights on or pulling the shade up. I locked it from the inside just as fast as I could. Jack told me to come out but I wouldn't. I'm too mad at him. Teddy isn't even here! I pulled the shade up and saw the room was empty. The cereal bowls are right on the floor where Jack set them, and I'm not unlocking the door until he tells me where Teddy is.

9 A.M.

I am putting the times down be-

cause it is good practice in telling time, and because this is the first time I ever wrote more than once a day in my diary. Jack is still right outside the door, yelling at me. This is his worse day so far. The sun is out again.

11 A.M.

Finally Jack went away from the door and down stairs. From this window I can see the woodshed, and that's where he went, and came right out again with Papa's ax that he's not even supposed to touch and came back to the house with it. I just heard him climb up the stairs again and right now he's making a terrific racket trying to get in here. I guess he's awful mad at me, but I better open the door and take that ax away before he hurts himself.

11:15 A.M.

I opened the door, but he wouldn't let go of the ax and he wouldn't let me out of the room. So I am just sitting here writing because there isn't anything else to do. I can hear Jack now, coming up behind me. I bet he's going to apologize for . . .



"I'M AS GOOD as ever I was!" Darky said, tapping his chest. He laughed, throwing his head back and thumping his empty beer pot on the counter—but there was something forced about that laugh;

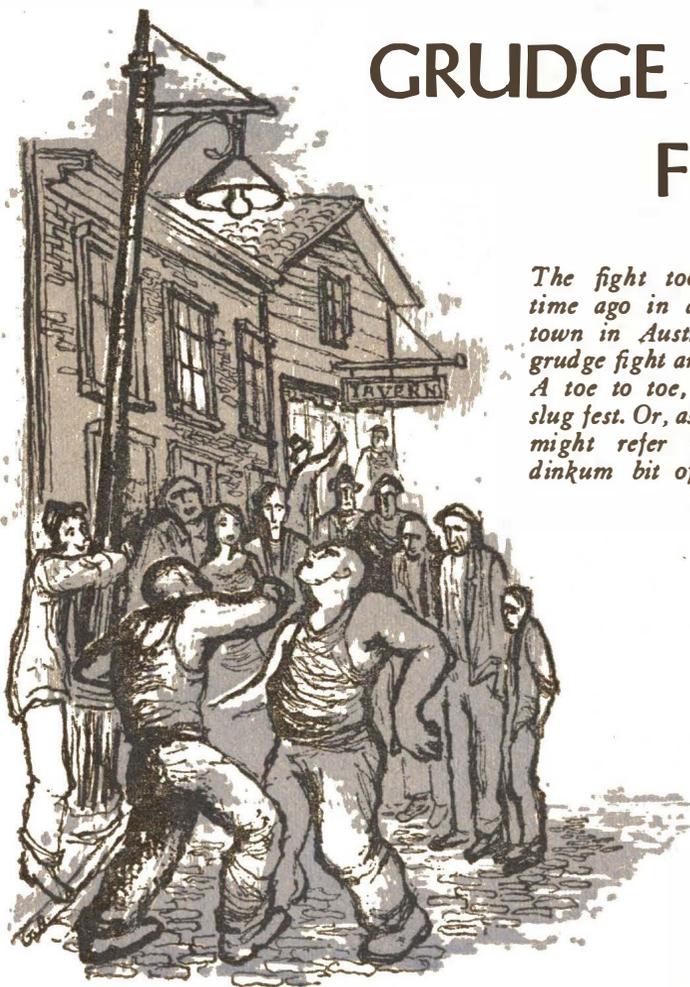
it didn't come from the belly or the heart.

"Here, fill 'em up again!" he ordered the barman.

Darky and Ernie Lyle always dropped into the Royal Hotel on

GRUDGE FIGHT

The fight took place some time ago in a small mining town in Australia. It was a grudge fight and a blood bath. A toe to toe, bare knuckled slug fest. Or, as the towns folk might refer to it, "a fair dinkum bit of stoush."



BY
FRANK HARDY

their way home. Lately, they'd been working at the open-cut coal mine on the outskirts of the town. They'd washed before leaving the mine but coal dust still persisted around their ears, eyes and finger nails and was caked on their eye lashes.

These two were mates now—at least Ernie would have claimed they were. Darky would express no view on that subject; he'd had a lot of mates in his time and acknowledged none of them. It wasn't in Darky to call a man his mate; his feelings were buried deep somewhere so you just had to guess at them.

Their pots replenished, Ernie ventured to comment: "I'm not sayin' you're not as good as ever you were, Darky—but Younger's as big as you are and, well, he's younger. He's only twenty two and you're, well, you're over forty, Darky."

The expression, that clouded Darky's face intimidated Ernie, who added with a hollow laugh: "He's younger by name and younger by nature . . ."

"Listen, Ernie! Younger's a bludger and a scab," Darky said. "Yes, he's a scab all right. The Trade Union fella from the city went out to the timber mill and Younger wouldn't join. Anyhow, I got to fight him now. It's been coming a long time and now it's here."

Darky drank his beer without taking the pot from his lips. Beer trickled down his chin into the hair

on his chest. "Here, drink up, Ernie, we'll have one for the road."

"Not for me, Darky. Three's enough for me. You've had six pots already—you generally only have three yerself."

"Ah, that coal dust needs washin' down . . . Have a pony to keep me company."

"All right, I'll have a pony."

"Here, Dan, fill my pot, and a pony for Ernie."

The drinks served, Ernie poured the beer from the small glass into his half-empty pot and gazed reflectively at the linoleum on the bar counter: "I still think you shouldn't fight him, Darky. It's what he wants. He's beat every one in the town . . ."

"Every one in the town," Darky interrupted, "except this Darky here!" He tapped his chest with his right forefinger, making a deep sound like a distant drum.

"Yeh," Ernie persisted. "But that's his ambition. He's been itchin' to have a go at you for years—and he can fight, Darky. He beat the pro' pug in Sharman's troupe last year, you know that . . ."

At that moment Younger plunged through the old-fashioned swinging doors, scattering a group of drinkers, beer splashing their clothes. He stood arms stretched sideways holding the doors open, his feet placed wide apart.

The talk in the long bar ceased as if it had been coming through a radio speaker and been switched off.

A hundred men in various stages of intoxication turned towards the door, beer glasses neglected in their hands and on the soggy counter top. The publican, Danny O'Connell, stood suspended, four empty glasses balanced in his left hand. His blonde wife sat on a high stool grasping the cash register in front of her, eyes wide with fear. The two employed barmen also ceased work and watched. A group of men playing hookey in a far corner of the bar ceased their sport. One of them stood, right arm outstretched with a rubber hook held between his thumb and forefinger as if posing for a camera.

Jimmy Younger went up to the bar and ordered his beer then turned to face Darcy and stood with his right heel resting on the bar rail, his right elbow on the bar itself. His left fist clenched instinctively. The nostrils of his wide nose dilated. The small glass of beer stood on the bar at his elbow, golden bubbles rising in it. Younger blinked his eyes and shook his head once, as though he was a little the worse for alcohol.

Darcy stood as if his legs, like steel bands under his grey trousers, were flexed to catapult him onto his opponent. It was a magnificent gesture, worthy of the occasion. But Darcy's inner feelings belied his manner. His heart seemed to be beating unevenly and his knees felt weak. Good as ever I was? These words formed a question mark to

beat at his temples. Well, we'll soon find out. Anyway, they won't let us fight for long in here—and we can't fight in the dark outside . . .

Suddenly, Darcy dropped his hands to his sides and walked deliberately towards Younger. Drinkers moved aside to clear a path. He swaggered, his fists held wide apart from his thighs as if the great muscles at his armpits would not allow his arms to hang by his sides.

As Darcy came within a few feet of Younger, a shrill scream, emanating from Mrs. O'Connell, ripped the air. She leapt from her stool by the till and ran from the bar yelling: "I'll ring the police!"

Her husband followed her calling: "Don't ring the police, Margo. It's no use, anyway. They're all at the Dillingley Carnival." In the back of his mind were thoughts of several convictions against his licence for illegal betting and after hours trading, which had been chalked up in spite of largesse. He wanted to avoid calling the police.

O'Connell returned to the bar. Finding Darcy standing beside Younger, he took up a position opposite them behind the counter.

Jimmy Younger did not move except to relax his muscles a little.

Darcy threw a two shilling piece on the counter. "Give us a pot of beer," he demanded in a husky voice.

O'Connell looked at the clock above the door. It showed three minutes past six o'clock, closing

time; "Sorry, Darky," he said, "the beers orf."

Darky looked at the clock in his turn. "It's only six o'clock," he said, "Your clock's always fast. Yer never stop serving till harf past six, as a rule."

The argument over time and beer; the tension heightened by the very incongruousness of the debate; the menacing air of impending violence; the nervous onlookers at the same time repulsed and attracted by the scene.

Younger's cronies gathered close round him. Quickly assessing the situation Ernie Lyle moved close behind Darky.

"Break it up, Darky," Ernie Lyle said, hoarsely and without conviction.

The elements existed for an all in brawl. But it wasn't the kind of fight that would start with a direct challenge. It would arise somehow out of the situation.

The more timorous souls amongst the drinkers took the opportunity to beat a retreat out onto the footpath.

"I'm thirsty!" Darky shouted foolishly, but he was findin confidence in the not unfamiliar air of impending fisticuffs. Good as ever I was! Younger has his right elbow on the counter. If he hits, he must throw a left lead. If I can slip it, I might end the fight in one punch—my only hope! His eyes met those of Younger. Each knew this moment had to come. Each welcomed

yet feared it. Neither dared flinch from it now.

Acting on a strange impulse, Darky said: "This beer'll do me!" He picked up Younger's glass of beer and drank it down in one gulp. His fears and doubts were gone. His eyes didn't leave Younger's face. And his thoughts ran clear: if I can get him to lead, I might end it in one punch.

Before Younger could react, Darky replaced the glass on the counter. Intimidated mentally by Darky's reputation and apparent confidence, Younger merely snorted and said: "Yer'll buy me another beer!"

"Not me!" Darky replied quietly.

"Well, yer'll give me fivepence."

"I'll give yer nothin'."

Because it was a real life fight in the making, it was developing unlike a fight in a book or a film. But a fight it would be and those nearest the antagonists stepped away a little.

"Yer'll give me fivepence, I said," Younger repeated.

"I'll give you nothin'!" Darky insisted. And he raised himself slightly into the balls of his feet as he found the words that would provoke Younger to punch. "I got no money to give a bludger and a scab."

Quick as the eye could see, Younger propelled himself off the bar rail on his right heel and swung a slightly rounded left lead at Darky's face. Darky slipped inside

the punch but not quickly enough to avoid a stinging, glancing blow on the right ear. Younger was wide open to Darky's right cross, a murderous punch in his heyday. Darky threw it now with all his strength. But his reflexes were too slow and Younger managed to take the blow on his upraised left wrist.

Younger closed on Darky wrestling with him until they fell to the floor locked together, Darky on top. Younger's cronies clamoured, pulling Darky off violently. A crowd milled round separating the fighters, Kevin, Ernie, one of the barmen, Younger's cronies and a few of those good souls who always take the thankless task of trying to stop a bar brawl.

O'Connell roared: "All out! The bar's closed!"

The crowd, now that violence had broken out, needed no third bidding. Soon, only Darky and Younger, their closest cronies and the hotel staff remained. The biggest of the two barmen ran from Darky to Younger shouting: "Break it up, for crissake! If yer want to fight, get outside!"

"Come on, Darky," Ernie Lyle said and Darky allowed himself to be led out. As he passed, Younger tried to drag himself clear of restraining hands.

In the street, the crowd gathered in three groups.

Darky, surrounded by half a dozen cronies stood near the corner of the street. "I'll have him any time he

likes," he was saying, but his hands were trembling a little from the tension.

Younger stood near the side door of the hotel. His drinking companions gathered round him offering encouragement. The color had drained from Younger's face but Darky's relative ineffectiveness in the encounter had given him confidence. He snorted and pranced about savoring the promise of violence and bloodshed.

He was saying: "I can do him, if there's somewhere to fight."

The third group was the largest; those hundred or so men from the bar who determined to be onlookers and not combatants in any fighting that would ensue. These gathered on the roadside at a safe distance.

Soon small clusters of people, including women and children, began to gather at vantage points on the opposite footpath of the side street, and on the corner where it intersected with the Main Street.

"You can fight under the street light there near the dunny," one of Younger's cronies suggested. Falling in love with the idea, he shouted for all to hear: "They can fight under the street light. Just like the ring in the Melbourne Stadium."

He pointed to where a street light shed its strong beams near a tree at the entrance to the back yard and lavatories of the Royal Hotel, forming a half circle of bright light on the edge of the roadway. He ran

and stood in the centre of the lighted spot. "Come on," he yelled. "Ring out and give 'em a fair go!"

Ring out and give them a fair go! The traditional announcement of an Australian grudge fight. At least on this occasion the antagonists seemed evenly matched, so far as size was concerned.

Younger walked purposefully into the light and proceeded to peel off his shirt and singlet.

Ernie Lyle shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

Darky stepped across the gutter and stood in the glow at the edge of the circle of light. Some of the most involved spectators came forward and formed an uneven half circle. Others moved closer but not too close.

The man who had discovered the "stadium" apparently felt this automatically made him referee, for he stood in the centre of the light with the exaggerated ceremony of the semi-drunk. He was stockily built. He wore a hat with a wide brim, and an ill fitting dark blue suit. His coat was unbuttoned and he struck a stance with his hands on his hips, his coat flapping behind him.

"Gents!" he called out. "Ladies and gents. There's a question of a bit of stoush and I'm here to see its fair dinkum bit of stoush. I want yer to ring out and give 'em a fair go." Espying the publican, Danny O'Connell, hovering with his wife at the window of the hotel kitchen

clearly visible in the light behind them, the referee added: "And I don't want no one sendin' over to Dillingley for the coppers, neither." Signalling Darky and Younger to come closer he lowered his voice and told them: "There'll be no kick-in'; there'll be no wrestlin'; and there'll be no bell, no rounds, and no ten counts; the fight ends when one of you turns it up."

With those words he stepped back and the fighters shaped up.

Younger's skin was burned dark brown from long days in the sun. His muscles rippled and bulged where the light picked them up; muscles made strong as steel from wielding the axe. Stripped to the waist, he had the torso of a powerful athlete.

Darky had not removed his shirt or singlet. By comparison to Younger, he seemed awkward and subdued, but there was a quiet air of power about him.

Younger was the taller by a good three inches and his reach was the longer; but Darky was the heavier man, perhaps a stone heavier. Younger was twenty two years of age; Darky forty five.

Darky had moved onto the rise of the roadside near the outer fringe of the light obliging Jimmy Younger to stand on slightly lower ground. Darky took up a flat-footed stance, legs wide apart, his fists low in front of his chest. He weaved a little and moved his fists forward and back like short pistons to the

roll of his body in the unorthodox Jack Dempsey manner. He was essentially a counter-puncher. He'd made his reputation as unbeatable on only a few fights. He'd never struck the first blow in his life, and now he waited for his opponent to lead.

Jimmy Younger carried his right fist under his chin, his left cocked forward in an orthodox stance. He'd hung around a gymnasium or two and had done some fighting in and out of the roped square.

Younger jogged about, feinting and weaving, while Darky waited, alert and ready to throw the counter punch.

The crowd had moved closer, in awed silence except for the scraping feet.

Younger led with his left but it was a tentative thrust and Darky weaved back outside it. Younger threw a hard left lead. Darky slipped inside it and crashed a short right hand under the heart; then he closed with Younger, claiming his arms, throwing his weight against him. Before the self-appointed referee could intervene, Darky pushed Younger clear and again waited for him to lead.

Sap his strength then go for an early knockout, Darky kept telling himself. The calm of battle had descended on him, but he knew he must win quickly or be cut to pieces in ignominious defeat.

Ruffled, Younger came in again throwing his left hand wildly.

Darky ducked; the blow slewed off the top of his head; he threw a savage right uppercut sending Younger down on his heels and hands. Younger fell near the wide trunk of the elm tree near the light post. Darky crowded in leaving Younger little room to rise. Younger managed to scramble to his feet and hang on, throwing short rights to Darky's head in the clinch. He was fighting mad, stung but rendered confident by the fact he had taken Darky's right to the jaw and come back clear-headed and strong. As the boxers scuffled and punched at close quarters, a murmur rising to a near roar came from the crowd. They expressed excitement, awe, near horror all mixed up.

Darky pushed Younger off and again took up his stance. He was beginning to pant already. I couldn't have landed that one square on his jaw, he tired to reassure himself. I'll try one more, then go downstairs.

Younger came in and poked out another left lead. Darky moved his head aside evasively, but before he could throw his right fist, Younger came up with *his* right and their punches jumbled, neither landing cleanly.

A man's gettin' slow, Darky admitted to himself, as he smothered close, pinioning Younger's arms. The referee ordered a break and again they shaped up to each other. Younger was growing more confident. Again he threw a left lead

and again he nullified Darky's counter blow and they clinched.

Darky noticed that his strength was ebbing a little though he hadn't taken a heavy blow; yet Younger seemed as strong as at the beginning. I'll try to bore in under him, Darky schemed.

Throwing aside the discretion of the left lead, Younger rushed in throwing round arm blows with both hands. Darky ducked low and shot a short right to the body. Younger grunted and smothered up. Darky ripped a left uppercut which caught Younger on the nose and set it bleeding. Sensing he had this time hurt Younger, Darky made to follow up his advantage, but Younger stopped him in his tracks with a savage right cross. The punch cut Darky's left eyebrow deeply, sending blood pouring onto his shirt front. Younger piled in punching wildly but Darky succeeded in clinching with him and pushing him away.

Younger came in again. Darky failed to evade a left hand punch and it struck his nose setting it bleeding from both nostrils.

The crowd circling the fighters swayed to the rhythm of the battle. A female voice screamed: "Finish him orf, Jimmy boy!"

Younger reigned blows on Darky. Darky clinched, desperately seeking respite. He leaned in on Younger, pushed him off. He threw a desperate right cross which landed flush on Younger's jaw, steadying

him. Darky levelled another right, then a left. Younger retaliated. They stood toe to toe, slugging it out.

"Take it easy, Darky," Ernie Lyle yelled. "You won't beat him that way."

Darky got the worst of the latest encounter and clung on, wrestling Younger back against the tree until the referee came between them, vainly trying to pull Darky away. The referee grabbed Darky's right arm, tugging at it. With Darky thus handicapped, Younger sent a left hook to the jaw. Darky staggered back. Younger followed him, raining blows. Darky crouched low, desperately trying to land an effective punch to the body. A grunt from Younger indicated he had succeeded. But Younger kept attacking like a ferocious animal; his strength seemed to have no limit. He punched Darky at will aiming his blows at the cut eye. The blood streaming from Darky's eye and nose had dyed the front of his shirt and trousers red, and spattered over Younger. Younger's own nose had stopped bleeding but his face was red and barked from the effect of Darky's punches.

The thud of bone against bone; the crunch of flesh against flesh.

The feeling in the crowd had changed to horror and revulsion; only those few who loved violence for its own sake and Younger's cronies held any affinity with the battle now.

Darky slumped to the ground as much from exhaustion as the effect of Younger's punches. Younger stood above him, breathing heavily through the nose, sensing victory.

Darky sat on the roadside wiping the blood from his eye with the back of his hand. His nose bleeding had ceased but he looked a sorry sight, his eyes puffed, his face bruised and swollen, his chest heaving, his clothes red with blood.

"Barley, a minute," he gasped to the referee. "I want to take me shoes off. I keep slippin'!"

He began to untie his shoe laces. Younger weaved above him impatiently.

Ernie Lyle stepped between them. "Don't you think you've had enough, Darky," he pleaded.

"Don't be bloody silly. I'm just gettin' warmed up," Darky replied.

Get me wind back and I'll get the old one two in yet, he was thinking; anyway, he's got to knock me cold to win it.

In his stockinged feet, Darky arose slowly.

One of Younger's cronies said: "Take him, Jimmy. He's had it."

Younger rushed in for the kill but Darky closed with him, pinioning his arms.

Darky felt some of his strength coming back. If I can coast for a while, I might win it yet.

He kept pushing Younger off, trying to relax and rest in the midst of the bloody fray. No one in the crowd gave Darky any chance

now; Younger's supporters hoped for a quick end to the slaughter; the rest watched Darky's desperate courage with a mixture of admiration, pity and horror.

Younger was giving Darky no respite. Victory was within his grasp. He bored in punching wildly. Darky kept parrying and clinching. He pushed Younger away and staggered back, his arms at his sides, a picture of abject exhaustion.

It was an old trick and Younger fell for it. He rushed in for the kill. Darky came suddenly to life and raised his fists, halting Younger in his tracks with a left to the face, then a savage right cross and another left as Younger went down. This time Younger was dazed and his right eye began to swell.

The crowd gasped in unbelief.

Younger raised himself on an elbow, shaking his head. Darky stood above him panting like a grampus. He'd hardly the strength left to punch if his opponent regained his feet. Hurt and dazed, Younger climbed to his feet slowly, edging away from Darky as he did so. He seemed to realize that Darky was near the end of his tether.

Now Younger sought respite to regain his youthful strength. As Darky moved in punching without much power, Younger clinched. The referee made no attempt to part them. Younger leant on Darky while the older man wasted his waning strength trying to free his fists to punch.

"Break, yer bastard!" Darky grunted but Younger clung onto him, his strength returning, his head clearing with every second.

"Break 'em!" Ernie Lyle yelled, but the referee paid no heed.

When at last Younger released his grip, his vigor had obviously returned and he began picking Darky off with well placed punches. He was more calm and purposeful than before faced, as he was, by a tired man.

Each man's knuckles were skinned. Younger's right eye was closed, his face skinned in places, his body bruised. Darky's right eyebrow still bled profusely, adding to a puffy black bag under his left eye to impair his vision. His right nostril was split, his face bruised and swelled up, his shirt and trousers red-fronted. He was desperately tired out, to add to his discomfort, his feet were bleeding.

Darky managed to keep his guard up and ward off some blows but he was being ruthlessly punished.

It has been said that youth will triumph over age in physical combat and now the crowd was witnessing a dreadful example of this truism.

Sensing his waning strength Darky seemed to become demented.

He rushed at Younger punching wildly to the head. He set Younger's nose bleeding again, but the main result of his effort was to so

enrage his opponent as to invite the most ruthless reprisals. Younger went over to the offensive again thumping blow after blow to Darky's undefended face. He backed Darky towards the tree.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Bone on flesh! And Darky against the tree now, his hands by his side. His heart seemed to have swelled up fit to burst and his legs would not hold his body erect. Only the support of the tree kept him on his feet.

Still Younger punched mercilessly.

A woman with a baby in her arms screamed from the edge of the crowd. "Stop him, someone! In the name of the Mother of God, stop him!"

"Stop it, for crissake," Ernie Lyle said.

Darky could no longer see his tormentor.

Darky's face was swollen beyond recognition, a mass of battered, bleeding flesh like a raw steak.

Younger kept punching Darky's face, sandwiching his head between the pounding fists and the trunk of the tree.

Slowly Darky slid down the tree trunk. Younger rained punches on him until he lay inert against the base of the tree. A dreadful gasp ran through the crowd, like a sigh of relief after torture.

With his fists still upraised Younger stood above Darky and half turned to the crowd.

"Look at him!" he shouted with exultant savagery. "There's yer famous Darky! He's stood over the town for twenty years—and look at him now."

People moved closer, craning with horror to see the sight of a man battered to pulp.

Darky's bloody body stirred. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. Now he could just make out the figure of Younger.

"Look at him. Look at him now!" Younger continued.

Mobilizing some reserve of courage from deep in his soul, Darky began to rise to his feet.

Younger, himself near to exhaustion, still stood half turned away, haranguing the crowd. "Now we know whose boss. Mister Darky won't do any more standing over in this town . . ."

"Look out, Jimmy!" one of Younger's supporters called—but too late.

Darky had reached his feet and, catapulting himself off the tree trunk, he sank his left fist low into Younger's groin. Younger doubled up in pain and Darky brought a right upper cut to the jaw, then a left, then another right.

Younger slumped down. The whites of his eyes were showing before he hit the ground. His head crashed onto the edge of the metal road. He lay stiff, unconscious.

Darky swayed above him for a moment then collapsed across his opponent's feet. With a tremendous effort of will, Darky rose on hands and knees then stood up uncertainly. He turned and staggered through the awestruck spectators. Reaching the gutter he groped for his shoes. Ernie Lyle rushed across, found the shoes and handed them to Darky. Darky sat on the edge of the footpath and put on his shoes.

Younger still lay inert, two of his cronies were trying to bring him round.

Without waiting to lace his shoes, Darky stood up. He placed a bloody left arm around Ernie Lyle's shoulders and they hobbled away.

At the point where the glow of the street light faded into the black night, Darky turned to the crowd. His left hand was still round his friend. He made a savage grimace driving his tongue against a tooth loosened by Younger's punches. The tooth fell from its socket.

The silent crowd watched open-mouthed, transfixed.

Presently, Darky spat the tooth from his mouth with a splutter of blood. He tapped his chest with his right fore-finger. From somewhere in the battered flesh of his face, his voice came: "Listen! Some of these young fellas are goin' ter learn it the hard way—but I'm as good as ever I was!"



JOHNNY MANSE stepped out of the bright October daylight into the musty dimness of the Silken Peacock. Crossing the room to his usual table in the corner, he heard the muted rumble of the juke-box and felt the familiar hush of the underworld hangout pour over him. He smiled grimly to himself. Harry's fancy name for the bar had been a hopeless attempt to give it class. It was still a *dive*.

Johnny sat down and scanned the room. A lush or two and a couple of small-time chisellers. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock in the morning. No self-respecting crook would even be up at this hour, much less out. But Johnny had been covering the streets of the 96th Precinct for two hours, stopping here and there, waiting for Harry to open up.

A guy in the confidence game has to keep in touch, he told himself. But the real reason for his early-morning prowling—the killing—he kept pushing below the conscious surface of his mind.

Harry brought his drink, the fat face grinning its usual happy welcome. "You ever see daylight before, Johnny?" he kidded, wiping his hands on his aproned stomach.

"Listen to the guy with the neon tan, would you?" Johnny grinned back at the bartender's pasty face.

Harry Donato and Johnny Manse had been friends since they were kids on Lacy Street. And though Harry had not followed

TO KILL A COP

BY
D. M.
DOWNING

The old cop had said, "Nobody can stay just half-hood, Johnny. There always comes a time when he's got to go all the way . . . or else." Johnny fingered the stiletto in his pocket and he knew that the time had come.

the rest of the gang into the racks, Johnny knew that behind the amiable fat was the same tight-lipped Harry who held answers to questions a whole generation of cops were still asking. If anybody knew anything about this deal it would be Harry.

"What's new, Harry?" Johnny asked, wondering if he really wanted to know.

"Not much." Harry was mopping the table with a towel. "Same old grind."

Johnny made his tone as casual as the way he picked up his glass. "I hear Jim Cole is out of stir."

"Yeah," but Harry's smile had faded, "he was in last night with Morelli and Burke.

Johnny kept the pace slow and tossed Harry the old joke they'd kept going since the early days. "How're you fixed for police protection, Harry?" A cop was about as welcome in Harry's joint as a case of measles, but Johnny wasn't laughing this time. The joke needed a different answer.

The bartender was folding his soggy towel into a meticulous square, and Johnny knew Harry *had* that answer.

"There's *some* who think we got *too many* cops in this precinct." Harry's dark eyes swept up to meet Johnny's so briefly a less skilled man would have missed their portent.

Then, as quickly as it had disappeared, the smile was back. "I'll

bring you another drink." And the bartender hurried away with the empty glass.

So the little lush he'd run into last night had somehow got hold of the real dope, and—if Johnny could guess at all—the punk was probably keeping the bottom of the West River company right now.

A shudder went through him and he shifted in his chair to bring out a small knife from the pocket of his topcoat. Cole was back after ten years in stir. "*He's gonna get the bull that put him away*, the drunk had garbled. And Harry had backed it—*too many cops in this precinct*. It was Mahoney all right. His testimony had been the clencher that nailed a ten-year murder rap on Cole.

So, okay! He'd got a tip and he'd been curious. Now he knew. Johnny flicked the button on the tiny stiletto and watched the silver flash of the steel blade. How many cops had he seen picked off in his thirty years without losing any sleep over it? He took a candle from its holder on the table and began to carve on it.

But as he watched the wax chips fall he thought of Mahoney again. Somehow he couldn't make this deal set right. A cop was a cop and Johnny steered clear of all of them. *Hell, Cole's right. There are too many of them. There'll always be too many.*

It was just that Pop Mahoney

had never been a cop to him the same way the others were. *Say that out loud, con man*, he warned himself quickly, *and you'll be fish-food too*.

Johnny thought back to the old days of the neighborhood here, when Mahoney was a beat-cop over on Lacy Street. There had even been times when Pop was more like Johnny's old man might have been—if he'd ever had one. Johnny laughed, *Damned if he wasn't almost a member of the gang in those days*. The way he helped them with this and that, fronted for them when they got in trouble. Always trying to make something out of them besides hoods.

And every darned one of them was a hood today, except Harry. Johnny ticked them off in his mind: Nick Morelli, dope syndicate; Charlie Burke, protection racket; Jim Cole, professional killer. And Johnny Manse, *top man in the con game*, they called him. The others in the gang were either working for one of the *Big Three* or were on Johnny's payroll.

Where the devil is Harry with that drink!

Above the pile of chips, Johnny smiled to himself as he remembered that Pop was almost pleased with Harry. He recalled one of the cop's grave speeches to his friend:

"All your crimes, Harry, are going to be sins of omission. But they'll be bad enough, lad—you'll

have to watch it."

And bad enough they were, Johnny laughed again. Harry's business thrived on racket money.

Harry's fat hand passed in front of him and put a drink on the table.

"Still got it, eh, Johnny?"

Brought too quickly from his thoughts, Johnny raised an eyebrow at Harry.

"Your lucky-piece, kid," Harry explained quietly, pointing to the knife. "You've had it a long time."

"Yeah," Johnny's glance met Harry's dark, brooding eyes and held a minute. "Yeah," he repeated soberly.

The bartender pulled out a chair and sat down. He remained quiet, but as he folded his arms on the table, Johnny knew they were thinking of the same thing.

He and Harry didn't see much of each other anymore, but years ago on Lacy Street they'd been like brothers. Johnny and the Donato boys, Harry and Dominick, had grown up in the same tenement house, belonged to the same gang, fought the same battles for survival. It was Dominick's knife that Johnny had carried as part of himself for fifteen years. The special-made keepsake from the old country—the *lucky-piece* he held now.

He felt his jaw tighten at the misnomer. Johnny carried it—maybe for luck, he didn't know—but it had brought no luck to Dominick Donato the night a rival gang cut

him down in an alley.

Johnny and Harry had found the slender three-inch stiletto, unopened, on the blood-smeared pavement by Dom's hand.

"You remember who paid for Dom's funeral?" Harry spoke as though continuing a conversation. "Pop Mahoney," he answered himself quietly and looked penetratingly at Johnny.

Avoiding the stare, Johnny clicked the stiletto shut and laid it on the table. "How about another drink, Harry?" he asked, downing the one in front of him.

Johnny lighted a cigarette and watched Harry's fat figure return to the bar. *Hell, is he plugging for Mahoney? He knows better than that. He must be sampling his stuff here.*

Johnny's eyes went back to the stiletto on the table. He used to do some pretty sharp knife-throwing when he was a kid. Just for kicks. But, for some screwy reason, he'd never wanted to throw that stiletto. He glanced at Harry and stiffened against thoughts he couldn't shake.

Harry was never meant to be any kind of hood. But it was that night in the alley, fifteen years ago, when Johnny had known that he could go only so far with it himself. He could still feel the pain that had filled him when he'd looked at Dom. And he couldn't forget the dark torture in Harry's eyes as Johnny had tried to hand him his brother's knife.

"You keep it," Harry had said in a trance-like tone. "You—you loved him too."

At fifteen, they'd long ago forgotten how to cry. But that night as they'd stared through the dark, each had seen the other's hate for the thing that still hovered in the alley.

And the surest damned way to find that kind of thing, Johnny brought himself angrily from the past, is to try to stop it.

"Never saw you take three in a row before, Johnny," Harry's tone seemed odd to Johnny as he set the new drink down.

"You pushing for the temperance league or something?" Johnny asked coldly. But inside every nerve was suddenly raw. *I've got to get out of this dump,* he told himself.

"Johnny Manse," the bartender smiled, as Johnny swallowed his drink and stood up, "smoothest operator in the business. Dressed like a Wall Street broker and cold as a marble slab."

The smile never wavered, but Johnny saw now that the dark eyes were studying him. "Don't *nothin'* bug you anymore, Johnny?"

A funny feeling came over him as he realized that Harry was the only guy in the world he couldn't—or wouldn't—con. "Sure, Harry—sure, lots of things bug me. Cops, for instance."

That was an old joke, too, but he saw the tension leave the fat face,

and he knew he'd been understood.

Outside, Johnny hailed a cab and climbed in. *That damned Harry must be gettin' squirelly*, he told himself, as he settled against the seat. *What kind of a crack was that to make? Does he expect me to do something about this?* Johnny Manse had stayed alive this long by minding his *own* business. A guy was either on one side of the fence or the other. He made his choice and took his chances. Pop was no exception.

But inside the con man there was a Johnny who knew different. This Johnny was a ragged little kid on Lacy Street looking up into the face of an Irish cop, who held a bag of peppermint sticks.

"Hell!" Johnny pulled out his cigarettes and jammed one in his mouth. *I'm getting sappier than Harry. Mahoney sent Cole to the pen for ten years and no sack of candy is going to make Cole forget it. This is the kind of thing nobody meddles with.*

* * *

In the living room of his apartment, Johnny stood in his bathrobe trying to open a bottle of cognac, when he decided he needed his knife. He went to the closet and searched the pockets of his suit. Finding nothing, he got his topcoat and went through it. The knife wasn't there.

An alarm swept over him that seemed unreasonable. He had no

need for weapons. He hated them. Yet Dom's stiletto was something else.

He went slowly back to the living room and poured a drink of bourbon while he thought of the fine bone and tempered steel. He had never been without the little knife since he'd owned it.

Johnny emptied his glass and walked restlessly to the window. Looking out over the smudged and throbbing city, he wondered how Cole planned to give it to Mahoney. Would it be like it had been with Dom?

A little dog wormed his way through the traffic below and Johnny thought of the pup Mahoney had once given him for Christmas. *A hundred years ago!* Johnny sneered and turned abruptly from the window.

Cole's good with a shiv—equally good with a rod. Pop's old—not very quick anymore—he won't be expecting it. Suddenly Johnny saw the Irish Cop's face lying in the pool of blood where he'd last seen Dominick Donato.

His hand shook as he poured another drink and tried to remember all the times Pop had hauled him in or fouled up a job for him. But all he could think of were the hundreds of times Mahoney had tried to steer him away from the rackets.

"Get out of it while you can, son," the old man had said once. And the memory of the still-uncon-

quered brogue was a strange ache somewhere in Johnny. "You've not got the stomach for it, boy." Pop's mouth had curved in gentle irony. "You wouldn't even make a good cop. I know—I've watched you."

"Sure, Pop. I know!" Johnny had snapped impatiently. "So I'm no good with rods and shives. I don't need 'em—I do it the easy way. So lay off, will you!"

There had been a mixture of disappointment and contempt on Mahoney's face when he'd answered.

"Kid, you're nothin' but a punk right now, who can't see past his nose. How long do you think you can stick to your private little ways? The gray eyes had grown wet with frustration. "One of these days, Johnny, you're going to have a dissatisfied *client*. And it's going to take some of Nick's or Charlie's men to keep you out of a *real* jam. *If* they don't get you in a worse one."

Then Pop's voice had softened. "Nobody can stay just half-hood, Johnny. There always comes a time when he's got to go all the way—or else!"

Johnny lit a cigarette and went back to the window. *The old man should have played the ponies, he thought. He could sure call the shots.* Johnny Manse hadn't made many mistakes, he remembered with professional pride. But there had been a time or so when a couple of Charlie's boys had called on one of his *clients*, as Mahoney

called them. Nothing rough—just a little reminder that worse things could happen to them than dropping a few grand. And, in return, Johnny had done a thing or two he hadn't liked for Charlie. *But—oh, the hell with it!*

Pop had never seemed to understand that a kid who lives on Lacy Street grows up wanting just *one* thing—to *get off of it*. And he does it the quickest way he can—the rackets.

Johnny returned irritably to his chair by the table. Refilling his glass, he caught sight of himself in the mirror across the room. *What the devil!* He smoothed his rumpled hair and stared at the tense lines in the usually inscrutable face of the *con man*.

"Harry's right," he told the reflection, and he put the drink down. "You're hitting it too hard. One lousy flatfoot is set-up and all of a sudden *you're* a lush!"

Then it hit him. Harry's place. That's where he'd left the stiletto. He began to dress hurriedly. Lucky or not, Johnny *wanted* that knife.

* * *

When he walked into the Silken Peacock, he could feel the tension even before he saw the calcimine grimness of Harry's face. Scanning the dimness with trained eyes, Johnny saw the reason almost instantly. In the shadows at a corner table sat Jim Cole.

A chill went over Johnny and

his first impulse was to do a quick fade. But it was too late. Cole's eyes met his across the room and he played it cool when Cole spoke to him.

"Well if it ain't Johnny Manse." There was still a hint of the old sarcasm that Johnny remembered. Cole had never made any secret of his contempt for a guy who didn't like guns.

"Hello, Jim." Johnny smiled, slipping by habit into the safe concealment of the confidence man. "How goes it?" he asked, approaching Cole's table.

"Great, Johnny. Just great." The voice was friendly, but the eyes were bright and guarded, studying Johnny. "I been in town almost a week now and I ain't seen nothin' of you till now." The grin on Cole's unshaven face just missed being a sneer. "You ain't hot for sellin' the Third Street Bridge to the cops or something, are you?"

Johnny laughed and took a chair. Automatically he cased the bar and caught Harry's nervous glance, as the bartender hurried past them. The last two customers were leaving and he heard Harry locking the door. *What the hell?*

Johnny raised his eyes to the clock behind the bar, but Cole seemed to read his mind.

"Five o'clock, Johnny." It ain't exactly closing time, is it?" Cole leered. "But you see, I'm expecting some company and I need a little privacy."

"You sure I won't make a crowd?" Johnny asked casually, as Harry waddled over with another glass.

"Nuts, Johnny! Stick around." The tone had more command than invitation.

But Johnny pretended not to notice and poured himself a drink from Cole's bottle. Whatever this was it was smart to take it slow.

"I guess it feels pretty good to be back, eh, Jim?"

"Yeah—it's *real* good." Cole drew the words out slowly and for an instant his eyes held Johnny's like a magnet. "Real good!" he repeated.

Something's cockeyed, sure as hell, Johnny told himself. *Harry's nervous as a cat and this gun-happy torpedo's too chummy.*

Harry was back again. "You forgot your lucky-piece, kid." As the bartender's shaky hand laid the little stiletto on the table, his eyes telegraphed an alarm signal that froze Johnny's spine.

"Still got your little toy, kid?" Cole's sarcasm carried a friendly tolerance unnatural to the killer.

"Got to clean my fingernails, you know." Johnny quirked a good-humored brow at Cole and pocketed his knife.

Cole laughed uncontrollably for a minute. "Just don't cut yourself, kid," he jeered. Then suddenly his expression changed.

"Ain't you gonna ask me what ten years in stir was like, Johnny?"

The rasp-like whisper carried a complete flip in mood now, and as Cole leaned over the table Johnny watched the strange grin spread and the kid-like excitement grow in the wide eyes.

As quick as that, Johnny knew. The pinched look—the dry mouth. *Cole's a user! He's on the junk!* The knot tightened in the con man's stomach. *Booze, snow, and hate! This guy's dynamite—he could blow any minute!* But Johnny kept his face expressionless.

"Sure, Jim, I'd like to know," he stalled Cole sociably. "How was it?"

"Rotten! A gloom stormed into the glassy eyes. "Filthy rotten! Every stinkin' day of it!" Cole moved spasmodically and took a drink straight from the bottle before his eyes burned into Johnny's again. "They gave me ten years in a hell-hole on the say-so of one bastard flatfoot!" The low tone became a shout, breaking on every high note. "Well this time they can fry me!"

Johnny battled with his growing tension and Harry's fear clattered in the glasses behind the bar.

"I'm gonna get that dumb cop—that goddamned, lousy Mahoney!" Cole screamed his hatred. "Then I'm gonna drag in every crummy bull in the city to view his ragged carcass!"

Watching the insane rage flare and burn low again, Johnny gripped the lucky-piece in his pocket and fought for composure. *He's*

nuts! Johnny had heard about guys who couldn't take stir. Somehow, feeding on revenge, Cole had made it back to the outside. *With a monkey on his back!* A flicker of something like pity mingled with Johnny's fear and was gone. *The meanest guy I've ever seen, dope-crazed and stir-bug now.*

Johnny flashed around in his mind for a reason to leave. Then something jelled and a hunch shook him clear to his shoes. *Company, Cole had said—Harry's blanched face—the empty bar!* It was going to be right here and soon!

He looked at the bottle and got an idea. "I'll get us something else," he told Cole. "I'm tired of this stuff."

At the bar Johnny punched a loud number on the juke box. Then he asked Harry for another bottle, adding through stiff lips: "What's the deal, Harry?"

"Mahoney checks the bars every night at this time." Harry's words were suppressed terror as he fumbled under the counter for the liquor. "He'll hit here about six."

Johnny glanced at the clock. *Two minutes till six.*

Harry's dark eyes flashed an indisputable S O S. "Cole's not going to give him a chance!"

Without answering, Johnny took the bottle Harry offered and headed back to Cole's table just as the rattle of the front door echoed through the bar.

Just some guy wanting a drink, Johnny hoped as he tensed all over. But a second persistent jiggle of the door told him, even before he heard the Irish brogue, that Mahoney was outside.

"Harry—Harry are you in there?"

Harry never closed until midnight. Everybody knew that no cop as good as Mahoney would fail to investigate such an unusual break in routine. Sweat formed between Johnny's hand and the bottle as he fought against panic.

He put the bottle on the table, glancing quickly from the petrified Harry to the leering Cole.

With a satanic grin, the killer took in the bartender's immobile state before turning to Johnny.

"That must be my company, kid. Let's see you play butler and let him in." The blue nose of a thirty-eight revolver slipped in silent menace over Cole's side of the table.

Johnny stalled for time. *Maybe the damned fool cop will beat it if I can con this S.O.B. for a minute.*

"What's the matter, kid?" The old contempt was back in Cole's face. "Still ain't got the guts for *some* things?"

Cool, Johnny, cool! "After ten years in the business, Jim" Johnny laughed, "a guy *grows* guts. I was just thinking that no flatfoot's worth it. Why not quit when you're ahead?"

Cole studied him for a minute, while Pop banged on the door, and Johnny met his gaze levelly. Suddenly the killer grinned.

"You know, Johnny, you turned out better than I thought. You're pretty damned cool."

But before Johnny could answer, the front door rattled again and Cole's eyes narrowed, as the thirty-eight moved out over the table.

"Open the door, kid."

"It's *your* show," Johnny shrugged.

As he turned toward the door, the con man knew the layers of steel calm were melting away. *There always comes a time,* he remembered, *when you go all the way—or else. Make one move to warn Pop and you've had it. Con yourself out of this one, wise guy,* he told himself bitterly when he reached the door.

"Just pull the bolt and step back, Johnny." Cole's hard voice was edged with suspicion as it cut through the silent barroom. "I might get nervous."

Johnny gave an inward laugh of self-contempt and put his hand on the bolt. *Don't worry, crumb, I never learned to be a hero.*

At the rumble of the lock, the door opened instantly from the outside and Mahoney's brusqueness filled the bar.

"What's goin' on, Harry?"

The door swung closed, revealing the con man.

"Well—and Johnny Manse, is

it?" Pop grinned. "It's been a long time since the old neighborhood has seen the fancy likes of you." Pop's clumsy attempt to cover his pleasure twisted something in Johnny's stomach as the gray eyes searched his for a minute. He still hadn't spotted Cole.

"I was afraid some of your thug pals might be holdin' a convention here, Harry," Mahoney laughed as he went toward the bar.

An ache of understanding burned briefly under Johnny's fear. *You Irish fraud, you also thought Harry might be in trouble.*

"Now why would you two be lockin' the door as this—" Mahoney broke off, his face sobering to stoniness. And Johnny turned to see Cole step out of the shadows, the thirty-eight gleaming evilly in the dim light.

It was plain Pop hadn't been tipped, but the sharp old bull saw the trap fast enough now. He stopped dead still in the middle of the room, looking long and hard at the depraved killer who had taken his stance less than ten feet from him. Mahoney's gun bulged in its holster, but the old cop was too smart for that, Johnny knew.

"That's right, freeze, you pig-latin tongued bastard!" Cole's words were a lunge of animal fury, and the years of underworld training began to buckle in Johnny.

"We didn't lock you out, flat-foot," Cole lowered his voice to a whisper. "We been waitin' for you."

The sadistic restraint congealed in the air above them as he turned to the con man. "Lock the door, Johnny."

In the brief second that Johnny hesitated, Pop's eyes met his over a bridge of twenty years. Then Johnny moved to the door.

Locked or unlocked won't make a hell of a lot of difference now, Pop. He shoved the bolt and the sound it made echoed his thoughts. *Full hood now!* Turning, he stood with his back to the door and faced the other three.

Cole was taking his time, trying to sweat Mahoney. Harry stood rooted behind the bar, his round eyes moving back and forth between cop and killer.

"Ten stinkin' years, copper!" Cole hissed. "Do you think I'd make it quick for *you* after that?" A gloating look came into his eyes, and suddenly he shot a hole in the floor by the cop's feet.

Johnny jerked at the sound, and heard Harry knock over a bottle. But Mahoney never flinched. Johnny felt sick. *You wouldn't even make a good cop,* he tortured himself. This was going to be a bad one. He caught Harry's pleading look. *What the devil does he expect me to do!* he thought angrily. *I'm no match for this maniac. He'd get us both sure!*

"A slug for every year, cop—placed where you'll know about it. Like I felt every rotten day of that rap!" Cole was grinning now and

licking his mouth like a snake.

Still gripping the lucky-piece in his pocket, Johnny looked at Pop. The cop's face was set and ready, a touch of sad irony around the Irish mouth. It was plain to Johnny what he was thinking. Mahoney had said it once when he'd lost a buddy: "A cop dies this way sometimes."

The killer paused tauntingly in a nerve-tearing silence. And Johnny's mind whirled dizzily away from him—back to the slums. Back to the fight he'd made to shake the stench and filth from his shoes, only to find now that another kind of slime had formed inside him. He looked at the cop's face again and knew this was not the dream he'd built on Lacy Street. Somewhere he'd missed it.

"Where do you want the first one, flatfoot? In the gut maybe?" Johnny heard Cole's insane glee.

A cop dies this way sometimes— the click of the hammer went through him like an electric current—*No!*

Johnny's thumb pressed the little button and the last of the con man cracked away as the sharp blade flicked out firmly. *Maybe, just maybe, if I'm lucky.* Swiftly, by the tip of the blade, he slipped the knife from his pocket and the kid from Lacy Street broke through as he sent the stiletto slashing through the air toward Cole's gun hand.

The blade missed its mark, sparking against the gun's blue

metal, and Cole whirled toward Johnny in a vicious scream of profanity—his gun blazing.

Hot fire went through Johnny's shoulder. He saw the floor of the bar tilt toward him and heard the other shots. *A hood dies this way too—sometimes—sorry, Pop.*

* * *

"He's coming around, Pop." It was Harry's voice.

Johnny tried to move and couldn't.

"Johnny—can you hear us, lad?" That was Pop Mahoney.

"How do you feel, Johnny?" It was Harry again, anxious now.

Somewhere Johnny heard a steeple clock strike twelve, and he opened his eyes. He was in a hospital bed and Pop and Harry were leaning over him. The old cop was still in uniform and Harry's bar-apron hung down from under his suit coat. A laugh rolled out of Johnny and he winced at the stab of pain it brought.

"Easy, lad." Pop laid a hand on Johnny's arm. "They've just dug a bullet out of you."

He was fully conscious now, and he looked from Harry to Pop for an explanation.

"It was really something, Johnny!" Harry began excitedly. "After you threw the knife, Pop grabbed his gun and got Cole the same second you fell. It took four slugs! That crazy Cole just wouldn't drop that gun."

"Johnny"—Pop began slowly—"I've always said that—"

"I know, Pop, Johnny moaned in surrender, "I haven't got the stomach for it."

"That's not what I meant, son. I never thought you lacked guts." The gray eyes smiled with gratitude. "It's your heart that's not right for it," the old man continued, "and I was thinkin' of your future—you could get out of the rackets now and—"

"Pop."—Johnny cut in with a groan—"will you knock it off! How much *future* do you think I've got after tonight?"

"The doublecross, Pop," Harry said quickly. "He's thinking about what they'll do to him when they find out he crossed up Cole."

The old man's face relaxed into the smile Johnny remembered from Lacy Street. "Nobody knows

but the three of us what happened at Harry's tonight, Johnny."

"There's this busted shoulder and the hospital bit, Pop. *They'll know,*" Johnny said with resignation.

Mahoney's eyes held a solemn oath as he looked at Johnny and spoke each word evenly. "Every hood in the underworld knows right this minute, lad, that you were in Harry's tonight with Cole—that I killed him and *accidentally* shot you."

For a minute Johnny just stared at Mahoney, while understanding and relief flooded through him. Then he smiled. "You *fronted* one more time, didn't you, Pop?"

"To the last detail, lad," Mahoney grinned, fishing in his pocket. "I picked this up from the *floor*. Then he tossed Dom's little stiletto on the bed.



THE KNIFE



BY GLENN CANARY

He was struck by the beauty of the knife, a switch-blade, simple and deadly effective. He bought it for six dollars. He bought with it a sense of power . . . and the need to prove it.

PAUL TALENT was cold and miserable. The weather had closed in over the city, shutting out even the false glamor of Times Square and leaving only the dirt to be seen. The wind came sharp down Broadway and little swirls of dirt and papers pyramided at intersections. The sky was grey and low, hanging below the tops of buildings.

The day depressed him. He put his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and beat his head as he walked. The wind reddened his face and made his lungs hurt. He

was trembling with cold, trying not to think, trying to pull in on himself like an animal.

He came to a corner and stopped, waiting for the signal. Standing still, he was hurt even more by the wind. The light turned green and he hurried across the street with the crowd. On the sidewalk again, he walked close to the building, huddled in his coat. A man bumped against him and hurried on without looking at him or speaking to him. Talent looked after him, resenting him. A girl skittered by

him, her hair whipped loose. He watched her, trying to think of anything except the cold.

He couldn't stand it any longer. He had to be sheltered. It was a long way yet back to his office and he could not make it without being warmed first.

Without looking in the window to see what kind of store it was, he stepped off the sidewalk and into a small shop. Two clerks were standing in the rear. There were no customers. One of the men came to the front. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

Talent shuddered, breathing in the warmth. "I'm only looking," he answered. "No. Just looking."

The man seemed to understand. He looked past Talent, out the window at the street. "Cold out there," he said.

"I'll say it is." Talent rubbed his hands together and blew on them.

"Paper says snow."

"That right?" He wished the man would leave him alone. All he wanted was warmth.

"Yeah. That's what it says." He looked toward the other clerk in the back. "You see anything you want, let me know." He walked away.

Talent looked down into a showcase, pretending to be interested. It was filled with watches. A small, hand-lettered sign on top said, **FAMOUS MAKES \$15 UP**. He looked out the window. The sky was darker. He crossed the store

and looked in another showcase. The top shelf was for leather change purses and key cases which were marked with pictures of the Empire State Building. The bottom shelf was filled with knives.

Talent bent to look at them. There was a hunting knife, he couldn't see the blade, but the handle was carved wood. The top was made in the shape of a skull. There were some folding knives. One had the Boy Scout crest on it. Next to that one was a thin, black knife.

The salesman came back and said, "See anything you like?"

Talent looked up, startled. "No," he said. "I was only looking at them. What's that one though?"

The salesman walked around back of the case and slid the door open. "Which one?"

"That black one."

The salesman lifted it out and laid it on top of the glass case. "That's quite a knife," he said.

Talent picked it up. "How's it work?"

"Push that button."

The blade came out, thin and shiny. Talent flinched, surprised, and grinned. "Really comes out of there, doesn't it?"

The salesman looked at him and then out at the street.

"What's a knife like this used for?"

"Cleaning fish," the salesman said. "Something like that."

"I thought a fish knife had a serrated edge."

"This one's good, too. It's good for a guy who has to work with packages or something and only has one arm free. You know, you don't have to open it like you do a regular knife."

"How much is it?"

The man shrugged. "We can't sell it," he said. "It's only for display."

"Why's that?"

"Kids. Kids buy them for fighting. Cops won't let us sell them now."

"It just sort of fascinates me. I'm not going to fight with it."

"Yeah."

"Come on, how much is it?"

"I told you. It ain't for sale."

"Sell him the knife," the other man said, walking closer. "He's all right."

"It's six dollars," the first man said.

"Six dollars?"

"It's a good knife," the second man added. "Feel the spring in that blade. It'll take a lot of shock."

Talent closed his hand over the knife. The plastic handle had been cool, now it was warming to his hand. The blade was narrow, sharp all along one side, sharp halfway up the other edge. He closed it and opened it.

"Well," the salesman said. "You want it or not?"

"Yes," Talent said. "I'll take it."

In his office, later, he sat, staring at the half finished page of copy in his typewriter, thinking about the knife in his pocket. He was not

used to carrying anything in his pocket but change and keys and he could feel the knife against his leg. He knew he had done a stupid thing, buying the knife. It was stupid to have paid six dollars for the thing and it was even worse to carry it in his pocket. At the top of the whole thing, he thought, it's even illegal to carry such a knife.

It's only a knife, he thought. Many men carry pocket knives. Only this knife wasn't simply a pocket knife. It made him feel silly, melodramatic, but this knife was a weapon. For cleaning fish.

Paul Talent was a young man with sandy hair, brown eyes, and a nervous habit of biting his lips. He was of average size and, by standards, moderately good looking. That is, he was neat, even featured, his shoes were polished, and his clothes were inconspicuous. He had been married for four years and he and his wife, whose name was Helen, had no children. He was a copywriter for an advertising agency. Two weeks ago, he had been given a ten dollar a week raise. He had been faithful to his wife through his marriage although, only a week ago, he had asked Laura Singleton to have dinner and see a show with him. She had refused. He thought perhaps she had refused because she had not realized he was serious, but he hadn't been able to ask her again. He had been born in Youngstown, Ohio. He had graduated from Kent

State University. He lived in a four room apartment in Bronxville.

And now he had a knife.

He took it from his pocket and looked at it. He pressed the button on the side and it opened. Someone came into his office and he looked over his shoulder and saw Laura Singleton, standing in the doorway. She had the afternoon mail delivery. She was looking at the knife.

"What's that?" she said.

"Come on in."

"What's that?"

"A knife."

"What's it for?"

"It's not *for* anything. It's just a knife." He closed the blade. "Do you have the mail?"

She put an envelope on his desk. "It's only an advertisement," she said. "Why do you carry that thing?"

"Why not?"

"Isn't it illegal?"

"Yes."

She shook her head. "I think that's silly," she said uncertainly. "What do you need a thing like that for?"

He put the knife on the desk, not looking at her. He was angry. "What do you care?" he said.

She hurried out of the office. He looked after her and then picked up the knife and put it back in his pocket.

He didn't much want to go out with her now. He didn't need to.

That night, after dinner, he went into the living room of his apart-

ment and sat down in front of the television set. Helen came to the doorway and looked in at him. "Will you clear off the table for me?" she asked.

"I'm tired tonight."

"You always clear off the table for me."

"Tonight I don't want to."

She looked at him for a few seconds more and then went back into the kitchen.

I wonder what she'd do if I showed her the knife, he thought. I wonder whether she'd be frightened.

He smiled to himself. Oddly, he liked the idea. He wanted to show her the knife, but not yet. He watched television and waited.

After a while, after she had finished washing the dishes, she came into the living room. She sat on the couch and watched the television, too, not speaking to him.

When the program ended, he stretched and lit a cigarette.

"Was everything all right today?" she asked.

"Fine. How was your day?"

She ignored his question. "You just seemed so moody tonight, I thought maybe you'd had a bad day at work."

"I'm just tired."

He started to tell her about the knife then, but he didn't. He looked back at the television set.

After the news, they went to bed. While she was in the bathroom, he hid the knife in his drawer, under

a stack of underwear. He undressed and took a shower. When he finished, she was in bed, almost asleep.

In the morning, he took the knife with him when he left home.

Harry Adams, his copy chief, came into his office at ten-thirty. He brought two cups of coffee in paper containers. "How about a break?" he said. He sat down and crossed his legs. "Nasty weather again today."

"It's cold."

"February always seems like the longest month to me," Adams said, "not the shortest."

"I'm almost finished with the Alterace copy," Talent said.

"We have plenty of time on that."

"It's almost finished."

Adams lit a cigarette. "That's not what I wanted to talk about," he said. He smiled. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way."

"Take what the wrong way?"

"It's about Laura Singleton."

"I asked her to go out with me."

"Not that. That's none of my business. I mean yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"She was pretty upset."

"What about?"

"Well," Adams laughed. "You know how women are. She said you were waving a big knife around and she said you got awful nasty about it when she asked you what it was for."

"I didn't get nasty. I just said it wasn't any of her business why I carried the knife. It wasn't a big

knife anyway."

"I didn't think it was." Adams finished his coffee. "I didn't mean to bring up anything about the knife. I only wanted to say that there's no use in upsetting any of the girls. They're hard enough to handle." He laughed again.

"I didn't upset her," Talent said. "I only said for her to mind her own business."

Adams stood up, nodding. "Well, take it easy," he said. He dropped the coffee cup into the waste basket, starting to leave the room.

"Harry," Talent said.

"What?"

"Would you like to see the knife?"

"I didn't mean anything about the knife."

Talent took it from his pocket, snapped open the blade, and put it on the desk. "There," he said. "See. It's not a very big knife."

Adams stared at it. "No. No, it's not very big." He looked at it for a few more seconds and then walked out.

Talent picked up the knife and fingered the blade, wanting to laugh. With a sudden, violent gesture, he drove it into the top of his desk. It hung there, stuck three-quarters of an inch in the wood.

He told his wife that night. He stood in the kitchen, watching her prepare dinner. He took the knife from his pocket and laid it on the sink in front of her. "Look at what I bought," he said.

"What is it?"

"A knife." With one finger, he pressed the release and the blade flicked out. The spring made the knife quiver on the white porcelain. She made a noise in her throat and he laughed at her.

"Whatever possessed you to buy that?" she said.

He picked it up and closed it. "I wanted it," he said. "I just wanted it so I bought it."

She looked at it in his hand. "It's ugly."

"I don't think so."

"It is. It's ugly."

He opened the blade again and held the knife up, away from him, liking the way the light from the ceiling globe flashed on the steel.

"Why did you buy it?"

"I said I wanted it."

"How much was it?"

"Not much." He laughed. "I practically got a bargain."

"How much?"

"I earned the money. I don't have to make an accounting of it."

She flushed and started to answer, but then turned back to the sink. "I still think it's stupid," she muttered.

"It doesn't matter."

"Money always matters. We don't have that much."

He laughed again. "I wasn't talking about the money."

She looked up at him uncomprehendingly and flushed again, but it was not a flush of anger. Her expression was uneasy, her lips were

moving, making silent little formations, and she said nothing. He leaned against the refrigerator, cleaning his fingernails with the knife. He was amused. No, not amused. He was exultant. It was not that his thoughts were triumphant. That would imply an enemy defeated. It was his emotions that were triumphant. It was a strange feeling, one that he could not remember having had ever before. He wanted to laugh, but not at Helen. He wanted to laugh because, suddenly, for the first time since adolescence, there was something else to do besides wait for tomorrow.

He threw back his head and laughed.

"What's the matter with you?" Helen asked.

He closed the knife and put it in his pocket. "Let's go to bed," he said.

"What?"

"Let's go to bed."

"It's dinner time."

"Now."

"The dinner will burn."

"We'll go to a restaurant."

"No. Don't be silly."

He stepped toward her and, putting one arm behind her knees, scooped her into his arms.

"Don't be silly," she repeated.

He kissed her and laughed again. Later, in the Italian restaurant around the corner from their apartment, they ate spaghetti and drank chianti with it, and he talked while she listened, holding her head

propped in her hands. Her hair was hanging loose around her face and she had put on a sweater to replace the blouse he tore in the bedroom. He wore a white shirt that was rumpled and open at the collar.

They drank chianti and he talked. He told her about how it was to work at an advertising agency. He told her that it wasn't bad, but it wasn't what he wanted to do. He said he wanted to write, really write, the way it could be done.

She listened silently. Her eyes were darker than usual and sleepy and she looked bedraggled, but she listened.

He told her about how he felt when he read good writing. He explained how he felt when he read a novel by a man younger than he. He said there were so many things he wanted to do.

After he had talked and after the chianti was gone, they went home and slept.

The next night he came home excited. They had dinner and then he said he wanted to go out.

"Why?" she asked.

"I just need to get out."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Just out. Someplace wild."

She looked down at her plate and didn't answer.

"I want you to come with me," he said.

"Where will we go?"

"Someplace wild. Someplace where people are."

They went out together. They went on the subway and they didn't dress well. He didn't want to be watched, he wanted to watch.

They wandered. Finally there was a place, a bar, he liked. There was a name above the door, but he could not pronounce it. The windows were too dirty to see through. Inside, a juke box with broken glass was singing in Spanish. There were tables, to the left of the door, but no one sat there. They sat on stools at the bar, both men and women, and those who could not find stools, stood, leaning against the counter, drinking, talking to someone, or maybe just looking in the mirror that faced them.

When they went in, there was an almost imperceptible pause. They were seen, but Talent could not have pointed to anyone and said, "Why are you looking at me?"

The hum of conversation solidified and they were not being watched. They walked the length of the room and found one stool at the end. Helen sat on it and he stood beside her. The bartender drew two beers when they ordered, and cut the tops off with a spatula and slid them across. He stood there until Talent put a dollar on the bar and then he made change and went away.

"I'm afraid in here," Helen whispered.

"Don't be." He sipped at his beer. "Just mind your own business and they'll mind their's. They just don't

like people who come slumming." He didn't know how he knew it, but he did.

There was a girl. She wore a blue rayon cocktail dress and plastic shoes that were meant to look like glass slippers. He thought about her, about the story of her. There were three men with her. He wondered whether they would fight for her, share her, or simply drift away because it was too much trouble.

He put down his glass and said he had to make a trip to the mens' room. When he returned, a dark man who was handsome was talking to Helen. He was leaning with one elbow on the bar, talking quickly, smiling. Talent heard him say, "Come on. It won't hurt you."

"Please go away," Helen said.

"You heard her," Talent said.

The dark man leaned back flat against the bar and smiled. "Who are you?"

"I said to go away," Talent said.

"Tell me who you are and we will talk about it." The man spoke perfect English, but with a lilting accent.

"I'm with the lady."

"She didn't say so. She was alone."

"I'm saying so. You heard me."

The bartender pretended not to see them. People close to them began edging away, not looking at them directly.

"He's my husband," Helen said.

The dark man looked at her and then smiled. He seemed to bow

even though he did not. "I'm sorry," he said to Talent.

"Go on away," Talent said.

"I said I am sorry. I did not know you were her husband." He smiled again at Helen. "I did not know she was married."

"I know what you said. Now get the hell away from us."

The dark man smiled again, but he did not move.

"It's all right, Paul," Helen said.

"It's not all right," Talent said, looking at her. "I came back and found this punk trying to pick you up."

"Punk," the dark man said.

"You heard me," Talent said.

The dark man stepped toward him. Talent took out the knife. The blade made a popping sound when it opened.

"Ah, no," the bartender said.

"Now what?" the dark man said.

"Now you go," Talent said.

The dark man smiled. "I don't think so. I think you will go."

"That's what you think."

"You have a knife."

"Yes."

The dark man had not moved after that first step. Now he reached into his back pocket and brought out a gun. He smiled again. "Now *compadre*," he said. "Now who will go?"

The knife blade was steady for another few seconds before it wavered and dropped. "Come on," Talent said to Helen.

They walked the length of the

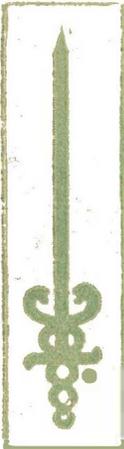
room. Someone giggled quietly. Someone laughed out loud. By the time they reached the door, everyone was laughing. He turned, wanting to say something, but Helen took his hand. "Come on."

They took a cab to the subway station at Times Square. While he was in the cab, Talent slipped the

knife from his pocket and stuffed it into the crack of the seat. He tried to hide what he was doing from Helen, but he thought she noticed it. She looked away and did not say anything.

When they got out of the cab, the wind was cold down Broadway and it burned his skin.



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RETRIBUTION

*Robert Dorp was a bank-teller and a lady's man.
The combination spelled "trouble."*

BY MICHAEL ZUROY

"YOU'RE QUITE SURE?" The president of the Chowder Falls National Bank stared unwaveringly at the auditor, his face expressionless. He was a large man whose features and bald head seemed formed out of one solid chunk of stone, unsoftened by the rigidly brushed and trimmed hair at the sides. The neat nameplate on the desk before him said in black and gold letters: Augustus Prescott, President.

"Quite sure," said Mr. Tunney, the auditor, matching Prescott's unemotional tone.

"Your figures show that something over forty thousand dollars is missing?"

"Exactly forty-thousand, two hundred and eleven dollars," said Tunney, as though reading from a balance sheet. Tunney was a crisp,

spare man with cool eyes behind rimless glasses. One could not picture him in anything but rimless glasses.

There was a silence. When Prescott spoke again, it was with a heavy deliberateness, as though he intended to make absolutely certain of one point before going on to the next. "Your audit also proves that one of our tellers, Robert Dorp took the money?"

"That's right."

"There's no question about it?"

"None."

"Seems to me," said Prescott, "a difficult thing for an audit to pinpoint the crook. Is that evidence conclusive enough to stand up in a court of law?"

"Absolutely." Tunney left his seat alongside Prescott's desk and strode to a long table, on which

were spread out ledgers, balance sheets and work sheets. "These figures prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the shortage originated with Dorp. Any C.P.A. in the country would agree with that."

"I don't want to prosecute the man unless we're certain."

"I repeat, this evidence is indisputable."

Prescott let out a weighty sigh, crossed the office and opened the door slightly so that the two men could look out at the banking floor. Dorp was at his cage several windows down, serving a woman depositor, smiling pleasantly. He was tall and lean with dark hair that held a trace of a curl.

"Fine looking man," said Prescott.

"Yes. Attractive to the ladies."

Prescott and Tunney exchanged glances. "Too damn attractive," said Prescott.

Both men fell silent, wrapped up in their own thoughts. After a while, Tunney asked, "How's your daughter?"

"Eh? Oh, coming along, thanks."

"She still doesn't realize that you know?"

"She doesn't and never will, if I can help it. They call me a hard man, Tunney, but I'm soft when it comes to my daughter. I'd never hurt her—and I'd make anyone who tried to hurt her sorry."

"I'm sure," said Tunney. "By the way, how did you find out?"

"She confided in a girl-friend of hers. The friend thought I ought to know."

"You are not one to advertise your feelings," said Tunney, "but I know how you felt. I know that you worship the child."

"Don't get me wrong," said Prescott savagely. "I wouldn't stand in her way when the proper time comes and the proper person. I don't go for this father antagonism towards the lover, and I don't expect her to remain a virgin child forever. But she's barely sixteen now, and not ready for life. What happened to her was just a rotten seduction."

"Do you think she sees it that way?"

"I think she's beginning to feel that. There's a humiliated, shamed look about her. She's hurt. I think she's feeling that she's been used and discarded. You know the romantic illusions of a young girl. Instead of the adoring prince her lover's turned out to be a rutting goat that stayed for a few encounters and has gone looking for other females in heat."

Tunney nodded sympathetically. "She'll get over it. Time, you know."

"At her age it'll leave an emotional scar." Prescott lit a cigar and brooded over the smoke for a while. Then he shook his head, as though to shake the thing from his mind, and inquired of Prescott, "How's the wife?"

"Oh, all right, I suppose. She's at her mother's."

"Yes, of course."

"I don't feel that I want her at home just now."

"Yes."

"Give us both a chance to calm down, you see."

"What are your intentions?"

"I suppose I'll take her back. I think I can forgive her in view of her attitude."

"Oh?"

"Yes, she begged me for another chance. Swore that this was a temporary insanity, that the scoundrel was so persuasive that she couldn't help herself. She's considerably younger than I am, of course, and hot-blooded. But she claims she loves me and has never been unfaithful to me before, and never will again if I take her back."

"I see. And how did you find out?"

"I walked in on them."

"A shock, eh?"

"You can imagine. I'd finished an out-of-town audit unexpectedly soon, and decided not to stay away another night. It was a long drive home, and well past midnight when I arrived. I didn't want to disturb Ann so I was quiet. I was about to step through the bedroom door when I realized what kind of sounds I was hearing. I couldn't believe it. I waited, listening to the relentless sounds and to Ann's soft crying which I hear all too seldom myself. My eyes grew accustomed to

the darkness, and the moonlight came through the window. I saw Ann's naked form and glazed eyes and bared teeth. I saw the man's lithe, animal body, and in that instant I admit I envied him his youth and strength. It was only afterwards that I grew furious.

"I didn't know what to do. I backed away and left. I'd seen the man's face clearly in the moonlight, and I decided I could take measures later. Ann, of course, I sent packing the next day."

"And so he remains unaware of your knowledge?"

"Yes."

A long silence ensued. Finally, Tunney broke it. "What do you intend to do with the whip now?"

"The cat-o-nine-tails? Keep it as a curio."

Tunney grimaced. "Nasty looking thing. You could kill a man with it."

Prescott permitted himself a frosty smile. "Yes, I could. However—what about your gun?"

"I'm getting rid of that. I won't have any use for it now, any more than you'll have for that whip."

"In my opinion," said Prescott slowly, "it's extremely fortunate that we happened to begin exchanging confidences over a drink. Had we not uncovered the similarity of our situations, one of us would be in trouble now."

"Yes, and awful trouble. I would hate to be facing a murder charge."

"It's much better this way."

"Much better. Do you think he suspects anything?"

"Not a thing."

"Yes, he's a handsome fellow," said Tunney. "Real ladies man."

"Well, let's get on with it." Prescott took a key from his pocket and unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk. He brought up two neat packages of currency and two shiny half-dollars. "That adds up to your figure. Twenty thousand, one hundred and five dollars apiece in bills, and a half-dollar apiece to make up the odd dollar."

The men pocketed the money.

Prescott said, "Once more, you're positive you've set up the audit to prove Dorp guilty beyond a doubt? No loopholes?"

"None whatsoever. These figures are incontestable. Remember my standing."

"Fine." Prescott puffed at his cigar. "Personally, I think he's getting off easy. I think we're being pretty fair."

"Under the circumstances I think we're being very fair."

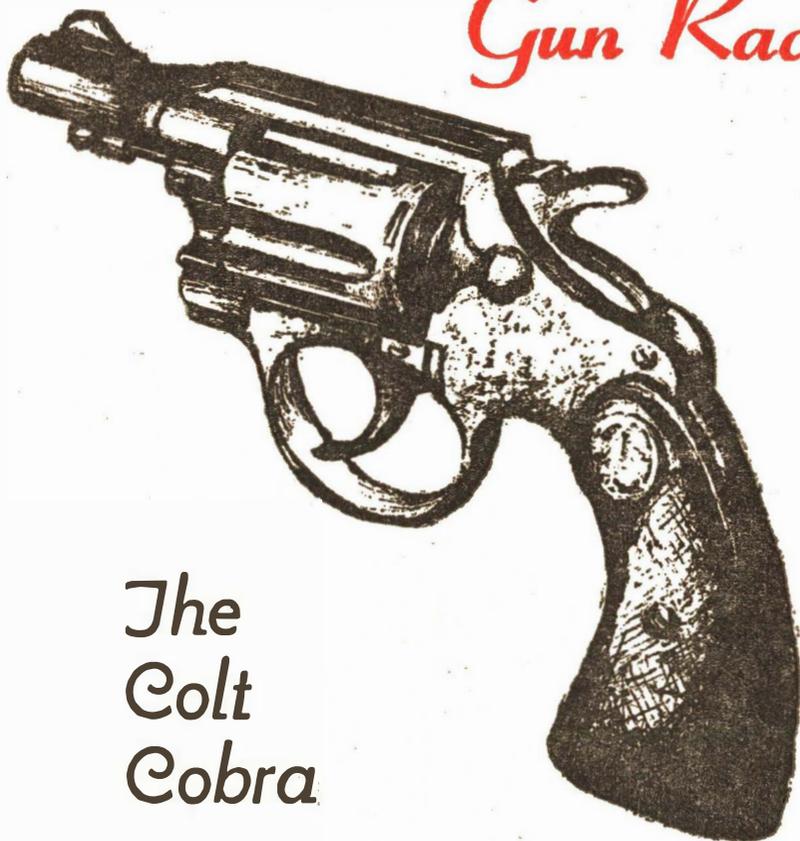
"Well, might as well call the police."

He reached for the phone.



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Everything had gone perfectly. He went into the house and fixed himself a drink. His hand shook, not from fear, but with excitement. Then he spied it, a white object lying on the black floor of the patio . . .

THE EVIDENCE OF MURDER

BY KENNETH McCaffrey

WHEN HELEN LEFT Tom Bates in early May he swore it was for another man, but he didn't care one way or the other. He would have given her away with blessings, paid for a divorce, or gladly put a bullet through her head. She saved him the trouble. And if she wanted to live in a cabin up in the woods with Bob Parker that was just fine with him. Why in the world had she come back now?

It was almost dark. The last thin light of late October was a metal band along the horizon, and Tom

knew it would be black and starless by the time he got home. The car rolled along through the last of the valley with a leashed-in power and he switched on his headlights as he started up the twisting hills that led to Curtis Mountain and home. The unexpected telephone call kept going through his mind. It didn't seem real talking to Helen again.

"Helen, I don't care what your problem is or why you want to see me, it's no dice." He was alone in the office but the door was open and he knew his secretary could

hear bits of the conversation. Helen's voice sounded flatter but more calm than he remembered.

"Tom, you've got it all wrong. I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. I'll be waiting at the house when you get there, so you may as well go right home."

It didn't sound as if she was drinking and Tom wondered for a moment whether she had given that up. He could feel anger rising like a bad taste in his mouth and he didn't want to explode and give the girl something to talk about.

"All right, Helen. I'll be there, but you'll have to wait on the patio. I had all the locks changed." He felt stupidly embarrassed.

Helen gave a short, unfriendly laugh. "Were you afraid I'd try to move back in?" She hesitated for a moment. "If that's what's worrying you, forget it. Five years of your sadism was enough even for me."

"Okay, okay, Helen. Let's not get started. I'll see you as soon as I can get away."

"Make that very soon." She hung up without any formal goodbye.

He dropped to a lower gear for the last long pull up the hill. The headlights picked out the house and washed across its low silhouette. He drove the car into the circle in front of the garage and parked. The patio was on the other side where the driveway circled the cliff. He hadn't been able to see, as he drove past, whether Helen was there or not.

He listened as his own steps crunched on the gravel. Then her voice.

"Tom, is that you?" It was like a rasp. Did you turn out the light in the bathroom? Did you pick up the bread at the bakery? Did you remember to pay the phone bill? It was simple. Full of ugly memories.

"Who did you think it was, Jack the Ripper?" He enjoyed the joke.

"I can tell you haven't changed."

He could make out her shape in the chair in the corner. She sat half facing the wall, blurred by deep shadow. She didn't look at him directly but spoke to the air in general.

"Shall we go inside? It's sort of cold out here."

She stirred uncertainly for a moment. "So. Let's stay out here. What I want will only take a few minutes and then you can call me a cab."

"What happened to your car?"

"I sold it." She cut him short. "But I didn't come up to talk about my transportation." There was a pause. "Tom, I need five thousand dollars."

He winced. It was like a physical pain. Then he laughed.

"You're out of your mind, Helen. If that's why you came you should have saved yourself the trip. I wouldn't give you five cents." He walked to the edge of the patio and looked across the ink stained valley. Helen sat in silence. "Why don't you ask Bob Parker for it. He ought

to pay for what he's getting." It came out wrong, jealous. Not the way he meant.

Helen's voice dropped to a far away whisper. "It's not that way with Bob. He's been very kind, nothing more."

Tom snorted.

"I don't know why I even try to explain. I certainly don't care. I just want the money. My money."

"Your money!" Tom exploded. "That's a laugh. That's real rich. Just because I started in business with money from your father doesn't mean you own part of it."

"Tom, I didn't come to argue. Just hear me out." He was quiet. "I could tell you I need an operation. But that wouldn't mean anything to you. So I'll spell it out. I know all about your shady business deals and about what goes on up here on weekends."

"Now, wait a minute . . ." Tom tried to break in, but she cut him short.

"I don't care one way or the other about your crimes or your orgies, but I can ruin you in five seconds of it's necessary."

"That's blackmail!" He shouted the word as though he invented it.

Her voice went on calmly. "I guess it is, Tom. Yes, I guess it's blackmail. But I'll expect your check in the morning." She fumbled with something in the dark, then stood up and straightened her skirt. She took a step toward the wall, turned, and brushed against a

table that teetered for a moment. "All right, Tom. You can call my cab now."

He stood looking down the drive and knew with an absolute clarity that he had to kill her. It didn't come as a searing passion. There was no rage. Just a calm necessity. The method, the alibi, the story for his friends came together like pre-arranged parts of a puzzle. He turned and walked over to her.

"Helen."

She lifted her head and his hand swung through the dark in a short sudden arc. She didn't try to duck. The blow slammed across the bridge of her nose and she fell backward against the table. There was a rattle of metal on concrete. Then silence. He looked down at the dim unconscious form and realized he didn't feel anything.

He took her body and carried it to the car. It was already pointing down the steep drive. He panted as he edged her behind the wheel and put her bag on the other seat. It occurred to him he shouldn't be so winded. Have to work out at the gym more often. When he reached across her body to turn on the motor he could feel the rise and fall of her shallow breathing. He switched on the headlights. They lit up the sharp turn at the foot of the hill and the vague emptiness that was a cliff. He released the break, stepped back, and shut the door.

The car remained motionless for

the smallest part of a second, and then, slowly, by inches, it started to move. It slid forward and began to pick up speed. It swerved for a moment but held the road. It bounced, charged, and leaped toward the curve. Tom watched, fascinated. A little boy blowing up a good toy with a firecracker. The car hit the thin rail fence, poised for a second, then disappeared. A moment later it shattered on the rocks. Tom ran down the hill to see what was left. There was a glow in the blackness, then a bright light. When he got to the edge he could see the steel skeleton burning quietly like a derelict on a dump heap. He turned and walked back to the house.

He went in, snapped on the light, and poured himself a drink. In a moment he would call the police. He rehearsed his part. She came to ask a favor. When she was going she wanted him to call a taxi. He offered her the car. She missed the turn.

Tom looked at his hand. It was shaking from excitement. That was good. Mustn't look too calm.

He walked over to the glass doors, sipping his drink. He stared out at the patio and remembered the table that tipped over when she fell. Good he thought of it. He stepped out on to the cement and picked up the table. He felt along the edge but it didn't seem to be dented. Something white on the black stone caught his eye. It looked like a thin white line. He bent over and picked it up. A long white piece of metal. He couldn't place it. Probably something of Helen's. He brought it over to the light. It was a cane. A white metal cane.

He looked at it again and tried to think. It seemed familiar yet vague. Then he remembered. Yes. Yesterday. There was a man downtown with a white metal cane. A man. A man who was blind.



She was a gorgeous long-legged blonde. She stood in distress beside her crippled car. I didn't feel at all like a "patsy" when I stopped to lend her a hand.

PATSY



A Novelette

BY PAUL FAIRMAN

TH**ERE** WAS nothing sudden or jarring about the trouble. It was administered slowly, in small pleasant doses by experts in such matters; injected into my life and routine so skillfully that I didn't know the size of the dose until twenty-four hours later; nor its lethal content even then.

The first sugary spoonful was a gorgeous, long-legged blonde; a girl in distress on a fine sunny morning around ten o'clock. She

was standing beside a crippled car she'd pulled off the highway and I didn't feel at all like a patsy for stopping to lend a hand.

In fact I was pretty smug about the whole thing because she let the two cars ahead of me go right by, waving a frantic handkerchief only after they'd passed.

Maybe this should have made me suspicious, but it didn't. And don't grin so knowingly because I think you'd have reacted the same way I did—with a glow of satisfaction at having been selected.

Anyhow, I pulled off the road behind her, happy that my car was a snappy new cream convertible—the kind that's supposed to impress beautiful blondes. Glad too, that I'd worn my hand-painted necktie and put a new blade in my razor that morning.

These aren't necessarily important points, though. I mention them only to bolster my earlier statement; to show how pleasant trouble can be when you have experts on the job.

But other small details were very important so watch close and maybe you won't miss them the way I did.

The flat left front tire on the girl's little black job made getting acquainted easy. All I had to say was, "I see you've got a flat," and she smiled right back and said, "Yes, it certainly is flat all right," and the ice had been broken.

"Nothing too serious, though," I

assured her. "If you'll give me your keys, I'll unlock your spare and—"

Her voice turned to a wail. "But I haven't got one! Isn't that ridiculous?"

For an ordinary run-of-the-mill female it would no doubt have been ridiculous indeed but in this case it seemed more like a daring gamble meriting admiration.

I smiled brilliantly and said, "No cause for alarm. I'll stop off at the next gas station and send a man back."

"But I'm so dreadfully late. I'm supposed to meet a friend at the hotel in Danvers. It's so very important to me!"

"I can drive you on in," I suggested hopefully. "Then you can come back later with a repairman."

"That would be just wonderful. But you're sure I wouldn't be putting you out?"

"Not in the least. I stop off in Danvers every morning for breakfast."

Which was true. So she got into the car beside me and as we rolled back into our lane she laughed and took a fetching red band off her hair and let it blow in the wind. A truly beautiful girl; so arresting that when we passed a house around the next bend a woman working in the front yard stood up and stared; a prim-looking woman who was either critical or envious, I couldn't tell which.

My blonde turned out to be Trudy Miller, a dancer. She didn't

say exactly what kind of a dancer but I got the impression soft light, exotic settings, and high cover charges would be involved.

Nor was I bashful with my own personal background; Larry Bowman, 32, single; a coin machine operator in that I owned a string of a hundred-odd juke boxes in the clubs and taverns north of Central City.

This appeared to thrill Trudy; a glamorous business. But I think I would have gotten the same effect by telling her I hemmed doilies for a living. She was obviously a girl who'd learned that making men feel important is good business.

And she was so good at it that the five-mile run into Danvers was over before I had time to suggest a broadening of our acquaintance; before she said I was a living doll and thanks and was rushing into the Danvers Hotel.

I rolled on around the corner, parked in my usual spot beside my usual restaurant and went in to my usual breakfast. This had been a part of my routine for a year now; since I'd bought a small house out on Crystal Lake; where—being no specialist in the kitchen—I didn't even bother with coffee except on weekends. That made the restaurant in Danvers a real convenience—the first civilized spot on the fifteen-mile run between Crystal Lake and Central City.

Red-headed Connie Higgins was waiting with my orange juice and

as I sat down at the counter, she glanced at her watch. "You're two and a half minutes late."

"Couldn't be helped. A lady had a flat tire."

"Oh, sure. I'll bet she didn't have a flat chest, though."

Connie was no slouch in the figure department herself. She slapped a napkin down in front of me and turned to the coffee urn as I said, "Quite the contrary, but let's talk about you. On our next date, we'll take a ride and you can let your hair blow in the wind. You'll probably look very gay and reckless."

She snorted attractively. "I'll probably be bald by that time. Some women lose their hair late in life."

"Then we'll make it tomorrow night. I'll knock off early."

"I wouldn't hear of you neglecting duty. I'll just run along behind and hold the spare wrench while you fix juke boxes."

"That's a heap but a girl's place is in the suicide seat of a cream convertible."

Connie sighed. "I wish you'd get that tub painted black. It stands out like a bonfire in a coal mine."

I said, "The better to find you in the dark, sweet. Wear something girlish," and left her a dollar tip to start her day off right.

I passed the hotel again on the way out of Danvers toward Central City and my office-warehouse but Trudy Miller was not in sight, nothing of her remaining except a

faint aura of the perfume she'd worn and an empty match cover labeled *Palermo Club* that she'd dropped on the floor of the car.

So, with the victim having experienced no pain whatever from the first injection of trouble, he went about his day's affairs; a routine somewhat heavier than usual because my one and only employee, Jim Palos was on a hunting trip in Canada.

Not that I minded having Jim on vacation. A dependable worker, he still had annoying traits that could probably have been bunched under one word—*impatience*. He wanted to get up there fast and we'd never been able to agree on how often he rated a raise or how much his pay check ought to be fattened.

I'd been tempted more than once to let him go but it's hard to tell a man he's through when you can't explain exactly why, so I'd ridden along.

My place was still there; nobody had blown it into the street, so I unlocked the door and went to work on a machine that had been an innocent bystander in a fight at the 52 Club and had gotten its nice shiny front all scratched up.

There were a few phone calls but none of any importance until I found Mack Carson on the other end. Mack was one of the nine local operators in the resort lake area around Central City. We hadn't formed an organization exactly but we got together once in a while to

keep the territory fairly divided and to discuss mutual problems.

And the big mutual problem of the moment was Gus Largo and his protection racket.

Mack Carson lost no time in bringing him up. "My box at the Kenton Lake Spa was wrecked last night."

"Largo?"

"Who can prove it? A drunk. He beat it. Nobody stopped him."

"Have Largo's boys been pushing you harder lately?"

"That's a silly question, Larry. You know the guy and what he's capable of."

"I don't quite agree with the rest of you on that. He wants us in that so-called union of his but so far it's been mostly threats."

"Well, he sure threatened the hell out of my box at Kenton Lake."

"That might not have been Largo."

"Maybe not," Mack said, "but the rest of us can't help being scared. We've got more to worry about than you. We've got wives and kids."

That was true. I had only myself and my boxes and not being vulnerable to the dirtier tactics of Largo's kind I'd become a sort of rallying point for the others. I was in a position to match dirty looks with the big thug so the boys had used me for a buffer—the get-Larry-Bowman-in-and-I'll-join-too type of thing.

So far it had worked and I

thought I knew why. I tried to explain it to Mack. "Largo can't afford to push his neck out very far right now. You know that. He's going before the racket committee in Washington."

"Uh-huh. He'll go down there and take the Fifth all over the place and then come back here and beat our brains out."

"I don't think so. There's that secretary of his you're forgetting about. It's not generally known and I want you to keep it under your hat, but she's ready to turn on him. She's not open to prosecution and there's nothing to keep her from talking her head off."

"Nothing except maybe she won't have a head by the time she gets there."

"You're misjudging Largo, Mack. He's clever and devious and he's scared. Sure he threatens—nobody can get him on that. But he's not going to do anything to Gloria Dane or have anything done to her because the finger would point straight at him. You've got to remember it's not just local law on his neck. He's been careless with his income tax and the Federal boys are keeping him awake nights."

Mack wanted to be convinced but he was having a tough time selling himself on how safe we really were. "Okay, Larry. I hope it's like you say. I'll hold out a while longer and I know the rest of the boys will too. But if the rough

stuff starts—the real rough stuff—"

"It won't. All we have to do is keep a solid front."

"Sure, Larry. It's solid as a rock. But I'd hate to see Largo try to throw a cream puff through it. The rock might melt."

"Everything will work out fine. Wait and see."

With Mack reassured, at least for time being, I went back to work; finished the mussed-up box, loaded a rack of records into the car, and went out on the route to make changes.

Things went smoothly with everything quiet on the juke box front and the customers dumping in dimes and quarters at brisk rate.

In fact things were so peaceful that I cut back through Central City proper, undisputed Largo territory, and tried a little salesmanship on a couple of his customers. But I didn't get very far.

Not that the owners wouldn't have liked to throw Largo's boxes out. They were both moaning over inferior merchandise—counterfeit discs—another of Largo's little rackets.

Not content with a big end of the take, he'd been transposing records onto his own wax and distributing stolen music to save the cost of buying from legitimate companies. The result was scratchy unsatisfactory rendition and the outlet owners were getting the complaints from their public.

There wasn't much they could

do, though, with Largo's goons handling the objections.

I listened to some myself, offered sympathy, and went on home and so ended the first day . . .

The second began as usual; back to normal in that there were no stranded blondes on the highway as I drove toward Danvers and breakfast.

Connie Higgins had my orange juice ready and looked a trifle more starry-eyed than usual, I thought. "You do recall asking me out tonight, don't you?" She asked the question over my second cup of coffee after I'd deliberately avoided any mention of the date.

"Of course. I was afraid to say anything for fear you'd been offered a better proposition."

"When that happens I won't hesitate to let you know."

"Okay. Just give me a chance to up the bid. But about tonight—how about driving out to my place? Meet me there and we'll go on up to Saugus Lodge."

Her blue eyes widened. "My, my! The dimes must be really rolling in."

"Confidentially, I'll have to hock my watch but a date with you will be worth it."

I reversed myself, left her only a dime tip and walked out of the restaurant just as one of Danver's two squad cars pulled up beside the parking lot. I paid them no attention, being of clear conscience

and went over to my convertible.

But they demanded attention when they cut across in front of me and blocked my exit to the street. One of them got out and strolled up beside me.

"Is this your car?"

"That's right. Bought and paid for."

He didn't seem convinced. "It sure is a blazer, isn't it?"

"Are you questioning my taste or my ownership?"

"Both maybe. Let's see your registration."

I took out my wallet slowly, trying to think the thing through. The suburban police around Central City had a pretty good reputation. I hadn't heard of any shake-down activities but things were beginning to look suspicious.

He was a grizzled veteran of the force with a fine coat of tan and as he studied my registration some thoughtful little lines appeared at the corners of his eyes.

"Driver's license?"

I handed him that too. "How about the initials on my belt buckle?"

"No need to get sarcastic," he said mildly. "I haven't insulted you. I'm just doing my job."

And he did it quite leisurely, circling the convertible and studying it carefully from all sides. Then he came back and said. "You'd better get out."

I did as I was told. "Okay. What next."

"You said this was your car."

"It is damn it all I bought it from *King and Walter* at Barton Lake. Their label's on the rear bumper."

"What's your license number?"

I politely lifted the registration from his fingers and pointed to where it said, *118-B-297*. "Right there. Read it."

"I did, but the plates on the car read different."

He was out of his mind, of course, but I decided to humor him. "Let's look together."

We looked together. Then I looked again, refusing to believe the impossible. The front plate read *119-B-741*. I stared at the plate, then at the cop. "But that's ridiculous!"

"Isn't it though?"

"Somebody switched plates on me."

"And somebody scratched *King and Walter* off your rear bumper too. They put *Central City Motors* on in its place."

The squad car had attracted a few people from the street and now I saw Connie hurrying out of the restaurant and even at this early stage of things, a familiar face was nice to see.

"Larry. What's wrong?"

"They say this isn't my car. They say I stole it."

"Why that's ridiculous!"

"The most ridiculous thing I ever heard of but they're right. This isn't my car."

When you looked close there were differences but too small to notice unless they were pointed out. And the oversight on my part wasn't strange. A man comes out of a restaurant to get into his car and if the make, model, color, and condition haven't changed while he was eating, he gets in and drives away—that is if the cops will let him. He doesn't check it over for the scratch on the right rear bumper, the smudge on the left front whitewall he put there the night before, or the slight flaw in the radiator cap that he argued with the dealer about.

But I checked now and when I showed Connie that these marks were missing, her bewilderment increased.

The cop had been wearily patient. Connie turned on him and said, "Good heavens! If he'd stolen the car would he drive it in here in broad daylight right under your noses?"

The cop shrugged. "Lady, I've got no idea what he'd do. Maybe he's going to claim the owner loaned it to him."

"Who is the owner?"

"The car was reported stolen late last night—or rather early this morning—by a Miss Gloria Dane."

Which went to show that most of what I'd gotten out of life had come by accident, not because I was smart and alert, because I still didn't realize what was being done to me; that right there in the mid-

dle of town on a fine summer morning I was being measured for the electric chair.

I didn't realize this even though I knew who Gloria Dane was—Gus Largo's beautiful blonde secretary; the gal who could put him in jail for seven hundred years if she said the wrong things at the right time in Washington, D. C.

I still reacted like an idiot, thinking there'd been some crazy mistake that would straighten itself out.

"You're taking me in?"

"It's customary," the cop said.

"Am I entitled to counsel?"

His manner turned a trifle colder. "Then you admit you stole the car?"

"I admit nothing of the kind."

He had me by one arm now and Connie was clinging to the other as though they planned to divide me down the middle. I said, "Connie—do me a favor. Call Lee Henry. Tell him what happened and ask him to come to the station."

"I'll go right in and call—and don't worry, darling. Everything will be all right."

I smiled bravely. "Of course. I'll meet you tonight." And the gendarmes hauled me away to gaol . . .

Lee Henry was an able lawyer and a good friend. He handled my business affairs along with those of the other operators Largo was trying to move in on.

He was a nervous, wispy little man but he looked to me like Sir Galahad's brother when they brought him to my cell half an hour after I was locked up.

"What sort of nonsense is this, Larry?"

"They claim I stole the car I was driving."

"False, of course."

"I didn't steal it but it wasn't my car. It was my car's twin—identical in every detail."

"I didn't know you were acquainted with Gloria Dane."

"I'm not. I never met her in my life."

"Then how did you get her car?"

"So help me, Lee—I don't know. I thought it was mine."

"Most peculiar but I'm sure everything will work out all right. In the meantime, you don't want to stay in this place do you?"

"I don't seem to have much choice."

"Oh, I can get you out all right. In fact I stopped off and got a writ from Judge Boylan on the way over. There was a thousand-dollar bond but that's routine. Nick Sampson has it ready. Nick handles all my bonding business."

And it occurred to me that democracy was wonderful as I silently thanked the writers of the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights.

So I thanked Lee out in the street fifteen minutes later and hiked by the Danvers Hotel to the restaurant where Connie was waiting.

She brought two cups of coffee to a corner table and asked, "Did the girl apologize?"

"What girl?"

"You mean the silly thing still isn't straightened out?"

"Not so far as the police are concerned. I'm out on a writ."

"But Larry. It's all so idiotic. Somehow the two of you switched cars."

"And you think Gloria Dane has mine?"

"That's the only way it could be."

"Then why did she report her's stolen?"

"I—I don't know. Wouldn't it be smart to ask her?"

"Good idea. Can I use your car, hon?"

"Of course. But be careful of the brakes. They need relining."

"I hope I can locate this Dane gal. I suppose she's in the phone book."

"If not the police should have her address. But if you don't, you'd better keep my car. You can drive it to your place tonight and I'll take a cab out." She looked up quickly. "We've still got a date, haven't we?"

I'd never realized before how pretty Connie really was. Also, I liked the quick concern in her tone of voice and knew that having her on my side made me luckier than most.

"Sure we've got a date."

Her smile uncovered even white

teeth. "In that case I'll get you the keys."

I set my cup down with a bang. "The keys!"

"What about them?"

"How come my key fit Gloria Dane's car?"

Connie stared at me. "Your keys—someone else's car—" She frowned. "Wait a minute. It gets a little complicated."

"It certainly does. It gets harder and harder to call it a coincidence. I'll grant that another convertible exactly like mine might get parked right next to it, but an accidental exchange demands identical ignition locks. I suppose such a freak accident could happen at the factory but I doubt that it did."

"Larry—I'm beginning to get scared."

"No point in that but I'm mighty curious myself." I got up from the table. Connie got me her keys and I said, "See you tonight, chick."

"Larry, you will be careful. And call me if anything new develops."

I said I would and went out to the parking lot.

The search for Gloria Dane ended quickly; after she didn't answer the phone number listed in the Central City directory, nor the bell I pushed at 2841 Sedgewick Drive. So I got back into Connie's little foreign job and sat back to think things over.

I was more worried than I'd wanted Connie to see. I'd have had

to be pretty stupid not to be. But still there didn't seem to be anything I could do because nothing that had happened made any sense. There didn't appear to be any objective to the weird goings-on. And nothing much I could do about it, at least until I found the owner of the car I'd been accused of stealing and asked her a few questions.

Of course there was plenty I could wonder about; like what had happened to my own pride and joy—the sleek cream convertible that had apparently turned into someone else's cream convertible in the parking lot—a miracle I couldn't quite swallow.

There were other angles to ponder also and I pondered them all the way across town to my office. First and foremost, who would profit by my conviction for auto theft?

The answer to that one was fairly simple. Gus Largo would conceivably get the boys who were looking to me as their leader if I were discredited with a felony; get them into his fake union where he wanted them. But somehow I couldn't buy it. The frame was too elaborate—and too full of potential holes. There were other, far simpler tricks that Gus could have pulled out of his bag. This one was too chancy. Even though I'd been arrested, I was far from being convicted.

No, it just didn't add in that direction, but think of the devil and

there he was—his big Cadillac parked in front of my office door as I pulled up.

No goons came over to escort me to the captain so I walked over under my own power and said, "Hello Gus," to the fat man sitting in the back seat.

Gus Largo had a huge, gross body with a face that didn't fit; the face of an innocent-eyed juvenile that looked as though it might have been attached to the front of his head on a day very few faces were available; just something to get him off the production line and away.

As a result, he looked like a sincere person who meant it when he said, "Hello, Bowman. I heard you got into a little trouble with the law."

"Something you arranged?"

He looked genuinely hurt. "How can you say that?"

I saw no point in explaining how easy it was. "A little out of your territory aren't you?"

He had two assistants with him; well dressed young men who might have been fresh out of college—no slanty-headed types for Largo—high-honor boys in the field of business administration. But no school taught the methods they were capable of using.

Largo had only smiled at my question and I said, "You're wasting your time, Gus. None of us are going along with you. And if you bust up too many of our boxes, I

know quite a few honest cops who won't like it any better than we do."

"All I've done," Gus said mildly, "is invite you fellows in with friendly persuasion."

"That's fine. See that you keep it friendly."

He made a motion toward the driver. "I wouldn't have it any other way, Bowman. And if you need any help from my legal battery, just let me know. I'd like to give you a sample of the kind of service Apex Protective gives its clients."

I could have said something about Gus needing the legal eagles himself when he got to Washington, but the car pulled away and I went into my office.

I tried to do a little work but my mind wasn't on it. There was too much unfinished business in other directions. It was collection day and I took the canvass change sacks and serviced two stops before I lost interest and kept right on going past the third.

I had a small hunting lodge about an hour's drive north that I seldom used; nothing much more than a shed on a marshy section of Lake Clara. Ducks were out of season now and there was no point in going there except that it suddenly seemed a nice place to be.

Maybe even then I was filled with subconscious fear that I refused to admit consciously. Maybe my duck blind looked good to me

because I was afraid I wouldn't see it again. That's the way it is, they say; when you see an end or a change in the offing, the simple, homey things you've had and known become very precious. Anyhow, I stayed there all afternoon and watched the sun slip down across the lake making the water and the reeds and the loneliness beautiful and desirable. Then I remembered my date with Connie and had a guilty twinge. If I didn't hurry, she'd be kept waiting.

I made the return run pretty fast but it was practically pitch dark under a thin sickle moon when I hit the road to the north end of Crystal Lake and my bungalow.

And the real trouble . . .

It began when my headlights outlined the girl in the road ahead. She appeared to have been hiding in the roadside bushes but when I got close enough she stood up and waved frantically. I stopped and she ran to the car.

"Larry! You've got to turn around and go back!"

"Connie! What's wrong? What's happened? Why are you down here?"

She'd come in high heels and the skirt of her fluffy green dress had been torn by brambles. "The police, Larry. They're waiting for you. I had a feeling you might be fool enough to come just because we had a date."

"Look—angel—I don't get it. I'm

out on a writ. If they've been told to pick me up, that's it. Hiding won't help."

"You mean you don't know what's happened? Where have you been all day?"

"Up at Lake Clara. I took the afternoon off."

Her laugh seemed on the edge of hysteria. "Well first let's get out of sight. A prowler may come down this road any minute and I can't let you give yourself up until you know what they're after you for."

We didn't say anything more until I'd turned around and gone back a few hundred yards where a narrow overgrown road just let the little car in with branches brushing our heads. I snapped off the motor and turned out the lights.

"Okay, what's it all about?"

Connie hesitated for a few moments. Then she said, "Larry, there's something I've got to ask you first and I want you to tell me the truth. And please remember whatever you say won't make any difference but I've got to know."

"Know what, angel?"

"Were you living with that girl? I mean, was she living with you in your bungalow?"

"What girl?"

"Larry—please—!"

I reached out and took both her hands in mine. "Darling, simmer down. I don't know what you're talking about but I'll answer your question. There's been no girl living with me up here or any

place else. You're the only girl who's been in my bungalow even for a quick drink. But you don't have to ask. You know that."

"I knew it but I had to hear it from you."

"Well, you've heard it. Now tell me why you had to ask."

She was tiny and warm and trembling there beside me as she spoke into the darkness. "I got to the bungalow early, before sundown and took a sun bath in the back yard. Then I went in and saw the purse and gloves on the table. I thought they were mine at first and then I knew they weren't. So—so I had to keep on looking and—well, I found the rest of the things. The robe—the nightgown—the dresses and the other things in the bedroom."

Connie—you out of your mind?"

"The things are there, Larry. I saw them."

"Then someone put them there between the time I left this morning and when you found them."

"I thought it was something like that—because I wanted to, I guess. Then I turned on the radio and I was sure."

"What did the radio have to do with it?"

"The whole story was on the newscast—so I began to gather up everything I could find. I was going to hide all the clothes and things, but then the police came and I dropped them in the middle of the living room and ran."

"What story, Connie? Tell me!"

She was fumbling for the knobs and a moment later the radio lit up. The voice came through a second later, beautifully timed:

". . . New evidence has been uncovered by the police linking Lawrence Bowman, Central City coin machine operator, to Gloria Dane, beautiful blonde secretary of August Largo, prominent local businessman also interested in coin machine activities.

"Miss Dane's mysterious disappearance was reported early this afternoon by Mr. Largo when he was unable to locate her at her apartment. Late last night, Miss Dane had reported her car as having been stolen and the first sinister note was added when the car was found in the possession of Mr. Bowman near a Danvers restaurant this morning.

"At the time, however, Miss Dane had not been reported missing and the police had no reason to be suspicious of Mr. Bowman for other than car theft and he was released on bail.

"But later a close check of the car revealed blood stains and a woman's shoe in the trunk. Fast-breaking developments followed when Gertrude Armitage, a resident on Route 18 into Danvers reported that she saw a man she identified from a picture as Bowman riding into Danvers with blonde and beautiful Miss Dane yesterday morning.

"Thus, Bowman was definitely linked with the vanished girl and further evidence of what was possibly a clandestine romance came to light only a couple of hours ago when the police searched Bowman's bungalow on Crystal Lake and found clothing identified as belonging to Miss Dane.

"Police, somewhat embarrassed at having released Bowman, have thrown out a dragnet and promise his apprehension soon. Also, they've begun searching the surrounding lake country for signs of foul play relative to Miss Dane's disappearance.

"Interesting sidelights of the case involve Largo's scheduled appearance before the Senate Rackets Committee in Washington, and rumors that Miss Dane, also scheduled to testify, would be a damaging witness for Largo.

"However, Mr. Largo denies this emphatically and claims he has nothing whatever to hide from the committee.

"Mr. Largo appears to be cleared of any suspicion by the fact that Bowman was his business rival, Bowman resisting Largo's efforts to organize local coin machine operators.

"The two cases of polio, reported at—"

Connie lunged forward and snapped off the radio and as she drew back I realized she'd been crying during the whole newscast. I said, "Take it easy, hon. I—"

She was tight in my arms, her wet face against mine. "Oh, Larry—I love you so much it's a great big ache! We've gone along from day to day and I've tried to hide it but when something like this happens—"

I held her tight and let her cry thinking how it's that way sometimes—the casual day to day business, and seeing only a cute little character always ready to be attractive or understanding or sophisticated or whatever you happen to need at the moment until you look at her more as a convenience than a girl trying to be whatever you want her to be.

And not realizing you've been in love with her all the time.

"Baby—take it easy. Everything will turn out all right."

She stopped crying, the effort taking a few moments before she said, "Darling. Who did this to you? Largo?"

Of course it had been Largo but there was no point in mulling that over now. I had to sit back and think. It was a little like getting suddenly smashed in the face with a blunt instrument. After you're down you sit there for a minute trying to rattle some sense back into your head.

"It looks like Largo's work, but the main thing is to figure out just what's happened and what I've got to do."

"You can't give yourself up, darling. That would be fatal. Do you

think Gloria Dane has been killed?"

"Who knows? Look, angel—I want you out of this."

"But I don't want to be out of it. I want to stay with you. I can help."

"You can help me the most by letting me take you home. I don't know what I'm going to do or where I'm going to do it but I'll feel better knowing you're safe."

"The police will be watching my apartment, won't they?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But they can't arrest you. Please, Connie. I don't want you in this and I might be picked up at any moment."

She came through in the clutch and began to look at things realistically. "If they found me with you they'd probably arrest me too and that wouldn't help any. As long as I'm free I can—"

I turned her face in my hands and looked straight into it. "There's one thing I want you to understand, darling. I have never met or talked to Gloria Dane. I don't know her and never wanted to. You're the only woman in my life—now and forever."

"You don't have to convince me, Larry. But who was the blonde that Gertrude Armitage said she saw you drive past her house with? Or was the lying?"

"She wasn't lying but it was a different girl; one that looked like Gloria Dane—enough so that when this story broke the Armitage wom-

an was willing to swear it *was* Gloria Dane. After all, the Dane girl's picture has been in the papers often enough."

"Do you know who this other blonde is?"

"No. She gave me a name, Trudy Miller, but it's probably not her real one."

"What are we going to do, Larry."

"I'm going to take you home and hope I can get you there. But if it looks as though we're going to be stopped on the way I want you to jump out and hide in the woods. Then get to your apartment some way and I'll call you there—if I'm not in a cell." I smiled at her in the dim light of the new moon. "Okay?"

"Okay, darling. But kiss me first. Then I promise I'll be real sane and sensible."

The kiss took a little while and then I backed out of the lane and headed for Danvers where Connie lived. I took the backroads and dropped her on the outskirts of town and just to show she was keeping her word, she had a wise-crack for me as I let her out after another kiss. "I'll run right home now and report my car stolen," she said and we laughed together, both of us trying to prove the courage neither of us had. Then she whispered, "Oh my darling, take care of yourself," and was gone in the darkness, leaving me with the warmest feeling I'd ever had . . .

I didn't go anywhere at first except back into the woods where I could hide in the bushes and think things out, follow it through from the beginning to where I now sat—a few jumps ahead of what was slated to be trial, conviction and the electric chair.

I forced the numb shock out of my mind and tried to view the mess objectively, asking myself exactly what Largo had done that was clever.

His job had been to safely get rid of a dangerous witness, Gloria Dane, and he'd used me as the fall guy to achieve a double result. Wipe out Gloria Dane and get me out of the way of his juke box domination.

The abstract problem was to associate the two of us—strangers—in a way that would stand up in court—before witnesses. This had taken a little time and a little money, he'd had to buy Gloria a car just like mine and get it into my possession. That had been achieved in the parking lot. Also, we had to be seen together, so the highway bit was carefully arranged—a blonde who looked enough like Gloria Dane to be mistaken for her—a ride down the road and into town.

A few parts of the devilish operation were still obscure; who had reported the theft of the car and called herself Gloria Dane? How had my personal routine and habits become familiar enough to Lar-

go for him to know I would be where he wanted me at the proper times?

And one more thing—had my release been a slipup in the routine? I thought it probably had. Largo could not have anticipated my quick release on the theft charge and had probably expected me to be still in custody when he sprang the bit about Gloria having disappeared. He'd probably wanted that to come out only after he'd forged the last damaging link—planted the belongings of the dead girl in my bungalow.

The words *dead girl* on my thought track caught my attention. Had Gloria Dane already been murdered? Was her body already lying somewhere out in the woods waiting to be found and labeled an example of my handiwork?

I didn't know, but there was little doubt in my mind that she would be found in due time. A week, two weeks—three—what difference did it make? One thing was sure; when they did find her they wouldn't be able to pinpoint the exact time of her death. This devious genius named Largo had set it up so that he could kill her any time he felt like it; a deal where he could wait and be sure of my conviction even before my alleged victim actually died.

Even sitting there in the dark with my stomach turning flip-flops, I had to admire the guy. He was good at his work. And there was

the thought in my mind to get in touch with all the boys and say, *Look, fellows, I was wrong. Sign up with this man Largo. Take whatever he'll give you and say thank you sir. Otherwise you'll wake up and find yourselves nailed to twelve crosses with iron spikes.* But that wouldn't be necessary. They'd sign now without giving him any more trouble.

I wiped the sweat off my face then and tried to find a way out of the frame. There didn't appear to be one. Locating my own car might help. It would be a step in the right direction. But it was no doubt repainted and out of the state by now.

The girl? The blonde who called herself Trudy Miller? She was the best of my few, forlorn hopes, but where could I find her? I didn't know her name or where she lived or where she worked—even if she worked at all.

But I had to do something. I couldn't sit there and wait for the cops to pick me up. They would do that soon enough and at least I wanted to be caught while trying to clear myself rather than hiding in a basement somewhere awaiting the inevitable.

And it was a pretty sad situation when my only thin hope of escaping execution lay in the name *Palermo Club* I remembered from an empty match cover on the floor of my car.

But oddly enough, it gave me

hope, which proves that hope, too, is a comparative thing, and I pulled out of my hiding place wondering just where Largo had set up the switch of cars—just where had he replaced my cream convertible with Gloria Dane's cream convertible. At the restaurant lot in Danvers? Possibly, but more likely the night before, at my bungalow when I was sleeping. Not that it mattered. It was just something to think about—something to keep my mind off chairs wired to high-voltage generators for the purpose of execution . . .

One tricky little point lay in my favor. They had to look for me, not my car. They would have no reason to associate me with Connie's gay little foreign job and the odds were that the hunt would center in the wooded, suburban areas, not in Central City itself where I headed after stopping at a lonely phone booth to check the address of the *Palermo Club*. 621 River Street, the book said; an entirely logical address.

River Street was a five-block strip across lower Central City—a vast neon blaze when I got there because this was honkytown, thrillville, the street of girlie shows, clip joints, and catch-penny museums; a gaudy belt below which lay the city's rail yards, the oil-streaked river and—at this hour—the sinister night streets of the skid-row slums.

I found a dark nook in a nearby alley where I parked the car and I decided that if I was going to get anywhere there was no point in slinking around with my hat over my face looking for back doors. So I stepped out into the carnival glare and moved down the street.

I'd been in the dark a long time with my nerves pulled as tight as violin strings and the pressure was telling a little in that suddenly none of it seemed real—the raucous color, the tinny music, the hoarse voices of the barkers—and I seemed to be walking in a dream—a big neon nightmare—with the girl I searched for nothing but a blonde phantom dancing in and out among the reds and the blues and the greens until they formed into a sign reading *Palermo Club—20 Blonde Sirens* and I walked in through the wide-open door knowing I wouldn't find her because it couldn't possibly be this easy.

And I didn't find her. But I found somebody else.

It was after my eyes had adjusted to the comparative dimness and I'd walked to the bar and ordered a scotch. Then I turned and saw him, alone, at a small table on the far side.

I paid for my drink and went over and sat down at the table facing him. I said, "Well, so this is Canada. And I suppose the blondes up there on the stage are deer and elk. How's the hunting been, Jim?"

Jim Palos seemed to be debating his reaction. Should he be embarrassed, apologetic, or belligerent? He decided against all three and smiled lazily as new facets of Largo's frame became crystal clear in my mind.

Jim said, "Hello, Larry. What are you doing down here?"

"Looking for a blonde. The name she gave me was Trudy Miller but it was probably phoney and the chances are slim that she even works here but you no doubt know more about that than I do."

He was being wary, careful, calculating. "Why should I?"

I turned the scotch glass slowly in my fingers. "If you're worried about my reaching over and knocking your teeth out, forget it. I'm not the explosive type. I'm just going to sit here like a law-abiding citizen and ask you a few questions."

"Then I won't start running. I'll just sit here too."

Jim Palos was a slim-waisted, broad-shouldered college athlete type and my trying to knock his teeth out was ridiculous. He could have unscrewed both my ears and made me eat them while I was trying to get one punch in.

I said, "It's funny, Jim, how I didn't figure you in when you were a natural. I knew that to make this frame work Largo needed someone close enough to me to get his hands on my car keys long enough to duplicate them and make a new lock for the other car.

He needed someone who knew my habits, my routine; someone who could give him a pattern for the frame."

"I didn't know anything about the frame, Larry."

"What did he offer you—my coin machine route?"

"That's what I'm getting. In return I gave him certain information he needed. But I didn't know how he was going to use it."

"Maybe you did and maybe you didn't but you certainly knew he meant me no good fortune."

"I suspected as much."

"Maybe you didn't want to know."

Jim Palos seemed to be trying to find words. He said, "Larry, this is a tough world. People have to look out for themselves. I'm sorry you had to get in the way of the steam roller. You're a real nice guy and it's a shame."

"Well, thanks a lot for your good wishes. I'll pin them on the wall of my cell."

"I really am sorry."

If he repeated that once more I was going to have to clout him even if the police got me three minutes later. I said, "You didn't say what you're doing here. Is this a Largo hangout?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm looking for Trudy Miller too."

"What's your interest. Have you figured out a way to cross Largo and me at the same time? That would really put you on top."

"A guy likes to play all the angles. But I can give you a tip. The girl's real name is Maggie Lynch. She's a singer and she used to work here but she left town."

"How did you get wind of her?"

"Oh, I hear things. I get around a lot."

Regardless of my wanting to kill him, I felt he was telling me the truth about the blonde. And, screwy as it sounded, I believed his bit about wishing me no harm when he said, "You ought to get out of here. Hide somewhere. The cops have got the dragnet out for you."

I said, "I think I've got you figured, Jim. You're the kind of a thief who won't kill the guy you heist unless it's absolutely necessary."

This got through to him. He lowered his head and I detected embarrassment. "Why don't you get out of here and hide somewhere?" he asked.

I had to get away quick or slug him. "Okay, rat. And I'll do one more thing for you."

"What's that?"

"I'll try and get you a pass to my execution. You'll enjoy it," and I got up and walked out.

Back into the street; back into the neon nightmare but without even the blonde phantom now. Just the nightmare of waiting for a cop to tap me on the shoulder. And as I walked I wondered why I was here on River Street in the first

place. I should have known it wouldn't work.

The thing to do was give myself up and get it over with. The more I thought about it the more sense it made. I wasn't built for big drama; no good at all at fleeing injustice, getting out of the country wearing a false beard and a changed name. Whatever was coming, I had to face it and there was no time like the resent.

I went into a phone booth and called Connie.

Her hello came back to me in a small hushed voice and I said, "Hon, I'm afraid I've had it. The blonde isn't available. Largo would have seen to that. I should have had more sense than to hunt and so I'm giving it up and turning myself in."

"Larry. Please!"

"Please what, baby? They'll pick me up any minute regardless. The dragnet's out as we criminals put it."

"But, darling. There's one more thing. I just thought of it. Wouldn't it help your case if that woman—that Gertrude Armitage—that witness—realized the girl you were riding with wasn't Gloria Dane?"

"I suppose it might, but she swore otherwise."

"But she might change her mind if I talked to her."

"Now listen here Connie! I told you to stay out of this. The woman believes her own story and no-body can change her."

"I'm going to try."

"You're not. You're going to stay clear."

"I'm going over there. You come here and wait for me. I'll leave the key under—"

"Connie! You stay there until I come. If you won't have it any other way, I'll go and see the Armitage woman, okay?"

"Not you. She's probably afraid of you. She'd call the police."

"But I don't want you—"

"I'm going, Larry."

"All right—all right. We'll go together. You wait there for me."

She paused. "Be careful. Be very careful."

I hung up and went back to the car . . .

Four blocks later, I was sure they had me; when a car behind mine seemed over-intent on not getting lost in the traffic shuffle.

I cut sharply off the boulevard into a side street and when the headlights followed me up an alley and back on the main thoroughfare, I was sure.

But why didn't they cut me off and pick me up? Instead, they seemed satisfied to act as dubious escort and I thought of the old one about the police letting the criminal lead them to his confederates; except there weren't any confederates and the police ought to have had sense enough to know it.

This did present a problem. Connie. I didn't want them following

me to her place and possibly picking us up together and with this necessity looming, I came up with an invention; my warehouse. There, evading them was simple. I drove in the front through the warehouse door, moved a few machines away from the back exit I never used and drove out again through the alley.

This seemed to outwit them and I headed for Connie's place. But then my troubles really started when I got no answer from her bell and found the door key buried in a potted palm where she'd left it for me a couple times before.

She'd gone to see the Armitage woman on her own.

As I gunned off in that direction, I had one forlorn hope of cutting her off—keeping her out of this mess. That hope lay in the fact that she had no car and had walked or called a cab. In either case, I might be ahead of her. It was a long walk and sometimes cabs were a little late in answering suburban calls.

When I got to the Armitage house out on the highway, I heaved caution out the window and parked right in front of the place. It was a big, ugly house set in the middle of a square lawn with a garage in the back, and there didn't appear to be any activity. Lights were on inside but there was no cab in sight and the whole place had a sleepy air about it.

Perhaps I was in time . . .

Then, as I crossed the walk and opened the gate, I saw a slow-moving car swing around the bend in the highway and knew what had happened; my escort had solved the riddle of my rear warehouse door and had picked up my trail.

A touch of panic hit me, generated, probably by a hope that Gertrude Armitage just might help me. I hadn't really thought about her until Connie brought up the possibility but now I wanted desperately to talk to her before I was picked up. So I ran.

Around the house and out toward the shadowy shelter of the garage. Of course I wouldn't be hiding from anyone with the car parked at the curb but I ran anyhow and got behind the garage as the driver of the tail car rolled slowly on past and down the highway.

I felt a surge of relief. Whatever their plan, it obviously did not include picking me up yet. For this courtesy I was grateful. As the tail light vanished I took out a cigarette, snapped my lighter behind the shelter of my hand and raised the flame to head level.

Then I stood there frozen, with the flame holding steady in the curve of my palm.

It was a flash of color that did it; a flash of cream revealed by my lighter-flame through a tear in the heavy curtain over the garage window against which I stood.

And I knew instantly, in a kind of bursting revelation, that my car was in there. They hadn't had time to get rid of it or have it painted and it was sitting inside that garage waiting to be worked over.

Revelations are strange things. Sometimes they pour in on a person as a result of god's impatience with stupidity. At any rate, I knew now what I should have realized in the beginning; that Largo would not leave his witness to chance. He would not depend on a casual bystander seeing the blonde in the car with me. Therefore, his witness, Gertrude Armitage, had been primed for her role in the frame long before I picked alias Trudy Miller up on the highway.

So I wasn't at all surprised when I felt a hard point pressed against my back and heard the female voice: "You're a trespasser. I could shoot you. So you just walk right on into the house and tread mighty light, mister—mighty light."

And as I walked lightly toward the house it occurred to me that maybe I rated the electric chair; maybe it was a good idea to kill off the stupid so the smart could have the world to themselves. Just save a few for suckers and patsies.

Bitterness at being a step behind Largo all the way . . .

It was Gertrude Armitage, all right; the prim hostile face; the gray hair pulled into a tight bun on the top of her head. Only a shot-

gun had been added and she handled it like a third arm.

This was what I saw in the kitchen where I turned and faced her and wondered at the hatred in her eyes. Had I injured her?

"Why can't you let him alone?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why can't you and all the rest of them let Gus Largo alone. Always dogging him, getting in his way. Not letting him live his life."

"Lady. It's my life I'm worried about. I—"

"Gus is a good man. When my Sam got killed, did any of you do anything for me?"

"I'm sorry I wasn't acquainted with Sam."

"But Gus did. He bought me this house. Took care of me. Gave me a chance to live out my old age in peace. And all you people sneaking around trying to take away what he's got. If I had my way I'd kill all of you."

I actually thought she intended to start with me as she fingered the trigger of the shotgun and I was relieved when she said, "But I'll call Gus and see what he wants to do. He'll probably kill you because you're wanted by the police and you're a trespasser but I'll call him."

She moved to a wall phone, let the receiver drop and hang loose as she dialed. After she picked it up and held it to her ear, she said, "Your girl-friends in there. I took care of her good and proper."

She almost had to kill me then as I took two steps in her direction. She stopped me by saying, "I got her tied to a chair. I'll ask Gus about her too."

"May I see her?"

"Stand where you are."

I stood there while she talked to Gus Largo, the gist of it being that she'd done fine and to hold everything, he'd be right over. Then we went into the living room.

Connie was sitting in a homey, old-fashioned chair; the kind you'd expect to find in any comfortable middle-class home; with her ankles tied to either leg and her wrists taped to each other.

She smiled at me and said, "I'm sorry, Darling. I didn't help any."

I looked at Gertrude Armitage. "She won't hurt you. Can't you at least undo her wrists?"

"We'll wait."

Gertrude Armitage had evidently had her say. From this point on she held the shotgun on me and stood silent. And fifteen minutes later Gus Largo rolled in.

He was a big man and *roll* was the word. He looked Connie and me over with thoughtful regard, acknowledging Gertrude Armitage's presence only when she said, "You came alone?"

He glanced at her sharply. "Of course. You know I never bring anyone here."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"We can kill Bowman. That will

work out all right. With what they'll find in the woods it will be logical—him coming here to get rid of a witness."

This didn't shock Armitage in the least. Largo could have been talking about a chicken for supper. "Do you want me to do it?"

"I'd appreciate it."

Connie sat speechless; stunned at cold-bloodedness she'd not thought possible in human beings. Largo turned his bland eyes on her. "The girl is different. She complicates things a little."

"You'll have to get rid of the car before we call the police."

"I'll drive it down the road and have someone pick it up there. We were too slow about that. It shouldn't have been brought here."

"You had to get it out of sight."

It was easy to see that Largo could do no wrong so far as Gertrude Armitage was concerned. She wouldn't even let him criticize himself.

I said, "You can let this girl go. I swear she won't say a word. It will be just as though she hadn't come."

Largo looked at me. "That's pitiful."

He was right, but I had to say something. "What are you going to do with her?"

As he pondered I gauged the distance to Gertrude Armitage's shotgun. Could I get it? Probably not but I was going to make a try because there was nothing to lose. At the worst I would make them kill

me right here and get blood on the rug. Blood on the rug has tripped killers up before and I thought it might work again.

"I know what we could do with her," Gertrude Armitage said.

We never found out what she had in mind, though, because the doorbell rang at that moment. Largo blinked. "Were you expecting anyone?"

"No."

"I'll hold the gun. You answer it."

The woman handed him the weapon and left the room. A few moments later she came back, took the gun from him and resumed her former position and Largo was staring at the man who had followed her in. It was Jim Palos.

"What are you doing here?" Largo asked.

"Gambling," Jim said. "I'm betting this is the place I've been hunting for—where you keep the records." And there was a gun in his hand as he finished. "FBI, Largo. This is it. I'm making my play."

I knew instantly that Gertrude Armitage was going to blow him in two with the shotgun if she could; that she didn't care about herself. If he didn't get her first, he was dead and so I hit her with a tackle as the gun barrel moved.

She would have gotten him too because no matter how well-trained he was Jim Palos would have waited too long before killing a woman.

As it was we went over in a pile and the shotgun blasted out like seventeen cannon. That didn't quite end it though because I had a fighting she-tiger on my hands. She was on me like the seven furies and I got the worst of it until I threw politeness to the winds and knocked her cold with a right to the jaw.

Largo stood frozen during the whole interlude. You could tell from looking at him that he still didn't believe things could have gone so miserably wrong. That he'd misjudged a man and let an FBI agent part-way into his organization.

Then he sat down on the floor and began to cry and that was the way it finished . . .

Later Jim Palos spoke gravely of the perils involved. "They could have shot you and gotten away with it, Larry. They'd have probably taken the girl out of the country where she would never have been heard of again. They could have gotten away with that and the other too, sent you to the chair, if things had tipped that way, because I didn't know enough about Largo's operations to do you any good in court."

"You fooled me, all right."

"I had to work my way in somehow and as a disgruntled employee of Largo's rival I was able to do business with him. But he was

cagey. He didn't let me in too far, and we might never have found what we had to have if you and the girl hadn't charged in on the Armitage woman."

It was Connie's idea."

Palos grinned. "Marry her. That girl's got a brain."

I did. Two months later, during Largo's trial. I'd like to end this nicely and say he hadn't done away with Gloria Dane, but I can't. He killed her, out in woods, after the frame had put the police on my trail. Killed her in a way I don't like to think about; one that would have sent me to the chair and labeled me a monster.

As it was, Largo never stood trial for income tax evasion. He was tried for murder and was electrocuted one year and seventeen days after the night the shotgun blew a hole in Gertrude Armitage's ceiling. The Armitage woman got twenty years but one thing that had to be said for Largo—he took the rap himself and none of his associates went with him even though we knew he'd had help.

As for me, I'll always think of the case in terms of the blonde Trudy Miller. The girl in my neon nightmare, and that was where she stayed. The prosecution never located her and I never saw her again.

Not that I wanted to. Connie's red hair in a black hardtop does me just fine.

The young man smiled. His lips curled back and the two eye teeth, abnormally long, glittered like fangs. Paoli wiped at the slippery sheen of perspiration on his forehead. "Yes," he said. "I got the message."

BY JAMES HOLDING

VERGIL PAOLI was the owner of The Gala Club. He sent word down that he wanted to see his singer, Olga Castle, as soon as she finished her ten o'clock show.

When she came into his office, a tall, shapely brunette with high cheekbones and a carefully cultivated air of youth, Paoli was sitting behind his desk, fretfully tapping his fingers on an open newspaper before him.

He was not only Olga's employer. He said to her, "Who's the tall thin guy with the crewcut you been drinking with between shows the last coupla nights?"

"From Jerksville," she said. "A nothing guy. But he has a clever way of talking."

"Know his name?"

"Sandy Thomas," Olga said.

"Local?"

"I guess."

Paoli frowned. "Has he tried any passes?"

She laughed. "A few, Vergil. Minor ones. But what do you expect? They always try."

"What's he talk to you about?"

"He says he likes to hear me sing."

"A music critic, yet," Paoli said heavily. "Has he mentioned Chicago?"

"Chicago? Let's see. Sure, several times. Why not? It's a big city and most everybody's been there."

"No cracks, baby. Just answer me. Do you think he could come from Chicago?"

She shrugged, a little crestfallen. "I'm no detective. He could, I suppose."

"These passes. What was the offer?"

"No offer. I simply told him I'm private property. Yours, darling. And no trespassing."

"What'd he say to that?"

She looked at him curiously. A thin slick of perspiration made his forehead shiny; she thought his eyes looked worried. She said, "He made the usual crack . . . that you might not be around forever. And maybe I better get out some more lines."

Paoli said nothing. He took out a handkerchief of fine Irish linen and wiped at his brow.

Olga went over and kissed him on his bald spot. "What is it with you, Vergil? You're not jealous, are you?" She liked the idea.

"Not jealous, no. But all the same, this Thomas has got me a little bugged, baby. You're sure his name's Thomas?" He sounded as though he wanted reassurance.

"That's what he told me. What is this, darling?"

"Maybe I'm nuts," Paoli said, "but I got a feeling the guy's from Chicago and his name ain't Thomas."

She began to feel faintly uneasy, too. "Who is he, then?"

Paoli brooded silently for a moment. "He said I might not be around forever, right?"

"Sure. But that's just a standard approach, Vergil. You know that."

"Any name like Dubrowski ever come up in his talk?"

She shook her head.

"Or anybody with the nickname of Eyetooth?"

"Of course not. What a silly name!" Olga started to laugh, a pleasing cascade of sound. Then she sobered abruptly. "Eyetooth?"

"Yeah."

Her dark eyes were solicitous. They asked him a silent question. He answered it obliquely. "Look, Olga," he said. He tapped a small item in the newspaper under his hand. She read it over his shoulder, standing tall and graceful behind him at the desk.

Under the heading "Syndicate Killer Hunted" it merely reported the murder in a distant city of an Italian suspected of criminal connections. Police were sure, the paper said, that this was another Crime Syndicate murder, committed by a legendary hoodlum known as Eyetooth Dubrowski, although he also utilized a score of other aliases. Dubrowski was thought to have served as Syndicate executioner on several prior occasions. What had led to the Italian's death, the newspaper speculated? Insubordination to Syndicate orders? Muscling in on a neighboring vice czar's territory? Nobody, the article ended, could be sure, except, perhaps, the tall, thin, crewcut Dubrowski for whom the police of the distant city were diligently searching. It was suggested that Dubrowski's unusually long eyeteeth might serve as an aid to identifica-

tion. His arrest was expected momentarily.

When she finished reading, Olga went around the desk and dropped into a chair. She stared at Paoli wide-eyed. "Is *that* who Thomas is?"

He nodded somberly. "Looks that way. He's got long eyeteeth. Ain't that why you stopped laughing a minute ago when I mentioned the nickname?"

"I—I—suppose so," Olga stammered, torn between telling him the truth and a desire to soften its impact. "I didn't really notice them too much, darling."

"I did. When he was talking to you at the bar before the ten o'clock show tonight, I was watching you through there." He motioned toward a circular glass peephole in the office wall that overlooked the nightclub below. "When he smiled at you, and showed those teeth, that's when I remembered this thing in yesterday's paper." He lapsed into silence, gnawing gloomily at a fingernail.

"He told me he was a kind of a newspaper man," Olga said eagerly. "And anyway, why do you need to worry? You haven't stepped out of line, have you?"

Paoli seemed to make up his mind. "Go back downstairs," he said. "And if he's still around, ask him to come up here and see me. Ask him real nice, baby."

Incredulously, she said, "You're *sending* for him? If he's really Du-

browski, you're asking for trouble, Vergil." She gave him a long look. "Aren't you?"

"Send him up," Paoli said.

When she had gone, he took an unsigned telegram from his desk drawer and read it through again. The message, handed in at Chicago that afternoon, was addressed to him at The Club Gala and read:

NEIGHBOR REPORTS YOUR EN-
CROACHMENT OVER PROPERTY
LINE. ADVISE PROMPT, REPEAT,
PROMPT SETTLEMENT BEFORE LAW-
SUIT BECOMES NECESSARY.

Paoli was sweating heavily now. His hand, holding the telegram, trembled a little. When the knock came on his office door a few minutes later, he went over and opened it himself.

Thomas seemed even taller and more gangling close-up than at a distance. He was young. He had light blue, glacially-cold eyes that showed nothing of his thoughts whatever. His right hand was in the side pocket of his jacket.

At Paoli's invitation, he took a seat. "I'm Thomas," he said. "You're Paoli, I guess? Olga said you'd like to talk to me about something."

Paoli hid his nervousness well. He offered Thomas a cigar which was declined. A Scotch-on-the-rocks, mixed by Paoli at a tiny bar in a corner of the office, met with a kinder reception. Thomas sipped at it impassively and waited.

Paoli could see no virtue in beating about the bush. He said, "You ain't Thomas. You're Dubrowski. Am I right?"

Thomas raised his eyebrows but his eyes didn't change expression. "Wrong," he said. "I'm Thomas while I'm in Demmlertown. Sandy Thomas."

"Let's not kid around," Paoli said. "You're from Chicago, Dubrowski. From the Brotherhood."

"Call me Thomas," the other said, a hint of iron in his voice. "I want you to know that I'm a reporter on the Demmlertown" . . . he stretched his neck to read the bannerhead on the newspaper on Paoli's desk . . . "the Demmlertown Herald. That's my paper, right there. I'm a legitimate local citizen, Vergil."

Paoli winced. Nobody called him by his fancy name but Olga. Its use by this cold-eyed killer set his teeth on edge. He said, "I suppose you got to have a cover name, any town you're in. A real name to hide behind. But you're still Dubrowski."

"No. I keep telling you I'm not." Thomas seemed amused. "Why don't you call up the paper and ask them?"

Paoli shrugged at this transparent evasion.

"I mean it," Thomas said. "Go ahead. Call them, just for kicks. It will show you how I work."

Paoli picked up the telephone on his desk and asked the Club's switchboard girl to get him the

Demmlertown Herald. Thomas could hear the tinny voice of the newspaper operator when she answered.

Paoli said into the phone, "You got a reporter on the Herald named Sandy Thomas?"

"Certainly we have," said the operator promptly. "Who is this calling? Do you wish to be connected?"

"No." Paoli's eyes switched to Thomas' face. "This is the Credit Bureau calling. What does Thomas look like?" He thought he might as well press it; maybe he could lean on Dubrowski a little if the description didn't fit.

"Some Credit Bureau!" the girl said. "Do you know it's eleven o'clock at night, Mister? Why don't you quit for the day? If you really want to know, Thomas is a doll! His credit's good with me, any time!" She snickered.

"Wait," said Paoli, trying again. "Is Thomas there at the paper right now?"

"Of course. I *asked* if you wanted to be connected, Mister . . ."

"Thanks." Paoli hung up. "Twins you are," he said to Thomas with a faint feeling of triumph.

"She doesn't always know when we're out on a story," Thomas said, unmoved. His lips curved in a humorless smile. "I like to be thorough," he said. "I don't take any chances. I've got all the bases covered before I go to work on any job like this."

"Like this?"

"That's what I said."

Paoli poured himself a shot of Old Forester at his bar. He tossed it down like water. He returned to his desk and sat down, accompanied by a persistent sense of danger from the tall man in the chair. He thought perhaps a little show of guts might help him with Dubrowski. He said, "You ought to be more careful, then, where you carry your heater. It shows." The hand he pointed had a slight tremor. "There."

Thomas dropped his eyes to the side pocket of his jacket. He had taken his hand out of it long since. But even in the chair, it was obvious that something heavy in the pocket was dragging the cloth of his coat into deep wrinkles.

"Nuts," said Thomas shortly. He seemed nettled. "That's not my gun."

"You think I was born yesterday? You don't need to show me. It's a gun."

"Have it your way," said Thomas. For the first time since the interview began, he smiled widely. The lift of his lip exposed his long eyeteeth, pointed and projecting three eighths of an inch below his other uppers.

The sight of the menacing teeth thus deliberately exposed, made Paoli feel cold. And that was funny, too, he thought, because he was still sweating.

Thomas said slowly, "I don't

smile or laugh very much, Vergil. Generally I keep my mouth closed." His eyes, as hard as chips of blue-white diamonds, drilled into Paoli's. After a moment he added, "Matter of fact, the kind of work I do, a fellow doesn't feel too much like laughing."

Paoli nodded. He felt sick. He passed the telegraph form across the desk to Thomas. "You know about this, don't you?"

Thomas read the wire. Slowly he nodded. "Yes," he said, "I know about that."

"So. Then why the hell not admit who you are in the first place?" Paoli blew out a breath of mingled relief and impatience. "The boys in Chicago are teed off with me for moving in on Cal Schirmer over in Riverton, ain't that it?"

Thomas said nothing.

"That dumb Prussian don't know which end is up, Dubrowski! His territory could produce three times what it does!" Paoli tried to make the note of bluster in his voice sound like toughness and confidence. It was difficult. "Tell them that in Chicago, will you? Do they want to see it all slip through their fingers, for God's sake, just because Schirmer ain't got the brains of a twelve-year-old moron?" He appealed to Thomas as one intelligent man to another.

Thomas responded in a neutral voice. "What is it of Cal's that's sticking to your fingers, Paoli? Dope? Prostitution? What? Cal

didn't say. He just said you were trying to move in and take over."

"Only Horse," Paoli said, "so far. Honest, Dubrowski, it's nothing to get hot about. Just enough to show that if I had both territories, if the boys would throw Demmlertown and Riverton into one package for me, I'd triple their take in six months! Tell them that, right?"

Thomas was noncommittal. "You made a mistake, Paoli. Usually we allow our guys only one. Why didn't you mention this to Chicago yourself, before you moved in on Cal? That's what we want to know. You got your own ideas about the percentage? Maybe you'd like to bust loose from Chicago and try to make it on your own?"

"No, Dubrowski, no!" Paoli's Latin temperament showed through the cracks in his self-control. "I ain't stupid. I had no such an idea. I swear it to you! I figured I could *show* you how well I could handle both territories, before I bothered Chicago about Schirmer. You believe that, don't you?"

"No, frankly, I don't."

"You got to! It's the truth." Paoli wiped his forehead with his crumpled handkerchief. "Why should I set up against you? I'm not a goddam fool. I know where the protection is. And the organization. And the . . ." he hesitated and looked at Thomas's pocket . . . "the firepower."

"Glad you do, Vergil."

"I do, all right. I ain't a complete dope, Dubrowski."

"You keep saying."

"It's the God's truth." Paoli was running out of conversation. He wanted to get himself another drink but he was afraid it would indicate his nervousness. He sat still behind his desk.

As casually as though commenting on the weather, Thomas said, "The way I hear it, you aren't breaking any records with your Demmlertown set-up."

"I ain't?" Paoli was suddenly indignant. His fear burned away in the fire of injured pride. He defended himself with spirit. "Tell me any other territory the size of mine that produces as good! You can't . . . because there ain't any! Fourteen pushers I got here, for H alone! And the best, Dubrowski. The best! With solid connections in the high school bunch!"

"Fourteen?" Thomas said, surprised. "That isn't the way I heard it. Seven was nearer what I heard."

"You heard wrong, then. Didn't you look up the records on my operation? Fourteen!" Paoli insisted. "Count them!" He reeled off a list of names that totalled thirteen.

"That's only thirteen," Thomas said, counting on his fingers.

Paoli repeated the list and remembered the fourteenth name.

"Yeah. That's fourteen, all right." Thomas was approving.

"You see? I ain't conning you, Dubrowski. I got this town like

this, in the palm of my hand!" He held out his hand to demonstrate. "And I could have Riverton the same way, if the boys would give Schirmer a push."

Thomas said nothing.

"Okay?" Paoli asked, his spirits lifting as he realized that Thomas was listening to him seriously. The interview was going much better now, he thought. "Will you tell the boys in Chicago, Dubrowski? And say I'm sorry I moved in on Cal without leaving them know. It'll never happen again, that's for god-dam sure. They'll understand if you tell it to them the way I explained it to you. Okay?"

Thomas got up. He turned toward the door, to Paoli's tremendous relief. "Okay," he said.

"Good," Paoli said. "That's a boy, Dubrowski. Have another snort before you go, why not? It's twenty-year-old Scotch."

"No thanks," Thomas said. He opened the door. "Give my love to Olga."

"I'll do that," Paoli said genially. "I'll do that."

Forty minutes later, Thomas walked into the City Room of the Demmlertown Herald and over to Joe Bailey's desk. Joe was the City Editor. He wore the expression of exasperated gloom typical of his kind. He looked at Thomas. "Well?" he asked.

"The works," Thomas said and made a grimace of distaste. "The

whole stinking mess, right from the horse's mouth!"

"No kidding!" Bailey brightened and put down his pencil.

"No kidding. He's our guy, just as you guessed. Mr. Vergil Paoli. The Syndicate's top dog in Demmlertown. By his own admission, he's got us right in the palm of his hand. Give him another couple of months and he'll have Riverton there, too. Dope, prostitution, everything." Thomas rubbed a hand over his crewcut. He leaned over Bailey's desk. "Joe, I've got *names*, even! Heroin pushers here in Demmlertown. It's enough to make you puke."

"How did you get it out of him?" Bailey asked interestedly. "Was it my first published fairy story that did the trick? The piece about the gang killing by a certain Eyetooth Dubrowski?"

"That set it up," Thomas replied. "But beautifully. Your phony item was right there on his desk when I went in. All I had to do was show my teeth."

Bailey grinned. "Tessie, on the switchboard, said somebody called asking about you. She told them you were here in your office."

"I heard her. She was great. I made the play for Olga Castle, Joe. And gave out with the sinister remarks about Paoli to her. And they didn't hurt us any, for I'm sure she told him. But what really started him running off at the mouth was the telegram you had

Bud send him from Chicago. He made me read it. I could hardly keep from breaking up!" Thomas looked at his chief with admiration. "How did you know about Schirmer?" he asked. "Enough to needle Paoli with the disgruntled neighbor bit in the wire?"

"Just an educated guess. You work on a paper for twenty years and you learn a lot of little things that finally point in a certain direction." Bailey looked at the big

clock on the wall. "It's getting late," he said. "You say you got the names of some pushers?"

"Sure. I've got it all right here, Joe." Thomas took the newest miracle of miniaturization from his jacket pocket—a tape recorder no more than four inches square and an inch thick. He grinned at his City Editor. "Paoli thought it was a gun."

Bailey grinned back. "More like dynamite," he said.



LUCKY LUCY?



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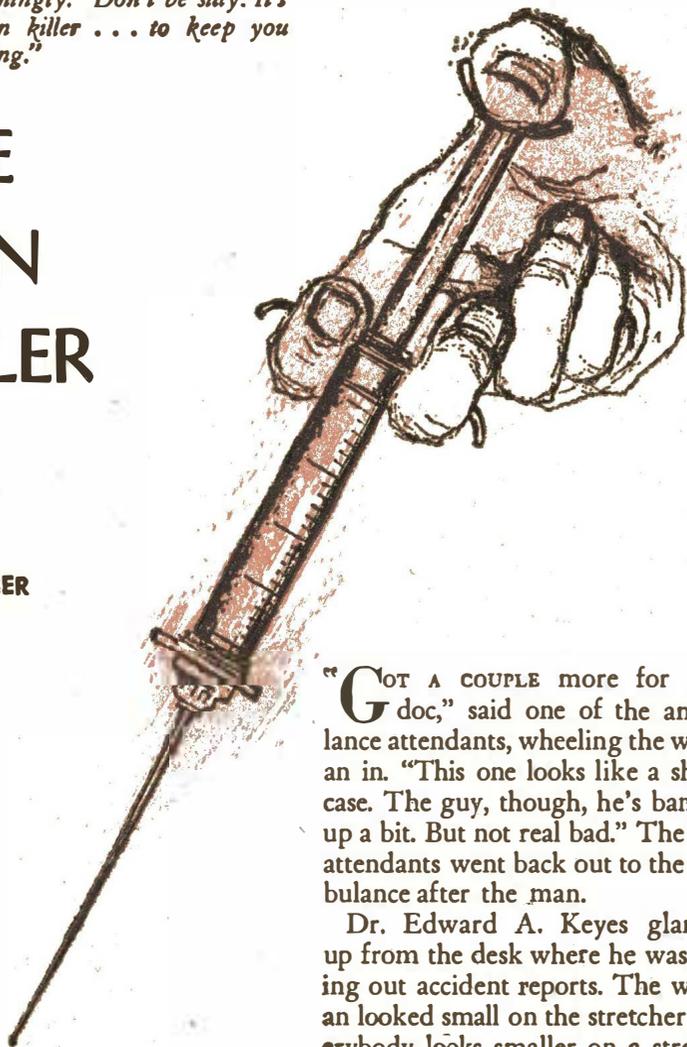


AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

The man was screaming now and struggling violently, his handsome face distorted with fear. The doctor pressed down on the plunger and smiled soothingly. "Don't be silly. It's only a pain killer . . . to keep you from hurting."

THE PAIN KILLER

BY
CHARLES
CARPENTIER



"**G**OT A COUPLE more for you, doc," said one of the ambulance attendants, wheeling the woman in. "This one looks like a shock case. The guy, though, he's banged up a bit. But not real bad." The two attendants went back out to the ambulance after the man.

Dr. Edward A. Keyes glanced up from the desk where he was filling out accident reports. The woman looked small on the stretcher: everybody looks smaller on a stretcher, he thought.

She had nice hair. That was all he

could see of her. He always noticed women's hair; it was the first thing he noticed about them. Then he thought what he always thought when they brought someone in: Why do people insist on getting out on the highway and messing themselves up?—so I can make a living, I suppose.

He went to the woman, turning her head toward him. She had such nice hair and he was hoping her face wasn't marked up.

"Doc."

He just stood there staring at her face.

"Hey, doc," the attendant repeated impatiently. "Where do you want this guy?"

Dr. Keyes pointed to one of the five beds along the wall; that was all the Briscoe Emergency Center had—five beds. "Put him over there," he said. "Put her down at the other end."

They lifted the man onto one of the beds. "Same old story every night," the talkative attendant said. It was ritual with him—he said it every time they brought someone in. "They plaster themselves all over the highway and we scrape 'em up."

"They were together, were they?" the doctor asked. "In the same car?"

"Yeah. This guy must have been dreaming. Either that or putting the grab on his wife there. Can't say as I blame him, though. Real good-looking dame. Anyway, they were coming down from Barnsdahl

Crossing—what folks up there call Motel Row. You know the place."

The doctor nodded.

"Ran off the road and smack into a telegraph pole. Take 'em a week to put that car back together."

They lifted the woman off the stretcher and onto the bed at the far end of the room. "The cops said they'll be in after your report soon as they get the car pulled off the pole."

The attendants wheeled the empty stretchers back to the door. "They gonna be okay, you think, doc?"

"Huh?" Dr. Keyes had to force his attention to keep listening to the ambulance man. "Yes, I guess so. It's a little early to tell."

"Sure hope so," the attendant said. "Sure is too bad. Such a nice looking dame." He pushed his stretcher through the door. "Well, back to wait for more carnage."

After they had gone, Dr. Keyes went over to look at the man. He was out cold, but the doctor could tell he'd be coming around soon. He was dark and he had a face that women would think of as romantic.

The doctor made his usual quick preliminary check for injuries. Several ribs were broken—painful, but not serious. The man had evidently been thrown hard against the steering wheel. There was a dark, spreading bruise on his forehead where he'd hit the windshield. That accounted for unconsciousness. Of course, it was impossible to tell

about internal injuries, but the doctor wasn't worried about that right now.

From the inside pocket of the man's coat, the doctor pulled out a wallet. He dug around in the wallet until he found a driver's license. He wrote the man's name on a tag and hung it on the foot of the bed. Under the name he wrote, SUSTAINING INTERNAL INJURIES. CONDITION—FATAL.

As he moved away to attend to the woman, the man moaned softly.

Taking a medical bag with him, Dr. Keyes checked the woman over quickly. Except for unconsciousness and general shock, she had nothing more serious than a few minor contusions.

The doctor took a hypodermic needle from the bag and injected her with a pain-killing sedative. He waited a moment for the sedative to take effect. Then with a small, sharp scalpel, in imitation of the careless artistry of accidental occurrence, he cut a long scar down one side of her face. Not quite such a good-looking dame now, he thought, remembering the words of the ambulance attendant. He wiped the blood expertly from her face, mopping gently to stem the flow.

Across the room, the man was moaning loudly now, returning to consciousness.

Dr. Keyes went to his desk and made out a bed tag for the woman. He squirted the residue of the sedative from the hypodermic needle

into the wastebasket. He didn't bother to sterilize the needle.

The man was saying, "Oh God, what happened? It hurts . . . it hurts so. What happened?" He tried to sit up.

The doctor hurried to him, pushing him back down on the bed. "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right now."

"It hurts . . . through here," the man groaned, drawing his hand carefully across his ribs. "My God, it hurts. What happened? I remember the car . . . the car, oh my God, where's Jean? . . . Jean—"

"She's all right," the doctor said with calming reassurance. "Hardly hurt at all. She's fine, just fine." He drew the plunger back on the hypodermic needle. "This'll take the pain away. Make you feel a lot better." He pushed the man's coat sleeve up.

At the sight of the needle, the man struggled up. "What's that? What's in there?" he demanded clearly and sharply.

Dr. Keyes pressed down on his shoulder. "This will stop the pain. It'll keep it from hurting so much."

"There's nothing in there!" the man shouted, fighting to sit up. "There's nothing . . . that's air!"

The doctor drove the needle with deadly accuracy into the man's arm and rammed the plunger down. "Don't be silly," he said soothingly. "It's only a pain killer. To keep you from hurting."

The man was screaming now

and struggling violently, his romantically handsome face distorted with pain and fear. The doctor threw a strap across the bed over him and cinched it down tightly.

"You're killing me—you're trying to kill me!" he screamed. "I saw it, I saw it—nothing in there . . . nothing but air! Why? . . . why? . . . why are you trying to kill me. Please—why . . . ?"

His struggling subsided. And with it, his screaming. Slowly his body relaxed, his pleading voice

sank through a whisper into silence.

The doctor stood impassively over him until he was completely still—in the stillness of death.

Dr. Keyes went back to his desk and put the hypodermic needle underneath all the other equipment in the bottom of his medical bag. He took the woman's tag and hung it on the foot of her bed.

FACIAL LACERATION AND SHOCK, it read. INJURIES SUPERFICIAL. *NAME:* Mrs. Edward A. Keyes.



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