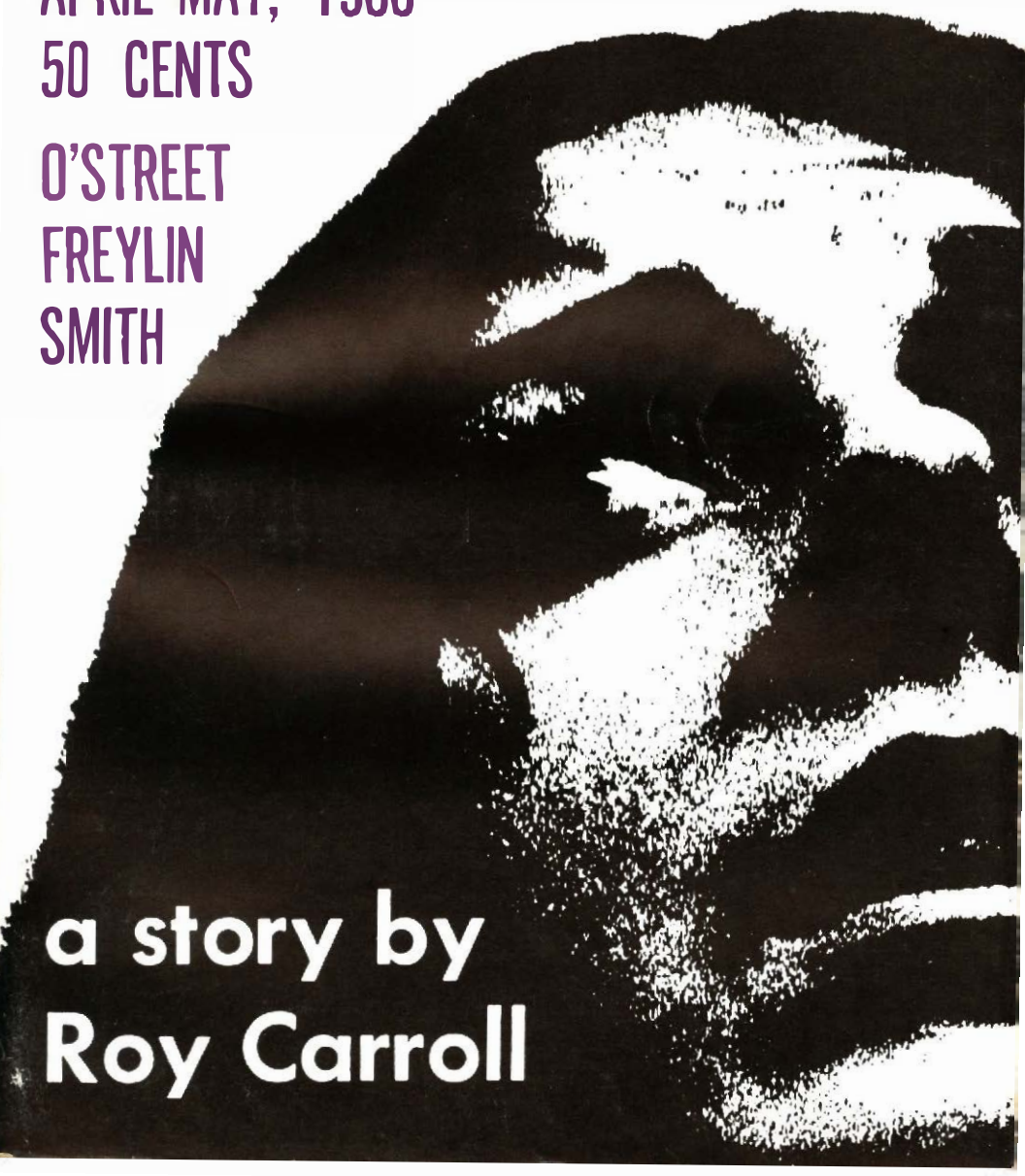
MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

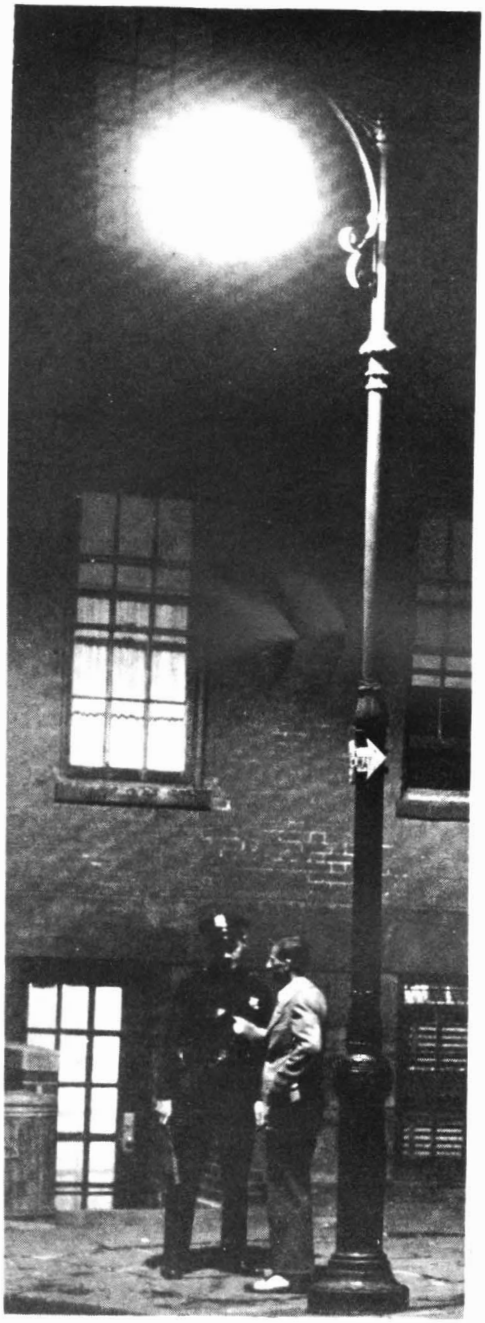
APRIL-MAY, 1966

50 CENTS

O'STREET
FREYLIN
SMITH



a story by
Roy Carroll



the word is out .....

GET MAN— HUNT

160 pages of MAYHEM MISCHIEF MURDER MALICE

see back cover

VOL 14, NO. 2 **MANHUNT** APRIL-MAY, 1966

CONTENTS

MANHUNT CLASSIC

NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*

GERALD ADAMS, *Art Director* JOHN UNDERWOOD, *Editor*

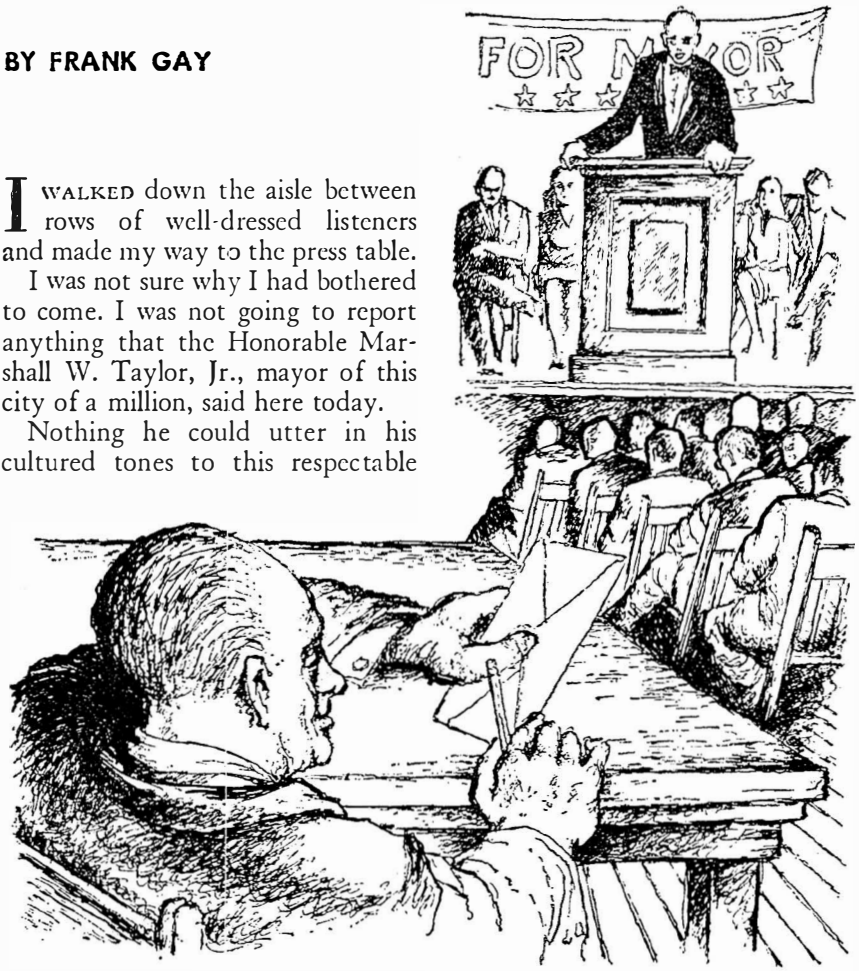
MICHAEL SHAPIRO, *Advertising Director* B. WADSWORTH, *Business Manager*

MANHUNT VOLUME 14 Number 2, April-May, 1966. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions, $3.00 for 6 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $4.00 (in U.S. Funds) for 6 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue New York, N. Y. 10017. Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at New York, N. Y., and at additional mailing offices. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1965 by Flying Eagle Publications Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

Scandal anyone?

He had a pocketful of dynamite and he knew just where the blast would do the most good.

BY FRANK GAY



I WALKED down the aisle between rows of well-dressed listeners and made my way to the press table.

I was not sure why I had bothered to come. I was not going to report anything that the Honorable Marshall W. Taylor, Jr., mayor of this city of a million, said here today.

Nothing he could utter in his cultured tones to this respectable

audience in the Parish Hall of this infinitly respectable church could match the story about him which I had in my pocket.

He might make better copy if he turned to Gino Rinauldi, his opponent beside him on the platform, drew a pistol and shot the guy point blank. But short of that, he was wasting his time.

I suppose I came because I wanted one last look at the faces of these people before I dropped my bomb.

I wanted to see collected together in one place at one time all the principals of the campaign, and I wanted to see them in the presence of this genteel, well-upholstered audience — so certain in its knowledge of right and wrong and so unshakable in its choice of a candidate.

Only from a seat in the midst of a gathering like this could I anticipate the impact when my story blew everything to pieces.

The meeting marked the start of the final week of the campaign and was billed as a great debate under the auspices of the Citizens Housing Association. At the moment of my entry the Mayor was taking his turn at the microphone. He was tall and distinguished, more or less blonde, and very youthful for a man seeking his second four-year term to the city's highest elective office.

He was an effective speaker. He was talking now about taxes and the difficulties of financing the operations of a big city.

I had heard this one a dozen times before, and I turned my ears off and looked about me. Joe Kelly, one of the television reporters at the press table, was reciting the Mayor's speech from memory, staying about one sentence ahead of His Honor and convulsing the cameraman to his right.

Gino Rinauldi listened to the Mayor's words with a heavy show of doubt. He was a round, flabby, balding little man who moved and spoke like a human whirlwind. He had ten years on the Mayor, displayed none of Taylor's urbanity, and was blunt, direct and crude, but he could generate more excitement and inspiration in five minutes than the Mayor had created in four years in City Hall.

I was drawn to this little guy, but unlike my paper, the *Banner*, I didn't claim he could save the world.

The Mayor's wife, Martha, prominently seated in the first row, was a large blonde somewhat given to fat. She had seemed to withdraw and even fade during the Mayor's time in office, and she was approaching the shape of the middle class society matron faster than her years required.

She was particularly unimpressive today because of the stunning brunette next to her. Pamela Fulton, wife of the Mayor's press secretary, was beautiful in the manner of Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, only more robust. She was one of those women who drew male stares from every

corner upon entering a room. She sat there now with her intense black eyes glued upon Mayor Taylor.

The Mayor still talked taxes. The press might have been bored, but the audience wasn't. He used the proposition that property taxes were already too high as the basis for a program of hold fast and undertake nothing new at City Hall.

Such a program could meet only with favor from the audience assembled in this church. Basically the well-to-do, they had little need for most municipal services beyond water, sewers, garbage collection, the Fire Department and the Police Department.

So long as you didn't raise their taxes, or otherwise offend their sensibilities, they were apt to vote for you.

Rinauldi, on the other hand, was sure in his blunt way to call for even higher taxes. He usually started by admitting they were already too high, then insisted they would have to go higher so the city could initiate urgently needed programs.

Like I said, my paper was for Rinauldi all the way. It was not a matter of principle, you understand. My paper didn't have principles. It was a matter of politics.

Under pressure from my managing editor, in the finest traditions of American journalism, I slanted story after story to point up Taylor's failure to initiate a single new program or to expand or improve upon any of the going programs. His inactivity and indifference over four dull years were a scandal.

Or so I said. And said and said.

Personally, after 20 years of covering City Hall at $150 a week or less, I didn't give much of a damn one way or the other. I'd stopped getting sucked in by campaign speeches a long time ago, and I'd reached the conclusion that I couldn't tell if a guy was going to make a good mayor until he'd been in office about a year. And by then it was too late.

All I really knew for a fact was that the election appeared close, so close that a good solid shocker could throw it either way.

I removed a sealed envelope from my inside coat pocket and tapped the edge against the press table. It held just what the doctor ordered —the finest shocker I'd ever written. I glanced first at the Mayor and secondly at the stunning brunette in the front row. Then I walked out of there, looking neither to the right nor the left, and headed back to the offices of the *Banner*, fingering the envelope all the way.

It was 3:30 P.M. when I got to my desk, and things were beginning to pick up in the City Room.

Wilson McCardell strode over and said, "I expect you have a couple of speeches for the Bulldog."

"Wrong again," I told him, "same old crap. Not a new line in either one of them."

McCardell was irritated in his

best Managing Editor manner. "I gotta have a story," he said. "I don't give a damn how tired it is, I can't go without a political story a week before election."

McCardell and I had come to the paper about the same time. Only now he was Managing Editor, and I was still a reporter.

The difference was large a matter of blood. His was blue, which didn't hurt any with that snoot of a publisher, and mine had alcohol in it. I hadn't had a drop in over three years, but I was still considered an ex-lush who might go off at any time.

"So my Managing Editor needs a political story a week before election," I said more harshly than McCardell deserved.

I drew the envelope out of my pocket and handed it to him. "OK," I told him, "here's the best story you've had the whole time you've been editor."

I took a photo-sized envelope from my desk drawer and gave him this too. "It's got pictures, affadavits, photostats, the works. All you gotta do is put a decent head on it and figure out how to play it right. And don't forget my byline."

I put my hat on and headed for the door, calling back over my shoulder, "I'll be at my flat if you need me."

I knew damned well they'd need me before this night was over. But they didn't wait until they needed me. The phone was jumping up and down when I walked in my door.

It was McCardell. He was afraid of the story. "Are you sure?" he kept asking me.

"Have you ever had to eat a story of mine?" I asked him. "Besides, you've got pictures, affadavits, photostats. What the hell more do you want?" It took some doing, but he finally settled down.

Half an hour before deadline, the publisher himself called and put me through the same "Are you sure?" routine.

I had but rarely been honored with a call from the great Henry F. Purnelle—owner of a big city daily, man of wealth and substance in the community, leader whose opinion was respected and whose favor was sought, son of the man who had the brains and guts to build the business, and publisher who paid his best reporters $150 a week.

He too was shaky, but I convinced him the story would stand up under the counterattack that was sure to come.

It would, I told him, blow the election wide open. It would catapault the eminently respectable Mayor right out of City Hall. It was the shocker the campaign needed.

When the Bulldog Edition hit the street at 8:45 P.M., I was there to catch it on the first bounce. McCardell had played the story beautifully. He had a double-line streamer across the front page and a three-line, two-column bank head, with the body of the story set two

columns all the way down the right side and jumped inside.

He had five pictures splashed over the page with cutlines meaty enough to give the gist of things to the town's laziest semi-literates.

He had played it for what it was —the juciest, messiest local stink ever to hit our front page:

MAYOR JUNKETS TO DENVER FOR ORGY AT CITY EXPENSE

STAYS 3 HOURS IN HOTEL ROOM WITH AIDE'S WIFE

by Tom Ballard

Two bellhops swore in a notarized affadavit today that Mayor Marshall W. Taylor, Jr., entered a Denver Hotel last spring with the beautiful wife of his press aide and stayed there alone with her for three hours.

The tryst between the 38-year-old Mayor and 30-year-old Mrs. Pamela Fulton occurred during a week-long junket to Denver at a cost to the taxpayers of $925.

Elsewhere on this page is a secretly-taken photograph showing the couple partially undressed and standing in the hotel room with an unmade bed in the background, the Mayor in undershirt and trousers, Mrs. Fulton in a slip.

Also on this page is a photograph of the City expense voucher, complete with the Mayor's signature, which he submitted following the trip and for which he was reimbursed $925.

The voucher covers travel and other expenses, including liquor, for four people.

It itemizes expenses ostensibly incurred not only by the Mayor and Mrs. Fulton, but also by the Mayor's wife and by Mrs. Fulton's husband, the Mayor's press aide.

But records of the Angelsea Hotel in Denver and of the Alcanna Airlines fail to provide any evidence that either the Mayor's wife or his press aide were in Denver during the convention.

A third photograph shows the sworn, notarized statements of the two bellhops, Daniel A. Styles, 36, 103 N. Haneover Street, and Andrew S. Jackson, 23, 4721 Broughton Street, both of Denver.

Other pictures include a portrait photo of the beautiful Mrs. Fulton, and a group shot of the Taylors and the Fultons in happier days smiling together in front of City Hall following the Mayor's first election victory four years ago.

Political observers agreed last night that the shocking disclosures concerning the Mayor and Mrs. Fulton, plus the Mayor's extraordinary expense account, would likely prove disastrous to his chances for reelection.

In a campaign notable for its closeness, a scandal of these proportions would provide fast-closing Gino Rinauldi, the Mayor's opponent, with the margin needed for victory, according to political figures who make a career of picking winners.

The story continued for another column and a half, replete with additional political speculation and the details of the charges.

So there it was, all laid out for the city to see—the biggest, best-documented, most persuasive newspaper bomb I had ever dropped.

I folded the paper into a fly swatter, turned away from the direction of my apartment and walked six blocks to the Algonquin Heights Hotel. The fat man at the desk grunted to his feet and rode me to the fourth floor in the world's smelliest elevator.

My room was at the end of the hall. I set my alarm for 1 A.M., turned back the sheets, hunted without luck for bedbugs, and slept.

When the alarm sounded, I washed my face and dressed again. I went back to the street carrying a small suitcase, bought a second edition of the *Banner*, and took it to a slezy cafeteria to read.

It was everything I expected—an absolute surrender!

The *Banner* made a complete retraction of the charges in my story, which it said were libelous and false, and offered an unqualified apology to Mayor Taylor.

In a front-page story which carried a two-line streamer and which was played as big as the original story, the *Banner* also reported these facts:

1) The picture of the Mayor and Mrs. Fulton was a composite photograph, shown by laboratory examination to consist of one shot of their heads and another of the partially undressed bodies of persons who could not be identified.

2) The two Denver bellhops had completely repudiated all statements and affadavits attributed to them.

3) The expense voucher was a phony, the Mayor's signature on it was a forgery, and a bad one at that, and there was no record that the Mayor had ever charged any part of the Denver trip to the city.

4) Hotel and airline records showed clearly that four persons, including the Mayor's wife and his press secretary, had taken the trip.

5) The reporter who had written the story, one Tom Ballard, could not be located.

6) The *Banner* was paying the Mayor and Mrs. Fulton $50,000 in cash in settlement of damages, and,

in view of the "untenable position" in which the story had placed it, was withdrawing from all further comment on the election.

I had seen papers eat crow before, but never like this. But then I had never seen a paper so completely wrong before. The money settlement easily could have been larger, but the Mayor had apparently bargained away money in return for the withdrawal of the paper's opposition to his reelection.

I was tempted to slip into a phone booth and call either McCardell or Purnelle or both and tell them that the story was my way of saying thanks. But I restrained myself.

I walked instead two blocks to an all-night parking lot and bailed out my tin can. I slid behind the wheel and drove past dark piers and warehouses to the intersection of Hull and President Streets, a waterfront area which bustled in day and died at night.

I turned right into President Street and parked behind the only car in sight. I left my engine running, got out and went up to the driver, who looked carefully at my face in the night light before haning me a bundle.

"How much is here?" I asked.

"Fifty thousand, like we agreed."

I said, "Thank you, Mr. Mayor."

Then we both got the hell out of there.

THE PROOF IS IN . . .

Harry was a patient, methodical man. For fifteen years he had been collecting evidence of his wife's infidelity. Now . . . the proof was irrefutable!

BY
S. K.
SNEDEGAR

HARRY PULVER sat on his haunches, concentrating intently on the job at hand. The job, one that he performed immediately upon his return from every road trip, consisted of sorting and analyzing the garbage.

Harry was convinced that his wife, Blanche, was cheating on him, but Harry was an auditor for a fairly large banking concern, and his training would have made him require some positive proof if a vainglorious obsession about his fair-mindedness had not. On a number of occasions at the bank Harry had held off making a report of discrepancy when it was fairly obvious that someone had their fingers in the till. When Mr. Wexler asked him why he waited so long to make his report, Harry would reply, "Mistakes can be made," and then he'd take out the ubiquitous black notebook and detail each step in the closing of the mathematical snare that trapped the culprit. When finished, he'd return the notebook to its nest in his inside breast pocket, finger his rimless glasses to settle them on his beak-like nose, waggle his almost chinless jaw twice, and gently chide, ". . . and remember the Cleveland Branch, Chief."

The Cleveland Branch case had been one of the high points of Harry's career. It had seemed so obvious to everyone that a gigantic embezzlement had taken place that the bank's officers had wanted to close the branch and put every employee under arrest as material witnesses until the thing had been cleared up. Harry insisted that they give him a little more time, and sure enough, he found that the shortage was due to an honest error; and a paper error at that—the bank hadn't lost any money after all.

After Harry mentioned the Cleveland Branch, Mr. Wexler would awake from his reverie—he had long since stopped listening to Harry's boring, methodical, too-perfect reports—and by way of dismissal would say, "Cleveland . . . Yes, that's right. Well, keep up the good work, Harry."

Harry Pulver's innate lack of confidence made him confident that Blanche was unfaithful. He had been trying to gather tangible evidence of her infidelity for fifteen years without success, but his dogged determination precluded any thought of giving up. In his free time—when he was not making thorough searches of the house or spot checks of Blanche's handbags, shoes, and toilet articles—Harry had worked out the details of what he would do when he finally had her dead to rights. Every detail lay in his mind like a separate, glistening gem, waiting to be used at the right time.

Harry completed his count of the eggshells and threw them in the garbage can beside him. He had the garbage strewn on a four by ten foot tarp that he'd bought for just that purpose. He picked up a single nylon stocking, glanced at it, and put it aside on the pile for later analysis. Soap boxes, cans, frozen food wrappers, candy wrappers (the kids liked Butterfingers and Snickers), paper towels, toilet paper wrappers, and coffee cans were examined, counted, noted in the blue notebook he kept with the tarp in their secret hiding place in the garage, and thrown in the can with the eggshells.

He had originally gone through the garbage every day, but quickly found it to be a monumental task, so he shrewdly curtailed that effort in favor of random trips home from the office, always unexpectedly. Sometimes he would not even go to the office, just stop at the coffee shop over on Bright Road for a half hour or so and then drop in at the house saying, "I left some papers I needed at the office." When he left town through, even while he had it a practice to lie to Blanche about his schedule (leaving later and returning earlier than he told her), the garbage had to be inspected on his return.

For her part, Blanche knew all about Harry's obsession. She never said anything about it to him, partly because it kept him busy and out of her hair, and partly

because it flattered her vanity somewhat. Blanche had a dumpy figure that hadn't recovered from her second birth-giving stint, stained, yellowing teeth that were badly in need of capping, and fine, stringy hair that just wouldn't take a set. If she had a saving grace, it was the soft, haunting light that emanated from a pair of large, deep-violet eyes. Oh, she had been beautiful once—and had pictures to prove it, but those days were gone.

At first she hadn't understood his numerous, if haphazard, trips home from work. Then she had caught him with all that garbage spread out on that piece of canvas. He had been so intent over the classification of cigarette butts that he hadn't seen her, and she quickly returned to the house to ponder his behavior. She and Edna discussed the whole thing some time later over coffee, and came to the entirely proper conclusion that Harry thought she had a lover. Edna, whom Harry disliked intensely, thought it was "perfectly delightful" of Harry to supply them with such a humorous subject for conversation, and she wanted to get Harry a fingerprinting set for his next birthday, but Blanche wouldn't hear of it and swore her to secrecy.

If Blanche were having an affair, she was certainly being circumspect about it. At least, Edna knew nothing of it, and Edna knew more about Blanche by far than Harry ever had. Edna knew a good deal about Harry, too. She knew that he was an ineffective and sporadic lover. If Blanche *were* having an affair, certainly Edna wouldn't blame her though God knows where she would find him. Edna knew too that every time Harry left town he dismantled the second car in such a way that it was useless. She either had to drive Blanche to the store or take her over to her Mother's to get their old car. Once, Blanche had called the mechanic from the garage over on the highway to come out and get the car running—she had called the bank and found out that Harry would be gone at least ten days (*that* time, he had told her that he'd be gone for a couple of days). The mechanic told her that it would cost at least seventy dollars to replace the parts that Harry had stripped off and taken with him. Harry was a methodical man.

The methodical man had classified and disposed of all the ordinary garbage and was approaching the meat of his task. He set out a Scotch bottle and a gin bottle, nothing in themselves because Blanche drank gin and Edna drank Scotch, but nevertheless important in giving the overall picture of Blanche's activity during his absence. Three lemon soda bottles—about the right amount of chaser for Blanche's gin—joined the two liquor bottles at one corner of the tarp. The next item made Harry's eyes narrow speculatively behind the rimless glasses.

In spite of his training, in spite of his apparently calm appraisal of the seltzer bottle that he fondled almost reverently, Harry was feeling a tingle of excitement in his spine. Edna drank her Scotch with *water!* It was insufficient evidence, to be sure, but Harry's visceral tremors stemmed from the fact that his perseverance had finally been justified: After nine years of searching, he had finally found a clue. Blanche had at last gotten careless. How careless, the remainder of the pile would reveal. Unhurriedly, but with growing excitement, Harry picked over the dwindling pile and laid out an empty cigarette package that had contained those cigarettes made with pipe tobacco, a kleenex smeared with lipstick—not blotted, like a woman does, but smeared like a man would do if he were wiping off the evidence of heavy petting—and to complete the mounting pile of evidence he added a button—one just the right size and shape for the job of holding a man's trousers together. He checked against his own trouser button to be certain.

Harry didn't even bother to assay each individual cigarette butt; he simply dumped the garbage into the can and strode purposefully toward the house. He was so furious that he very nearly went ahead with phase two of his neatly formulated plan, but a tiny voice in the back of his mind jangled through the red haze to remind him," . . . and remember the Cleveland branch . . ."

An icy calm gripped him as he found Blanche in the kitchen. "Why don't you run the kids over to your Mother's, Blanche? I'm tired and cross, and I don't want to snap at them. I know I will, though, if they're around."

"All right, Harry," she answered, putting down the magazine she had been reading. "Kids!" she shouted toward the back of the house, "Get your peejays and your toothbrushes; you're going to Gramma's."

While she was gone, Harry mixed himself a bourbon, after satisfying himself that the level in the bottle was right on the tiny line he had made with his thumbnail before leaving on his trip. "At least," he said aloud, "the bastard didn't drink anything out of *my* bottle."

When Blanche returned, Harry was sitting in the living room with a magazine over his knees. He looked at her legs and noted with satisfaction the small bruise on her right shin. It was located in the same spot where the discarded stocking, now residing in his left hand coat pocket, had started to run.

"What happened to your leg?" he asked. She looked down, guiltily, he thought.

"Hit it on that hassock in the kids' room," Blanche answered. She saw no point in telling him that she had bruised the leg and ruined a perfectly good stocking on that broken, crazy-angle emergency brake on her Mother's car. Let him think that his funny game with the

car keeps me home while he's gone, was her idea.

Harry set the magazine carefully in its rack and wandered out to the kitchen where he drew a glass of water from the tap. He set the glass on the drain and stepped quietly across the hall to the children's room where he removed the stocking from his pocket and held it, heel against the floor, next to the hassock. He moved the stocking back and forth, trying various angles of attack until he was satisfied that the only way she could have hit that particular spot would have been to lie down on the floor and kick the hassock. He put the stocking back in his pocket and went out to the living room.

"Well," he said, "what went on here while I was gone?"

"Just the usual," Blanche answered noncommittally, "Kids go to school, kids come home from school. Eat supper, watch TV, go to bed."

"Anyone drop in?" he persisted.

"No. That is unless you count Edna as somebody." She knew he didn't like Edna, but she thought she'd better not lie about *that*, because he knew Edna was always popping in. Her answer cinched the case for Harry. Of course, he'd known of her faithlessness all along, but he knew that his evidence was circumstantial, and his questions had been worded carefully so that any answers save the ones she had given could have proved her innocence on the basis of reasonable doubt. Blanche had lied; of that he had no doubt. He reasoned that if there were an innocent explanation of the evidence, then Blanche would have no reason to lie: Therefore, the explanation was decidedly uninnocent. He went into the bathroom.

"Come here, Blanche," he called. "I want you to look at something."

"Oh, God," she thought. "Has he found one of the gray hairs I've been so carefully plucking out? Old Sherlock will probably deduce that I've been having an affair with Caesar Romero."

"What is it, Harry?" she said aloud as she walked into the bathroom, but she didn't say any more after that because Harry wrapped the incriminating stocking around her throat and choked every last bit of life out of her.

The rest of it went right according to plan. When darkness fell, he drove the car out and left it a couple of blocks from the railroad station. He walked home, keeping to the shadows. He got out his hacksaw and methodically flushed every last piece of Blanche down the toilet. He cleaned up the mess with small rags and flushed them down the toilet after Blanche. He showered, scrubbing every last inch of his body very carefully, and then he dressed, noting with satisfaction that the job had taken fifteen minutes less than his original estimate. It was eleven forty-five, fifteen minutes

before midnight. He was ready for phase two of the operation.

Harry went to the telephone and dialed his Mother-in-law's number. "Hello, Mother? Sorry to bother you at this hour, but is Blanche still there?" He waited for the negative response and went on, "I must have fallen asleep while she was taking the kids over—are they asleep?—anyway, I just woke up, and she's not back yet."

He waited for her to suggest Edna's, as he knew she would, and then said, "Yes, of course, Edna's. She may even have come back and found me asleep before going over there. I'll call over there right now."

He talked briefly with Edna and then called the police station. It took them two hours to find the car, and upon hearing the desk sergeant's theory about the car and the train station Harry audibly thanked God that she hadn't been in an accident and told them to keep trying; that he'd let them know if he heard anything.

On the third day the police informed Harry that they could do no more. They opined that she had caught the evening commuter train to the city and had disappeared from there. He was advised to hire a skip tracer (if he could afford it) because the police had run out of leads and couldn't spend any more time on it. Oh, they had looked around the house and in her room and asked a lot of questions, but there was certainly no evidence of foul play, and the few talks they had had with Harry, Edna, and the Pulver children had more or less convinced them that Blanche had a lot of justification for disappearing.

Harry had worked that third day—the children were staying with their grandmother—and he was relaxing in the living room when the bell rang announcing Edna.

"Have you heard anything, Harry?" she asked.

"Not a thing, Edna," he answered. "Won't you sit down?"

And as she did, "Can I fix you a drink?"

"Thanks, Harry, I need one. Scotch and soda, please."

"SODA?" He almost shouted the question.

"Yes," she explained. "Nancy gave me soda by mistake a couple of weeks ago. I liked it so well, well you know how it is, I won't drink anything else now."

He fixed the drinks rather mechanically while he pondered Edna's inconsistent and inconsiderate behavior in changing a habit of years' duration. When he returned to the living room with the drinks he noticed something wrong.

He was trying to isolate the source of his discomfiture, and Edna must have noticed for she said, "It's my cigarette, Harry. I'm smoking these things made with pipe tobacco. Not very ladylike, I suppose, but I enjoy the taste of them." She poured a cloud of smoke at the

ceiling and said, "Harry. I know you're worried and all about Blanche, and maybe this isn't the time to bother you with trivialities, but I used one of Blanche's lipsticks when I was over here the other night—I scrubbed my own off because hers looked so good with this outfit—well, I wonder if I might borrow it again?"

"Sure Edna," Harry said numbly. "It looks like you've lost a button off your sleeve. Is this it?" He woodenly handed her the tiny button he had removed from his pocket.

"Why thank you, Harry."

When they found Harry Pulver hanging in his garage the next afternoon, some thought it was due to despondency over his wife's recent disappearance. Some thought other things. The Bank ordered an immediate audit of all of Harry's accounts. One very methodical policeman, however, found a couple of rusty hacksaw blades and took them to the lab where it was discovered that the washing hadn't removed all of the bone, tissue, and blood. Where did the policeman find the hacksaw blades?

Why, where else?

THE HAND

BY
CHARLES A. FREYLIN

She sat frigidly, hands together in her lap, fingers locked securely. Her blonde hair was in violent disarray and her face was a staring mask of psychogenic despair.

CONRAD tells me I might have prevented the whole thing. I wonder though, how I could have seen such a far-reaching tragedy and the night of horror from those few whispered words.

Bleeker came into the laboratory that morning and handed me some papers. "Will you sign these, Doctor? Six copies. Original for the county, one for us, one for—"

"What is it? Oh, the assault case."

"Positive Florence test. That man has had it." Bleeker leaned against my desk, scratching his ribs monotonously.

"For goodness' sake, Lover, stop scratching," I growled.

"Sorry, sir. He'll get the axe for this, all right. Cops are in there talking to the girl now."

"Why don't they leave her alone?"

"Your head's aching again, isn't it, Dr. Claude?"

"Yes. Listen, I'm going into Physiotherapy and lie down for a bit. If I go to my room the telephone will annoy me—" I paused at the threshold. "When Dr. Andrews comes in, will you call me? He wants to see the autopsy on Mrs. England. She died last night, you know."

Bleeker nodded. "I'll look after things, Dr. Claude."

I walked rapidly down the hall and turned into the darkened Physiotherapy section, leaving the door ajar behind me. This was a barn of a room not yet in operation. The Venetian blinds were kept closed. It was crowded with extra furniture and accessories that had yet to be distributed.

An iron lung sat in the center on the floor, where segments of shipping batts still clung to its under structure. Ranged against the wall was an array of surgical stands, instrument cabinets, wheel chairs, unopened crates, and complex diagnostic equipment. I noted with satisfaction the bust of Beethoven (which I was planning to pilfer) still perched incongruously in a far corner on top of an EKG machine. A donation from some civic-minded citizen of Southport, no doubt.

Against the wall to my right was a clumsy looking wicker chaise longue. I had arranged the high end of it toward the door, so that if anyone entered (such as Conrad), he'd have to look twice to see me lying on it. He didn't really care; it was a question of pride with me.

I stretched out gratefully on the thin mattress and closed my eyes. Almost at once the headache began to subside. It had been like this since the Tenaru engagement on Guadalcanal where, as Regimental Surgeon, I was nearly killed by a grenade fragment. It penetrated my skull and lodged precariously in the subarachnoid space. With a little rest the periodic headaches vanished like magic. In the circumstances, I was very lucky indeed.

I had been advised to avoid a vigorous practice, so I took the opening at Southport's new general hospital. Like Conan Doyle's celebrated Watson, I came home from the war something of an invalid, keeping my professional boot in the door.

I lay there several minutes listening to the muffled wind outside portending an approaching storm. Then I heard hasty footsteps, and the starchy unmistakable swish-

wish of approaching nurses from out in the hall. They came into the room and began whispering together like pretty witches on a heath.

"Are you sure we can get it?"

I recognized Miss Kirk, our Central Supply nurse.

Another one whispered. "We can get it, Kirk, but do you really think we ought to do this?"

"That's what I'm wondering," said still a third. "Don't you feel this is going a little too far, Kirk?"

Now the whole group erupted into a chorus of dissenting feminine whispers.

"Oh, look, you kids . . . Hush!" Miss Kirk was exasperated. "It's all in fun. How about what she did to me? I didn't get mad. Remember after the hospital opened last March —she put that spider on my bed? It almost scared me to death. Oh, no. I owe little Norma a good one. She's probably cooking things up for me right this minute."

There was a moment of silence. Now I was too embarrassed to get up. If I moved, the chaise would creak, so I lay still and waited, faintly annoyed.

The furtive conversation was resumed, mostly in hoarse, indistinct whispers until one of them said, "All right, Kirk. I'll go along. I hope you know what you're doing."

This acquiescence broke up the meeting and they moved to the doorway where someone said, "Count me out, girls."

As their footsteps retreated down the hall, I heard Miss Kirk again. "All right, Phyllis. You're out. Now, who's going to ask Bleeker . . ." I heard no more. Little Miss Kirk. I never heard her voice again. Not ever.

I got up yawning, rubbing my face with both hands. I smiled indulgently. Good kids, I thought. Our nurses were good kids. I wondered idly what they were up to. Then I forgot about it for the moment.

I opened a blind and stood looking out at the prospect. It was heavily overcast, and the wind was mounting. While this part of Southport had better homes, they were somewhat scattered over a vast desolate woodland area. It wasn't raining yet, but toward the east the sky was black and menacing. Truly, the shape of things to come.

Perhaps the weather induced me to pick on my laboratory staff that afternoon. I wound up a tirade with my chief technician. "You're in charge of this lab, Bleeker. You've got two girls under you. Keep them on the ball. Joan's on vacation, so Millie will have to bear down a little until she comes back.

"Millie's getting careless. She does good work, but she leaves glassware all over the place. I don't like it; Mr. Conrad doesn't like it. After all, he *is* the superintendent. You know, being your sweetheart doesn't excuse Millie . . ."

"No, sir. But you're my boss, not

Conrad. He doesn't have to be such a snoop. The creep."

"Conrad's not such a bad sort," I protested. "He's responsible for this entire hospital—you know that. Don't worry; run this lab properly and I'll back you to the limit. Don't forget, Conrad's got to answer to the board of directors."

"Yes, sir." Bleeker started to scratch again but caught himself and pretended to reach in his pocket.

I leaned back in my chair and regarded the golden haired beauty at the other end of the lab. She was browsing through *Todd and Sanford* while waiting for a solution to come to temperature, and she was looking very pretty doing it.

"And Bleeker . . ."

"Sir?"

I lowered my voice. "This is a small hospital. I know Millie is a very attractive girl, and that you're engaged. But you're going to start a scandal. Go somewhere else besides my chaise longue to hold hands."

"But, Dr. Claude, I haven't—"

"Oh, come on, Bleeker. I haven't always been silver-haired and fifty-five, you know. Here—I found this on my favorite headache chair." I handed him one of Millie's scented handkerchiefs with the big M in the corner.

I laughed. "And don't tell her I found it. Enough said?"

Early that evening the storm broke and raged far into the night. About two a.m., it settled into a steady cadent downpour. Sharp exploding thunder and frequent arc-bright flashes of lightning had subsided to the horizon where feverish veins persisted along with heavy intermittent rumbling.

That's when they brought in Norma Walden. I recall the details of that tragic morning only too clearly. It was mere chance that I happened to be around. Really, it was something for the resident to handle, but this time I meddled a little.

My bachelor's room was a little cul-de-sac off the laboratory. I had slept a few hours when the grumbling of thunder awakened me. I went prowling to the dining room for a midnight forage and a chat with the night nurses, then wound up in an argument with the orderly about the battle of Savo Island. He'd been on the Vincennes when she was blasted from under him.

With happy malice I had awakened Shelley, the resident, and we played chess in the doctor's lounge until two. He had gone back to his room when I started up the corridor past the silent Ward 3. I was about to swing into the lab when a group of girls appeared in the hallway.

They were coming from the front lobby, pushing a wheel chair. Miss Kirk was among them. Hers was the voice I had recognized in Physiotherapy the day before.

We met under the light outside Ward 2. They were all Southport

nurses. Miss Kirk and the girl in the wheel chair were dressed in pajamas and bathrobe; the other two were in street clothes.

I looked at the figure in the wheel chair more closely and at first did not recognize Norma Walden, day nurse from OB.

She sat frigidly, hands together in her lap, fingers locked securely. Her blonde hair was in violent disarray and her face was a staring mask of psychogenic despair. Except for occasional jerking of fingers, she made no sign of life. Her pupils were enormously dilated. Across her upper lip I saw a curious rusty streak, like an absurd, painted moustache.

"What is it?" I asked Miss Kirk. "What's happened here?"

Miss Kirk's face was chalk white. They were all deathly pale, the four of them, like a phantom quartet liberated by the storm.

The night nurse bumped through the swinging doors of Ward 2. "What on earth is wrong here? Oh, hello, Dr. Claude—"

"Good morning, Miss Lessinger."

She rested a hand on the wheel chair. "Why, Norma! It's Norma Walden!" She looked over the silent caravan. "The whole nurses' home is here! What's the matter? Food poisoning?"

"Hardly," I muttered. I felt Norma's wrist with some difficulty. It was cold and dank, the pulse thready and rapid.

The hospital was coming to life now. Shelley came pounding up in his white rubber shoes. "I just got a call from the front office that Miss Walden would be admitted. Thanks to our chess game I was up for this one, Dr. Claude."

None of the four nurses had said a single word. I moved away from the wheel chair. "Can't one of you tell us what's happened here? Miss Kirk?"

She gripped the back of the wheel chair tighter, but maintained a frozen silence. I turned to the two girls in street clothes. I had seen them in the building from time to time, but I didn't know their names.

Gently as possible I said, "How about you? Can one of you say something?"

Without warning, Edith Kirk crumpled into a heap behind the wheel chair. Her two companions remained quite motionless.

"Will you look to her, Shelley?" I bent over the girl in the wheel chair again. I sniffed suspiciously; there was no odor.

Shelley picked up the unconscious girl. "Miss Lessinger, open those doors, please," he said. "Let's push Miss Walden into the ward."

I turned to Miss Lessinger. "It looks as if all four of them ought to be in bed. Hadn't you better call Miss O'Neil at the nurses' quarters —maybe she knows what's happened. Anyway, she should be advised that some of her nurses are sick."

I glanced around at the dispers-

ing crowd. The two pale nurses in street clothes had disappeared. I wondered about it. I was puzzled about something else, too. One of them had carried a large beaded handbag. For some reason it jarred me.

I went slowly to my room and had a drink of brandy. That nurse had been wearing a dark tailored thing of very conservative cut. And she had carried a large beaded handbag.

I picked up the telephone and waited.

"That you, Dr. Claude?" Even the PBX operator was wide awake this morning.

"Yes. Listen, Miss Lopez. Would you wear a large, beaded handbag with a strictly tailored outfit?"

It took a moment to register, then she said, "A large beaded . . . Oh, no. Never. *I* sure wouldn't. A paper bag would look better."

I thanked her and hung up. I strolled back to Ward 2 and ran into Shelley. "Did you get them to bed?" I said.

"Just Miss Kirk and the Walden girl. The other two took off like zombies. Look, Dr. Claude, this is the craziest thing I've ever seen. I couldn't get a word out of those girls to save my life. What do you make of it? I know the two we put to bed are in a state of shock. The other pair didn't appear to be a whole lot better off."

"Let's go to the lab and make some coffee, Shelley; we'll talk about it for a while."

He watched me pour cold water into an Erlenmeyer flask and place it over a Bunsen burner. I set out some cups and paper towels.

"It's shock syndrome all right, Shelley. That's for sure. Severe shock. In Miss Walden's case it's darned near total collapse. In fact, I'd say that girl is in trouble. There's a curious thing about all this though."

"Yes," he snorted. "They're women and none of them will talk."

"Well, I don't mean that. Have you observed the varying *degrees* of shock? The girl in the wheel chair was in a virtual coma. Miss Kirk, who fainted, was the next most serious. The two in street clothes were just pale, silent and badly shaken. Indeed, they've more than likely gone back to the nurses' home."

"That's right. What about poison —Norma Walden getting the largest amount?"

"Possible, Shelley, but most unlikely. Can you think of a poison that behaves this way—that leaves no odor—and that *four* of them would have ingested?"

"Mm. I won't argue with a pathologist on that, Claude."

I smiled at the young man's familiarity. "No poison, no injuries. There's only one possible answer."

He rested his chin on his hand and stared at me.

"I think those four nurses were

nearly frightened to death, Shelley."

Norma Walden died at seven o'clock in the morning. Edith Kirk waxed catatonic, and Shelley started intravenous plasma on her. Southport Hospital was buzzing.

Dressed all in brown, Conrad reminded me of a cocker spaniel. He was nervous enough, and he all but barked in his high pitched prattle. He couldn't sit still. A pile of papers on his desk was weighted down with an open telephone directory.

"Good morning, Dr. Claude. You were about last night, I understand, when this crazy business started."

He had a cigarette going in an ashtray but he lit another, which afforded me a twinge of perverse amusement.

"Yes, Mr. Conrad. I was here. Is that why you wanted to see me? I have an autopsy . . ."

"It is. I've talked with the supervisor of nurses. I've talked to the resident. I've been to the nurses' quarters. Miss Herron and Miss DeMaras left early this morning. Packed their things and left." His voice had risen to a squeak.

"You mean they've resigned?"

"They've resigned. Dr. Claude, I've gotten absolutely nowhere. Not one person I've talked to has thrown any light on this fantastic situation. Can you tell me what in the devil happened to those nurses last night?"

"No, sir; I cannot. I can only tell you what I told Shelley. With this latest development my suspicion is reaffirmed that those four girls were frightened out of their wits. I'd say it's a certainty now."

"Shelley mentioned that. Frightened . . . You think fear did this to four adult women . . ."

"Not just fear, Mr. Conrad. Stark terror. I'd stake my life on it."

Suddenly I recalled the scraps of conversation I had heard in Physiotherapy the day before. *We can get it, Kirk, but do you really think we ought to do this?*

And Edith Kirk's reply: *It's all in fun. How about what she did to me?*

This was it, of course. There must be an ominous link between the recent macabre events and the clandestine gathering the day before.

I owe little Norma a good one, Miss Kirk had said; a chilling statement in the light of the mysterious tragedy.

I decided to withhold all this from Conrad for the moment. I wanted to be sure of myself.

On the way back to the laboratory I remembered something else. The last thing I heard Miss Kirk say was, *All right, Phyllis; you're out. Now, who'll ask Bleeker . . .* Or words to that effect. Bleeker!

But Bleeker emphatically denied knowing anything about the matter. I badgered him a little, but got

nowhere, except that he became irritated with me and began scratching himself, probably as a subtle means of revenge.

But I believed him. He was honest, and a crackerjack technologist, even if he did drive me crazy with his infernal scratching.

There was still the Phyllis person. She had backed out of *something*. I wondered what that something was.

I said to Bleeker, "Do you know a nurse here named Phyllis?"

He leaned against the lab bench and puffed out his cheeks. "Phyllis . . . Phyllis . . . No, sir; I don't."

"Find out who she is, will you, Lover? Let me know, but keep it quiet."

The autopsy on Norma Walden revealed what I had half expected. There was evidence of long standing myocardial damage, which explained her failing to survive severe shock. I reported my findings in writing and sent a copy to Mr. Conrad. It read in part: . . . POST MORTEM EXAMINATION DISCLOSES THAT THIS FEMALE SUFFERED SHOCK SYNDROME OR ACUTE CIRCULATORY COLLAPSE OF REFLEX ORIGIN WHICH RESULTED IN IRREVERSIBLE CIRCULATORY EMBARRASSMENT. THERE WAS MARKED CARDIAC HYPERTROPHY AND MYOCARDIAL INSUFFICIENCY. PROBABLE CAUSE OF DEATH: CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE . . .

It was still overcast when I walked into Southport for a haircut late that afternoon. I nosed through the newspapers but saw nothing about the riddle at Southport General. Good for Conrad; he hated publicity.

Stopping at Southport Inn for a sandwich and coffee, I ran into Gerald Houser, an old colleague of mine who was on the surgical staff at Southport.

"Any developments on that nurse business, Claude?" he wanted to know.

"Two of them resigned, you know."

"No! Well I'll be darned. Very singular, indeed. I hear Conrad has a private investigator on it."

"Well, well," I chuckled. "The foxy so-and-so never said anything to me about it."

I elected to walk rather than take the bus back to the hospital, although a fine drizzle had begun to fall. I thought about the rusty streak on Norma's face and the beaded handbag that nurse had carried. *A paper bag would look better . . .*

I paused a moment in front of the nurses' home. It was a two-story affair, rectangular and nondescript, contrasting sharply with the one-storey hospital. Now it was growing dark and I felt the first trace of autumn chill. One of the windows showed light in the second floor rear; the rest were black and sightless.

I shivered a little and walked hurriedly up the deserted street to the brightly lighted main building.

A typewritten note was fastened to my lab coat with a huge safety pin; it read: *Dr. C: Ph. is Mrs. Minetti on W-3. Also please call Conrad at his home. Bleeker.*

A duplicate message was anchored under my telephone. Bleeker was thorough, even if he was itchy. I called Conrad right away.

"I wanted your opinion, Dr. Claude," he said. "Do you think the police should be called on this business? Miss O'Neil thinks so."

"You mean the Norma Walden matter, of course."

"Yes."

I thought for a moment, while we listened to each other breathe. "No, Mr. Conrad, I don't. I mean, not yet, anyway."

"You're sure?"

"Well, no. I'm a doctor, not a policeman. But let's face it; there's been no foul play that we know of. Surely, Miss Walden wasn't murdered. I went over that body very carefully."

"But how about the agency that frightened those girls—and caused all this mess? Perhaps it's still extant. Shouldn't the police give that nurses' home a good going over?"

"Now, that's something else. You have a point there. I hadn't thought about it that way."

"I have. But I don't want bad publicity for the hospital. Do you see? We're new, so vulnerable."

"Let's sleep on it, Mr. Conrad. Anyway, don't you have a private detective on this?"

"Maybe I have. That's not the police, though."

"No."

"All right. Thanks for calling, Dr. Claude. Good night."

"Wait a moment . . . Mr. Conrad?"

"Yes?"

"I should tell you something. I said I hadn't thought about having the police go into the matter of what frightened those girls. What I really meant was I think the answer lies among the girls themselves. I don't think there *is* an outside agency."

"Do you know this?"

"I'm convinced of it."

"You're holding out on me, Claude."

"Well, I am."

"That's a fine thing. I'm only the superintendent."

"You have my word, Conrad, I'll give you all I have tomorrow."

There was a brief pause. "There'll be no more trouble?"

"Not the way I see it."

"All right. All right, Dr. Claude. Good night."

Phyllis Minetti was off duty so I called her at home.

"Yes, I can come in, Dr. Claude," she said. "I've got to give the children their supper first. My husband won't be home until later."

I'd seen the plump dark haired Mrs. Minetti on Ward 3 several

times. When she walked into the laboratory I knew her at once. I came right to the point.

"Do you know why I asked you to come in, Mrs. Minetti?"

"I'm sure it's about Norma Walden . . . and the others."

"I'm no investigator, you know."

"No. But you were here. And you're about second in command at this hospital." She smiled. "In charge, I mean."

"Do you know anything about what happened, Mrs. Minetti?"

"No."

"No ideas?"

"None."

"Well, a few days ago you walked into Physiotherapy with at least two other nurses. Remember?"

She looked completely surprised, but showed no signs of distress. "You saw us . . .?"

"I was in there. Oh, I wasn't spying on you. I was lying down with a headache when you people came in."

"Well, if you were there, you know I had nothing to do with this hand business, Dr. Claude."

There it was. But I missed it. "I know. I believe you, Mrs. Minetti. I heard you when you declined to have anything to do with some conspiracy. Miss Kirk called you by name. But you see, it follows that you knew what was going to happen."

"I'll have nothing to do with it, Dr. Claude."

"You're already involved."

"I have nothing to say."

"This isn't a whodunit, Mrs. Minetti. You know as well as I do that a girl is dead. Another is deranged, perhaps irretrievably. Two more resigned at an ungodly hour without a moment's notice. For all we know they may be mentally disturbed, too. All this without any explanation, which undoubtedly you can provide.

"I have reason to believe that Mr. Conrad is going to notify the police department tomorrow. Don't you see the position this puts you in? Puts all of us in?

"It's almost a certainty that a group of you girls got together for some kind of mischief, or practical joke, and the thing backfired. I think, Mrs. Minetti, that those four girls were—if you'll permit a touch of melodrama—hoist by their own petard."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Dr. Claude, I know exactly how you feel—how Miss O'Neil feels. But why pick on me? Ask the girls who resigned. Ask Ruth DeMaras or Marjory Herron; they were there. I'm sorry, sir. I don't mean any disrespect, but I had nothing to do with what happened and I'm not going to get mixed up in it now."

I sighed. I decided the woman was not too bright. "Well, all right. I'm only trying to help us all. Thank you for coming in and talking to me.

Shelley and I looked in on Edith

Kirk that night; there was no change.

We stopped to chat in the doctor's lounge and that's when I saw the whole thing. It struck me like a thunderbolt. Unwittingly, Phyllis Minetti had told me, and it nearly slipped away. Something she said came back to me as I talked with Shelley.

The resident had asked me if open surgery were ever done in cases of Dupuytren's contraction. Then I remembered her remark, *well, if you were there, you know I had nothing to do with this hand business* . . . Those were the words Mrs. Minetti had used.

I told Shelley about the incident in Physiotherapy.

"That's it, Dr. Claude!" he exploded. "Of course! This was a practical joke that backfired. All we have to do is find out what it was."

"I think I know, Shelley. Come on. Let's go over to the O. R."

A clipboard hung on the wall in the vestibule outside of the main operating room. I lifted it off the hook.

"Let's see. What date was it when the girls came into Physiotherapy?"

"That would be . . . Tuesday, the seventeenth," Shelley said.

"Good. All right, let's see. This schedule of operations is sent to all departments concerned, as you know. Let's go back to the seventeenth. Nineteen, eighteen . . . here it is. Here's the answer, Shelley."

The schedule read:

PILONIDAL SINUS
9:00 a.m. Dr. Scheer
EXPLORATORY LAPAROTOMY
11:00 a.m. Dr. Houser
AMPUTATION, HAND
2:00 p.m. Dr. Moran

"You see it?" I asked grimly.

"No."

"The *hand* business, Shelley. Remember I told you Edith Kirk said Norma had put a spider on her bed —that it nearly scared her to death?"

"Yes."

"Those girls got that amputated hand and used it on Norma Walden somehow, as a practical joke."

"Great day in the morning!"

"Let's call Conrad."

Miss O'Neil finally contacted Ruth DeMaras at her sister's home in Paragon Falls. A private investigator dug her up, and reported back to the wily Conrad. Miss DeMaras was the girl of the beaded handbag. Her companion was nowhere to be found.

Miss DeMaras reluctantly agreed to come back when she was assured there would be no trouble. So far, miraculously, news of the mysterious incidents had not trickled to the press.

We held a closed conference in the superintendent's office. Moran, Shelley, Miss O'Neil, Miss DeMaras, Conrad and I were present.

After an hour-long conclave I walked into the laboratory looking very grave indeed. Bleeker and the green-eyed Millie were waiting to gang up on me for the story. Millie poured me a cup of instant coffee with Victorian coquetry. Bleeker pushed sugar and milk in front of me knowing full well I never use it.

"All right," I growled. "I'll talk. It's pretty gruesome, though. According to Miss DeMaras, Edith Kirk and the Walden girl had been enthusiastic practical jokers since their training days, especially with each other.

"From Central Supply, Edith floated around the hospital a good deal and came across a copy of the surgery roster the day a hand amputation was scheduled. This gave her the idea for a joke to end all jokes."

"Why did my name come into this, Dr. Claude?" Bleeker had his arms folded, probably insurance against scratching.

"All specimens removed during surgery are sent to the laboratory for pathological examination. That's the law. Just like a biopsy. That's where you *and* I would have come in, Bleeker.

"But it was simpler for Miss Kirk to slip into the utility room of the O. R. after the operation and steal the amputated hand, which lay encased in a rubber glove in a bucket. Each of the O. R. staff would think the other had sent the specimen to the laboratory. In a new hospital like this, these things can happen very easily. They can happen anywhere.

"At the nurses' home that night, Edith Kirk decoyed her friend out of her room. With two confederates this was no problem. It's of no real consequence, but Miss Kirk and the Walden girl had both washed their hair; they were wearing pajamas.

Shelley strolled into the laboratory and sat down looking disgusted. "Telling them about it?"

"Yes. Stick around a minute. I'll soothe you with a chess game . . . Anyway, while two nurses looked on, Edith placed the hand on Norma's pillow. Edith was, therefore, the most guilty. She loosened the overhead light so that Norma must switch on her bedside lamp and get the full shock. Which she did. Tell them, Shelley."

The resident made a sick face. "They all hid and watched for Norma's return. She entered the darkened room and closed the door behind her. Evidently the one street lamp over that way threw enough light so she could find her bedside lamp without any trouble. They heard the wall switch snap a few times, but of course it was ineffectual. In a few moments, Norma switched on the lamp; a line of light appeared under the door.

"Then it got rough for everybody. The minutes started to roll by and the pranksters panicked, for *no*

sound came from inside that room. You can imagine." There was a painful silence.

"What became of the hand, Dr. Claude?" Bleeker asked.

"After they finally opened the door and looked into the room and saw what they had done, Miss DeMaras had presence of mind—and the courage—to grab it and stick it in an old handbag she had. I wondered about the handbag that morning. She got rid of it up here after the excitement—threw it in the incinerator."

"Will there be any charges against the girls, Doctor?" Millie asked.

"I don't think so. I'd say there's been enough suffering for all concerned, wouldn't you? Mr. Conrad is praying by the hour that this doesn't get out. I don't think there's a chance in a million to suppress it.

"But, good Lord! What killed Norma and turned Edith into a virtual psycopath?"

"Bleeker, have you ever come upon a severed hand, unexpectedly? On a wild stormy night? Norma Walden did; for all we'll ever know, inches from her nose."

He glanced thoughtfully at his own open hand, and I saw Millie shudder.

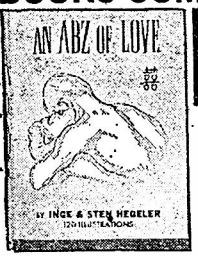
Shelley shook his head like a bull. "It's the most frightful thing I've ever heard of; do you know that? I've got poor Conrad eating tranquilizers like peanuts. Edith Kirk has had it, too. We just shipped her off to the state hospital at Weymouth."

Millie adjusted a green scarf inside her lab coat and looked at me. "Dr. Claude, what was that business about the streak on Miss Walden's mouth? And I *still* can't see why they were all so badly shaken . . ."

I glanced at Shelley, who shrugged indifferently. "Well, Millie." I lowered my voice. "You may as well get all of it. When the girls opened Miss Walden's door, they found her sitting up in bed cross-legged and staring. She was holding onto the hand as if it were a chicken bone. She was eating the goddam thing."

For ADULTS Only

BOOKS COMPLETE! UNCUT! UNCENSORED!



AN ABZ OF LOVE by Inge & Sten Hegeler

OVER 100 ILLUSTRATIONS
600 VITAL SEX TOPICS

"ABZ is the best Sex Book ever published"— London Sunday Times

This explosive "BOOK OF LOVE" shocked even Europe. It presents a new and remarkable approach to **Sex**. The authors, both doctors, write in simple everyday language, in a completely frank and uninhibited manner on every aspect of advanced sex techniques that can provide exquisite varieties for the man and the woman.

NOT FOR BEGINNERS

ABZ was written for mature people who have had years of experience but feel that their sexual relationships can be improved and become more rewarding. **ABZ** shows numerous ways to attain a happier relationship. **ABZ** is considered by many to be the most important **Book on Sex** in existence today! A must for Doctors, Scholars, Connoisseurs and your private library. A large, magnificent, illustrated volume.

Published at $10. NOW ONLY $8.95

NUDES AROUND THE WORLD

Masterpieces of photography of the Female Beauty. Girls from nearly every country in the world appear inviting comparison and inspection. Asian Beauties, Exotic African Lovelies, the full sultry beauty of France, Spain, Cuba, Norway, Tahiti, England, Italy and many more . . . Luscious girls from every walk of life . . . Secretaries, Strippers, Exotic Dancers, some representing their countries in Miss World and Miss Universe contests. A rare opportunity for discerning connoisseurs. Invites many hours of leisurely browsing.

ONLY $3.50

SPECIAL OFFER!

FREE ORDER BOTH BOOKS FOR ONLY **$9.95**

& RECEIVE ABSOLUTELY FREE "DIARY OF A NYMPH" by NATHAN A. SCHIFF, M.D.
The actual case history of a "Nymphomaniac" taken from her own private diary.

IMMEDIATE DELIVERY IF YOU ORDER NOW! FULL 10 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

NOVEL PRESS, 31 Second Avenue, Dept. 136 New York, N. Y. 10003

Please rush me the following: Check book or books you wish to order.

☐ **AN ABZ OF LOVE $8.95.**

☐ **NUDES AROUND THE WORLD $3.50**

☐ **SPECIAL OFFER 2 BOOKS plus FREE BONUS ONLY $9.95 Plus 50¢ Postage and Handling**

Add 25¢ Handling Charge for each book.

I understand I must be fully satisfied or my money will be refunded.

☐ I Certify that I am over 21 years old. (FOR ADULTS ONLY).

NAME _____

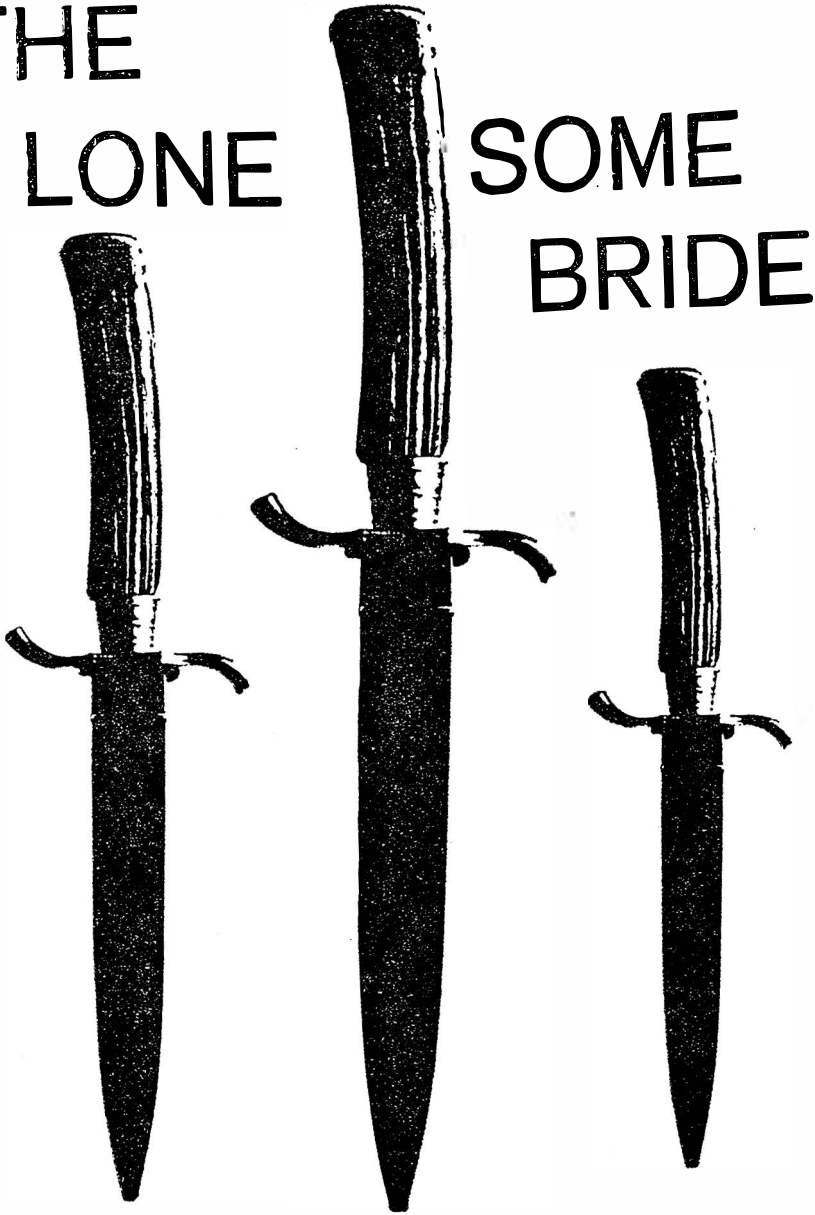
ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

★ Write for **OUR FREE CATALOG**

A Collection of hundreds of unusual & exciting books.

THE LONE SOME BRIDE



"Go ahead . . . shoot," Short laughed. "I'll bet you a harp and a halo I explode this thing before I die."

AN "OLIVER SHORT" NOVELETTE

BY

NELSON ADCOCK

THE first thing Oliver Short saw as he stepped from the train into the blazing hot sun of San Jacinado was a man some sixty or seventy pounds fatter than himself. That put the guy at an even three-hundred. He was standing on the dry wooden train-platform, dressed in a white linen suit and a broad-brimmed panama hat, staring fixedly at Short. His face, burned a fiery red, was a jellylike thing of bulbs and pouches, and it overhung a white collar secured by a black shoestring tie. The man's eyes, all but lost in the fat, were like tiny jet-black licorice pastiles, hard and shiny. He was about five-yards away from Short. He stood solid, feet well apart, weight thrown back on his heels, and he projected an air of authority.

Short frowned, took his eyes away from the man, and let them go down the length of the platform. Just past the center, standing by a bright red bottled-soda machine, he saw a blond woman in a white and green print dress. She was wearing sun-glasses and carried a large white purse. Short hefted his overnight bag from left to right hand, gave the fat man an amused look, and walked toward the woman. At the soda-machine he paused and stuck in a dime. The bottle he got was warm as soup and he tossed it, unopened, into the slotted box provided for empties.

"Nice racket," he said, grinning and nodding at three or four other unopened bottles beside the one he'd discarded. "All profit." Then his face became serious. "You're Susan McCrory?" he asked, as his eyes swept down from the woman's crown of golden hair to her trim ankles and neat white sandals.

She removed the sun-glasses and blinked. "Yes. You're the man from the Cosmopolitan Agency?"

"Yes. I'm Oliver Short. I caught the first morning train from Frisco. You told the Chief on the phone that it was a matter of life or death—" Short glanced over his

shoulder and saw that the fat man was staring at them intently—"anything to do with the heavy boy down there?"

"Yes." Susan McCrory's blue eyes narrowed. "His name's Clymer. Martin Clymer. He's the sheriff, the magistrate, the mayor, and everything else in San Jacinado. He owns the Paloma Hotel, the Sierra Royal Restaurant, the San Jacinado Garage and Auto Sales Company, and just about everything and everybody around here. The people obey him like trained dogs."

"He sounds important." Short hung a Kent on his lip after Susan refused one. He flipped open his Zippo lighter and sucked on the flame. "He's giving you trouble?"

Susan's lip trembled and for a moment Short thought she was going to cry. "Take it easy," he advised. "He's not going to do anything right now. You can be sure of that." Short looked round and took in the flat yellow sand that stretched from the station platform in all directions, then said, "Shall we go wherever we're staying and you can tell me on the way?"

"All right. But go off the platform on this end. I don't want to talk to him—not till I tell you the story."

Short nodded. "We're walking? I don't see any car."

"It's not far. Less than a half-mile. The town's behind that rise over there. From here it's hidden, but you'll see it in a minute."

Short nodded again and guided Susan's elbow as they stepped from the low platform to a rutlike path of hard yellow clay. "We're staying at his hotel?"

"There's no other," Susan answered simply. After a few steps, she added, "It's empty except for me. They say it's off-season for tourists. There were some old ladies and a minister there Monday and Tuesday, but they checked out."

Short looked at the girl — in terms of his fifty years he could only consider her a girl, although she was perhaps twenty-three or twenty-four—and he decided if she wasn't so frightened and worried looking, she'd be a real beauty. Her complexion was soft and white, and there was no trace of habitual squint about her eyes—sure indications she was not a native of San Jacinado or its environs. By her dialect, Short set her origin as the north middle-west.

"Are you armed?" she asked suddenly, before Short got round to commenting on the empty hotel.

"Yes." Short smiled with the word.

"That's good. I am too. When I got the anonymous phone call to go down to Sonora—that's in Old Mexico—I bought a gun while I was there." Susan patted her handbag. "I have it right here. Loaded."

Tugging at the corners of his mouth to hide the smile, Short said, "Maybe you'd better tell me the whole thing from the beginning."

Susan nodded and began talking,

slowly at first, then as the matter came to a head, much more rapidly. Short listened, said "yes" many times, and twice glanced back over his shoulder. Martin Clymer, the fat boss of San Jacinado, was not to be seen.

2

By the time they stood in the adobe walled courtyard of the Paloma Hotel, what Short knew about Susan McCrory and her troubles added up to the following:

A week before—which made it a Friday—Susan McCrory and her newlywed husband of a month had arrived in San Jacinado. They'd been driving to Old Mexico and had stopped for dinner and a night's rest in what had impressed them as being a pleasant, quaint little bordertown. Susan's husband, John McCrory, a tall, thin, heavily bearded, prematurely bald man of thirty, had been enjoying the best of spirits. They'd wined and dined well at the Sierra Royal Restaurant, then, after John left instructions at the San Jacinado Garage to have the car checked, they retired to their room at the Paloma.

In the morning when Susan awoke, the first thing she noticed was that the twin bed John had occupied was empty. It was also neatly made up. Surprised that John had risen so early and that he'd troubled to make the bed, Susan had puzzled the matter for several minutes before getting up herself and dressing. She finally concluded that John had either gone to see about the car, anxious that it be ready for an early start, or had decided to do a little sight-seeing on his own. Also, she remembered that John had once or twice shown traces of restlessness and insomnia during the early morning hours. He was a music composer by profession and often worked the night through, going to bed at dawn.

When she came down to the hotel lobby, Susan asked the desk-clerk if her husband had left a message. The clerk gave her a blank look and wanted to know what she was talking about. Although exasperated at the man's stupidity, Susan patiently explained that her husband, John McCrory, had come down from their room earlier and she wanted to know what message he'd left for her concerning his whereabouts. To this the clerk had replied that Mrs McCrory had no husband in the hotel to his knowledge. While looking her straight in the eye he said she'd checked into the Paloma alone. For a moment this answer staggered Susan, then she decided the clerk was either drunk or insane—or a little of both. She told him in no uncertain terms to stop talking damn nonsense and tell her when and where her husband had gone. The clerk shrugged, called a Mexican boy who worked as a bellhop and porter, and an old woman chambermaid, and both of

these persons solemnly confirmed that Susan McCrory had come into the hotel alone. Hearing this, Susan lost control and screamed. She rushed upstairs, intending to get some of John's things, clothing and whatnot, to prove he existed and had been there. But not an item of luggage, clothing, or personal property was to be found. Even the paper wrapper from the new razor-blade he'd used the night before was gone—John didn't shave, but he had a troublesome callous on his right foot and he'd spent a half-hour or so soaking and trimming it. Also gone was John's attache-case which contained hundreds of pages of musical scores—all his current work-in-progress. This was too much for Susan and she fainted.

Upon regaining consciousness she decided the events of the early morning had been a dream. But the made-up bed was still there and John's luggage was nowhere about. With a great effort, Susan got control of herself then and once more went down to the clerk. She quietly told him that unless he admitted the truth—that she had had a husband in the hotel—and unless he gave some explanation of his whereabouts, she would go directly to the police. The "police" turned out to be Martin Clymer. On the screened-in porch of his home next to his general store, he listened to Susan's story with great interest and concern. Then he accompanied her back to the hotel and questioned everybody—desk-clerk, bellhop, and chambermaid. Their stories were consistent down to the minutest detail—Susan McCrory had checked into the Paloma alone. Sheriff Clymer asked to see the hotel register. When it was produced it showed opposite Room 3 the single signed name, *Mrs Susan McCrory*, and following that the address, *22 Pike Street, Chicago, Ill.* Clymer then asked Susan for her driver's license. The address on it tallied with the one in the register and the signatures were identical. It was a bad moment for Susan and she came near to fainting again.

Sheriff Clymer told her there was nothing he could do unless she could explain the register and could produce some kind of evidence that John had existed. It was impossible for him to believe that everybody in the hotel was lying. Then Susan thought of the garage where John had taken the car the night before. Clymer agreed to question the mechanic. But when they got there, the mechanic, a middle-aged Mexican of serious mein whose speech was interspersed with all kinds of religious avowals involving various saints and the Holy Trinity, said quite plainly that *Susan* had brought the car and given instructions to check it over. This closed the matter as far as Clymer was concerned, except that later on in the evening he sent Doc Haines, the local bonesetter, over to the

hotel to look at and talk with Susan.

For a couple days nothing happened. Susan refused to leave the Paloma without her husband, and since she'd paid her bill in advance nobody could object to that. She searched the town, questioned everyone she could, and drove miles and miles hunting for John—or his body—in the surrounding desert. All this was to no avail, except that in actually moving about and doing something, Susan found that her strength and courage rose to the situation. She became grimly determined. Then Monday morning, three days after John's disappearance, she received a mysterious phone call. A woman's voice told her to drive down to a certain address in Sonora, across the Mexican border, and she might find something she'd lost. Then the voice laughed softly and clicked into silence. Susan went at once. It was a drive of fifty miles and ended in a blind alley. Number 14 Balboa Avenue—the address she'd been given—turned out to be a tourist shop whose owners disclaimed all knowledge of Susan, her husband, or of any phone calls to San Jacinado. After that, Susan spent the remainder of the day in Sonora, reporting the matter to the local police, asking questions in unlikely places, and finally buying an automatic pistol in a pawn-shop. Then she drove back to San Jacinado. Martin Clymer looked skeptical, bored, and mildly sympathetic when she told him about the strange phone call.

On Thursday evening, in desperation, Susan suddenly thought of the Cosmopolitan Detective Agency, whose Chicago branch provided security for the bank where she worked as a cashier. She phoned San Francisco and spoke to the Chief of that branch, requesting the services of an operative immediately and giving the name of her bank-president uncle as reference that the required retainer would be paid. The following afternoon she—and Martin Clymer, doubtless informed of the phone call by the hotel clerk—awaited Short's arrival by train.

3

After hearing all this, Oliver Short put a cigarette between his lips and lit it. He stared at a dry pool and fountain in the center of the Paloma courtyard. "Before we go in," he said, "I've a couple questions."

Susan put a hand on his arm and stared at him with wide anxious eyes. "You believe me, don't you? You don't think I'm crazy?"

"Is that what Doc Haines said?"

"Just about."

Short rubbed his fat neck, squinted at the girl, and shook his head sideways. "I've heard of one or two women who imagined they had husbands. One of them—a case in Spokane—used to go out and buy clothes, shaving-cream, and

special food for hers. She even answered ads in the help wanted columns for him. Laziness was his big trouble. But—" Short patted Susan's hand—"none of these women looked anything like you. These gals had to imagine they had husbands. You get my point?

"Yes." Susan flushed pink with the word.

"Anyway," Short added, "I believe your story."

A great deal of tension and fear drained from Susan's face. "Thank you. After a week of everybody saying you're crazy, just having somebody believe you is a relief. You can't guess how much."

"Sure I can. Now tell me what John looks like. I assume any pictures you had of him were taken along with his luggage?"

"Yes. Our wedding pictures. And I had a few snapshots from back in Chicago that are gone too."

"I see. Well, describe John, please."

Susan was silent a moment while she looked pensively at two stone turtles that formed the fountain. "Like I told you, he's tall and thin and prematurely bald. He has a heavy, full brownish-black beard. His face is long, narrow, and strong; especially the jaw which you can see forming powerful ridges at his cheeks and ears. His neck is lean and corded. His eyes are large, deep-set, and burning-dark. They smoulder with unexpressed feeling. He's sensitive and tense and sort of charged with vitality. He's alive to things in a way that other men—most of them—aren't. It's hard to explain."

"Was he in the service? Army? Navy?"

Susan looked blank. "I don't know. The subject never came up. He's not much interested in war, politics, and things like that. He's an artist—a gentle person. His music is beautiful and important—one day he'll be famous."

Short nodded. "How does he dress?"

"Not too carefully, I'm afraid." Susan smiled. "He likes old rumpled tweeds—worn, comfortable things. There's nothing pretentious or middle-class about him; he's spontaneous and happy—like a big boy. I think that's because he loves his work. His whole life's doing the thing he wants most to do—creating music."

"Uh huh." Short considered a moment. "What kind of an income does his music bring?"

Susan hesitated and looked from Short to the stone turtles. "Nothing yet," she said. "You see, he doesn't write popular music. It's deep serious stuff—symphonies, string-quartets, tone-poems—that kind of thing. There's no immediate market for it."

Short studied Susan's face in silence.

"You have to understand," she added quickly. "It's hard to explain John. He sounds weird to people who don't understand. He's not

interested much in money or property—"

"You mean he's a Beat?" Short asked. "And was scrounging along in some cellar or attic while he wrote music? And now you're paying the bills?"

A defiant look came into Susan's eyes. "We all live off the earth. In a sense, we're all parasites. Those of us who are ethical try to give something back. Something truly worthwhile. John's trying to give something tremendous. He works long hard hours without ever thinking 'What am I going to get out of it?' Why shouldn't I share in his project? In fact—" Susan's chin rose —"it's a privilege."

"All right," Short said, smiling. "I'm not criticizing you or John. What does your banker-uncle think of this marriage?"

"He didn't know until John and I left. I wrote him a letter. I don't know what he thinks."

Short digested these facts. He looked at the dry fountain and saw, lying on the bottom, two perfect little fish skeletons, bleached white as lime from the hot sun. Goldfish, probably.

"How long had you and John known each other?" he asked.

"Two months. We met at a concert and took to each other at once. If—" Susan paused and shook her head—"if you're thinking John married me for money and then run out, you're wrong. All I have is what I saved from my job. It's true my uncle is well-to-do, but he has a large family of his own."

"I wasn't thinking that," Short said. "But speaking of money; how much was John carrying?"

"About twenty-dollars. He hates to be bothered handling money and was glad to let me take charge of it. I have our traveler's checks and my regular checkbook here in my purse."

"What exactly is your financial situation?"

"We have the car—a new Chevrolet that's paid for—and a little over two-thousand dollars."

"Well," Short smiled, "that rules John out as a kidnapping and ransom prospect—unless the local boys work awful cheap. The checking account's in your name?"

Susan smiled archly. "Yes. I suggested changing it over, but John said, 'Why bother?' "

Short nodded. "Did you and John have any kind of disagreement last night? Was everything going along okay?"

"Everything was fine. We got along perfectly. Besides, if John left me, for any reason, how would that explain the behavior of Clymer, the desk-clerk, and the others? You think he could bribe the whole town to say he didn't exist.

"Not likely. Have either of you ever been in this town before?"

"No."

"No connection of any kind with anybody here?

"None."

"Remember," Short pointed out, "you've only known John three months."

Susan shook her head. "No, he's from the East. New York. Besides, we only came here by accident."

"What do you mean?"

"About twenty-miles north there's a major fork in the highway. A sign says 'San Jacinado' one way and 'Silver City' the other. Both go down into Mexico. John asked me which way I wanted to go and when I said I didn't care he flipped a coin, heads for San Jacinado and tails for Silver City. It came up heads."

"That's conclusive enough," Short said, shrugging. "Now about the hotel-register—John actually signed it?"

"Certainly."

"Yet Clymer found your signature and it checked with the one on your driver's license."

"I can't explain that. I never signed the register."

"How long have you been driving?"

Susan looked surprised. "About three years. Why?"

"Wouldn't your license be in your maiden-name? Shaw?

"Oh—" Susan shook her head—"I had it changed a day or two after the wedding."

"Most people aren't so efficient."

"I am. I like records and things kept up to date and accurate. I also changed my library-card and my voting registration. It's a habit you pick up working in a bank. Loose ends prey on my mind."

"The Beats I've known," Short said drily, "hardly measure up to those standards. Most of them don't bother to keep track of the day of the month."

"Meaning why did I marry a man like John if I like system and order?" Susan shrugged and smiled. "Maybe it's a case of opposites attracting. To be honest, John's hardly even conscious of the month, let alone the day. In practical matters, he's an overgrown child."

"Has he had *any* kind of success with his music?" Short asked. "Since he's thirty, I imagine he's been working at it a few years at least."

"His quartets and trios have been played by the Chicago Friends of Music Society. And he's had work played in New York. All free concerts, open to the general public. His work is very advanced—ultra modern—what we call anti-Gestalt, Primary-Process expression. It's unsigned, atonal, dissonant, and tremendously exciting."

"Yes," Short said. He lit a cigarette and walked to the edge of the fountain. He stared at the dry stone, watching heat waves rise from its surface and distort the line of the opposite side. "It's funny," he added after a moment, "that they don't run this thing. It's kind of pretty."

"They drained it," Susan replied, moving to Short's side. "I understand there was a serious water

shortage a few months back."

"You'd think," Short pointed to the fish skeletons, "that somebody'd be decent enough to have put those fish in a bowl first. A little detail like that says a lot about people. Well—" he smiled and nodded at the pink stucco fronted hotel building with its sloping roof of interlocked red tiles—"I guess we go in now."

4

Short rented room 5, next door to Susan's. He put his bag on a chair, removed a blackjack and a pair of handcuffs from it, slipped them into his hip pocket, and looked round. It was a plain room. It had two windows, chintz-curtained and draped at the sides with gray monk's cloth; a pair of twin beds of brown painted metal, two small chests of drawers, and two wooden chairs. A cheap printing of a dying Indian on a horse was framed and hung over one bed; nothing hung over the other. A multicolored oval rag rug was placed on the bare wooden floor between the beds. There was a Bible placed squarely on top of one chest of drawers.

Completing his survey, Short moved to the hall doorway in a quick jump and flung the door inward. His arm flashed out and caught the wrist of a thin, wiry Mexican boy of nineteen or twenty-years. The kid struggled hard and missed a poorly aimed blow at Short's face; Short grunted, twisted the wrist round hard, and brought the kid down to his knees, yelling with pain.

"Gotcha!" Short grinned. "I bet you were listening to see if I needed water."

"Si—yes, yes, Senor! That is right. You need ice-water, no?"

Short laughed. He passed his hand along the kid's belt and shirtfront. "No shiv?" he asked in surprise. The Mexican looked at him in stubborn silence. "Maybe," Short said, frowning, "we'll find something here." He reached behind the kid's collar and pulled from a sheath nestled between his shoulder-blades a ten-inch, leaf-bladed throwing-knife, flat at the guard and ground from a single cut of steel. "Well, well—" Short hefted the knife in his palm, testing the balance —"you're a real little pro. Bet you could spear a fly at ten yards with this dingus, no?"

The kid's eyelids lowered and his face froze into a stubborn mask of hate. His jaw muscles tensed as he locked them in silence.

Short let go of his wrist, saying, "Go back and tell your fat boss I'll be around to see him in about a half-hour. Meanwhile," he opened his coat and slipped the knife into his belt, "I'll borrow your pig-sticker."

"Bitch! Dog!" the boy cried, spitting and backing away. "Fat overfed Gringo!"

"That's bad language, Son. Now go ahead and deliver my message

while you still got teeth." Saying this, Short followed the kid a short way down the hall and watched him as he descended the stairs. Then Short went back and tapped lightly on Susan's door. She opened it at once.

"What happened out here?" she asked. "I was changing and I heard a noise."

"Nothing. I caught the bellhop spying on me. Look, I'm going to make a couple calls. I suppose we'll be eating at that Sierra Royal Restaurant you mentioned—Clymer's—suppose I meet you there in about an hour?"

"All right. It's only a block down the main street. But I thought you'd want to check in here first."

"No point." Short shook his head. "There won't be anything of John's—not if somebody thought of his razor-blade wrapper. I'll put the time to better use. By the way, where was that razor-blade wrapper? Where'd John put it?"

Susan stepped back from the door and pointed to a small table placed between a pair of twin beds exactly like the ones in Short's room. "He twisted it into a ball and tossed it at me in fun. It bounced off my arm and landed behind that table. Then he went into the bathroom."

Short looked at Susan curiously. "After your first encounter with the clerk, you rushed up here to get something of John's to prove his existence. You were in a distraught condition, near to fainting, minutes later you did faint—yet you thought of a little thing like a razor-blade wrapper behind a table? It seems strange."

Glancing nervously at the table again, Susan caught her underlip between her teeth and frowned. She looked back at Short. "I guess it's because he tossed the paper at me—or because it went behind the table. John's careless about things—cigarette-ashes, coins, letters—all that sort of stuff; he tosses it wherever he happens to be standing. It—it annoys me a little. I guess that's why I remembered."

"That's probably it." Short nodded. "It sounds like a funny question, but I thought the Beat crowd was against marriage—how come John took the plunge?"

Susan shook her head. "They're against marriage in the conventional sense. I'm not the kind of woman who'd be a drag and take John away from his creative work. In fact, I wouldn't want him if he wasn't what he is. I think good music's the most important thing in the world."

"Ever study it yourself?"

"Many years. The piano. I play competently; I began at seven; but I've no creative power. John has."

Understanding came into Short's pale blue eyes. He smiled and bobbed his head once. "Okay—I want to talk to the clerk now. I'll meet you at the Sierra Royal in an hour. Just take it easy."

The desk-clerk was a sallow, horse-faced man of some sixty years. Long-drawn wrinkles, a loose chin, and watery bloodshot blue eyes made him tired and weary looking. He was reading a Los Angelos newspaper and picking at his decayed front teeth with a bent-open paper-clip. Hovering about him was the smell of cheap, strong tobacco and stale wine. A crescent of white showed under his eyes as he peeped upward at Short's approach.

"Something wrong with the room?" he asked indifferently.

"No. Just the help." Short pulled the throwing-knife from his belt and tossed it on the desk. "No wonder this joint's empty—since when do bellhops carry these?"

Looking at the blade, the clerk gave a loose, flabby grin. "That don't mean nothing. All these Spiks carry knives. Makes 'em feel important."

"Yeah," Short said. "Guess I'm just getting touchy." He leaned over the desk. "What happened to Mrs. McCrory's husband?"

The clerk kept grinning. "She never had any—not here anyway." He touched his temple with a yellow-stained forefinger. "It's all in the mind."

"You're telling me she's crazy?"

"What else? Ha!—" the clerk cackled—"who'd steal her husband? Why? Ha, ha! Doc Haines says she's got what they call demon's cocks. It's pretty bad."

Short frowned and thought. "He probably said dementia praecox."

"Yeah, that's it. You a doctor too?"

"Come off it, Old Timer—you know I'm a detective. Look, if this dame who hired me is really nuts, why's everybody acting so cagey?"

The clerk shrugged. "She's a nuisance. Makes everybody nervous talking about a big bearded bald-headed guy who don't exist. Saying somebody stole him. We're quiet folks down here. Sheriff Clymer'll be satisfied if she just drives back to Chicago. She's been bugging him every day for a week."

Short lit a Kent, drew on it hard, and held in a great lungful of smoke. He eyed the clerk thoughtfully as he slowly exhaled. "Sheriff Clymer —is that exactly what he said?— that he'd be satisfied if she just drives back to Chicago?"

"Sure."

"Those were his very words?"

"Yeah, sure. Clymer's a sport. He had Doc Haines look her over— no charge. He'll bill the county. That's pretty white, I'd say."

"Yeah, it is," Short agreed. "Maybe I've come down here on a wild goose chase. Maybe," he considered, smoking, "I'll run over to the garage, check her car out, and get her home as soon as possible. Maybe I'll start tonight. Let her folks back in Chicago handle her."

The clerk nodded emphatically. "You're talking sense, Mr. Short. That's where the poor girl belongs—

with her folks. And her car's out back in the parking lot."

"It wasn't repaired in the garage? She imagined that too?"

"No. Juan Colum had it that first night. He cleaned the plugs and timed it. She's run it down to Sonora since then. In fact—" the clerk giggled—"she bought herself a gun."

"She didn't get a phone call sending her down there?"

"Not while I was on duty."

"Who handles the board when you're not?"

"Nobody," the clerk grinned. "I just leave the phone here in the lobby plugged for outside."

"Then she couldn't get a call in her room when you weren't on duty?"

"Right. And she didn't when I was."

"Are things always so slow in this hotel—just one or two guests, I mean?"

"It's off-season."

Short nodded. "Okay, Old Timer." He ground his cigarette into a tin tray loaded with butts. "Maybe I'd better see Sheriff Clymer before I haul her off. Make it official when I talk to her folks."

"That makes good sense. He's most likely in his general store—right down the street, past the Sierra Royal, and on the other side. Can't miss it."

"Thanks. See you later—" Short began to move away, then stopped —"oh—one thing—how come you know she bought a gun?"

The clerk gave his cackling laugh. "She asked me where she could buy one. I told her Sonora."

"Wasn't that kind of dumb—considering she's deluded?"

"Maybe," the clerk admitted. "Guess I just didn't think."

"Everybody makes mistakes," Short told him, waving a generous hand. "See you later." He left the hotel then, crossed the patio, and looked up and down the main street. He saw the Sierra Royal Restaurant sign, the words formed of unlit neon tube and set within a neon crown; and beyond it, on the other side of the street, a plain black and white printed board that read: *M. Clymer. General Merchandise.* Walking rapidly up to it, Short saw a large window loaded with everything from shoes to farm implements; and beside the window, separated by a narrow alley but attached to the same building, a screened-in white-painted porch. Through the screens he saw the fat man, Sheriff Martin Clymer, sitting in a wicker rocking-chair, and on a wicker taboret at his elbow was a tall frosty-looking glass containing some beverage. Beside it was a telephone. Short walked up two flat wooden steps and rattled the screen-door by its brass knob.

"Come in, sir," the fat man nodded, smiling with the words. "Come in, by all means. I've been expecting you for the past hour.

Just turn the knob; it's unlocked. I always say that honest, God-fearing folks have little need of bolts, catches, and keys. Those who live behind locks do so because of the larceny in their own souls. Take a chair, sir—you're most welcome."

Short sat in a rocker that faced Clymer's at a distance of four feet. He planted his arms on the wicker rests, laced his fingers across his stomach, studied the fat sheriff, and said nothing.

The fat man smiled again. His lips, lumped round with rings and gullies of pink flesh, were a perfect little cupid's bow, uptilted at the edges and lost in deep dimples. His nose was a black dotted button, a lump centered on his face, to all appearances lacking bone or bridge. And little black eyes, wide-spaced on each side of it, sparkled with a kind of puckish delight. He still wore white linen, but it was a freshly cleaned and pressed suit. His tie was a blue bow, mostly hidden under the enormous folds of flesh that constituted his chin.

"I'm Martin Clymer, at your service, sir." The pink lips moved girlishly, and the voice, pitched high with a nasal twang, suggested bubbles of merriment. "Sarah! Come, Sarah!" he called, cranking his neck round and sending his voice into the doorway of the house proper. Almost on the last syllable of her name a tired-looking, gray-haired woman appeared. She was small and birdlike. Dressed in a blue cotton dress, no cosmetics on her face, hair pulled back and tied into a large bun on her thin neck, she glanced once, quickly and nervously, at Oliver Short. Then she lowered her mild gray eyes, saying, "Yes, Martin?"

"Something to drink for our guest, Sarah. This is Mr.—ah—"

"Short. Oliver Short," the detective said, standing up.

"My wife," Clymer added. "Now, a gin and tonic for Mr. Short, please."

The woman bobbed her head in reply to Short's smile and scurried away without a word. "Be seated, sir," Clymer insisted, taking a long, flat case from his inner breast pocket. He flicked it into halves and held it in a chubby palm before Short. "Cigarette? Those on the left are an Egyptian blend; on the right, Chesterfields. I alternate and find the combination delightfully complementary."

Short took a Chesterfield. Clymer held out a lighter and asked, "You're a silent, reserved type of man?"

"No. I talk a lot. Right now I'm wondering why the town of Jacinado would want to steal and make vanish a not wealthy, not famous, relatively unimportant beatnik composer."

Clymer watched Short steadily and closely for a few seconds, then, all, at once, he slapped both hands down on his fat knees. "Ha, ha!" he wheezed, rocking forward and backward, "Ha, ha! Very good and

very well put! Ha! Why indeed? Isn't it ludicrous, sir?"

"But on the other hand," Short continued, keeping his expression sober, "why would Susan McCrory make up a story that such a thing had happened? What's in it for her?"

Before Clymer could reply, Mrs. Clymer reappeared bearing a tray with two tall glasses exactly like the one Clymer had at his elbow. She served both men and left without a word. Clymer picked up his glass and said:

"Well, here's to mutual understanding."

"I'll drink to that," Short agreed. He tasted his drink and nodded. "Good. Excellent. Now, Sheriff, how can you help me clear up my client's troubles—no point beating round the bush; you know who I am and exactly why I'm here."

Clymer put his glass beside its twin on the table and held out his pudgy hands, palms up. Baffled sincerity was in his eyes, the lines of his forehead, and in his smile. "I can't help you, sir. How can I? As you yourself so aptly expressed it, the situation is absurd. There's neither motivation for the hypothetical missing man's existence or his disappearance. We must therefore conclude that the poor girl is sick. At least three persons saw her enter this town and the hotel entirely alone. There's not a scrap of evidence—not a shoelace—to indicate the reality of Mr. John McCrory. What can I possibly do?"

"That lack of evidence is what bothers me," Short said. "It works two ways—if the girl's really deluding herself, it seems to me she *would* have all kinds of evidence handy—a man's clothing, shaving-cream, personal papers, and that kind of thing."

"I'm not a psychopathologist," Clymer shrugged, "and know nothing of the variations of the schizophrenia syndrome."

Short smiled. "I'd say you're an unusual man for a small town sheriff."

"Contrary to the popular notion—" Clymer glanced at his neatly trimmed, pink fingernails—"environment and circumstances do not make the man. But to return to Mrs. McCrory, I've had Doctor Haines over to see her and he's convinced she's suffering from delusions. However, she's broken no law; I can't order her out of the hotel or take her into custody. Outside of notifying the authorities in White County, where there's a mental institution, my hands are tied."

"Why haven't you done that?"

"Conscience, sir. A matter of conscience." Clymer's head wagged forward on his big shoulders. "According to Haines, the girl could snap out of this thing as quickly as she snapped into it. Is it my place to institutionalize her and possibly stigmatize her life? Is such a decision my responsibility?"

"I guess not," Short admitted.

"Well, she can't hang round here forever. What if she just drove back to Chicago to her parents? You'd be satisfied?"

Clymer exhaled a big sigh. "That I would, sir. I certainly would. I'd rather be faced with smoking out a gang of bandits than this sort of problem."

"She could be dangerous in her delusions," Short suggested. "She bought a gun down in Sonora."

"Yes. A used 7.5 mm. Mauser automatic pistol." Clymer smiled. "And a box of American .32 caliber cartridges, which, being—" Clymer paused and eyed the porch ceiling while he calculated swiftly—"0.6 mm. oversize will either jam or eventually ruin a fine weapon. I have the serial number of the pistol in on my desk. We get full reports on guns and jewelry bought below the border—nothing official, you understand; the merchants simply cooperate informally. As to her having the gun, well—" Clymer shrugged—"we have no local ordnance against firearms. Criminals carry them regardless of the law, and we see no sense in preventing honest citizens from protecting their lives and property. Outside of her delusion about a husband, the girl seems sensible and reasonable enough. So far, I've just let the matter of the gun ride."

Short listened to all this with considerable interest while he sipped his drink. "You know German guns?" he asked.

"I've a fine collection of Lugers and Mausers." Clymer nodded. "On another occasion I'd be pleased to have you examine it."

"Years ago, when I was with the OSS, I picked up a few nice guns," Short said. "Which reminds me, I spent some time in these parts. There used to be a hell of a big traffic in heroin and morphine."

"There's still some. However, the Border Patrol and the FBI men keep it pretty well down. But what does the OSS have to do with smuggling?"

Short looked surprised and vague, as if he'd been caught thinking of something else. "Smuggling? Oh, nothing. We were tracking enemy agents holed up in Mexico; the smuggling was just something I heard about. Heroin and morphine came to our attention because the Nazi bigwig we were after kept himself feeling like a superman with a skinful of dope. We traced him through his supplier." Short laughed. "In the fatherland he had chemically pure demerol; here he took plain sugar-cut junk."

"Circumstances change, sir," Clymer said, staring fixedly at Short.

"Yeah, they do. But like you said, it's the man who counts. Well—" Short rubbed his jaw with a thumb and forefinger—"as soon as I nail down some definite evidence that my client's dreamed up this husband of hers, I'll get her back to her parents. Anyhow, I'll

wire Chicago and my Frisco office."

"Maybe I can save you some trouble. I wired the Chicago police Tuesday for a run-down on the girl and her supposed husband. I'm expecting a reply any hour. As far as your company's concerned—what's its name, sir—Metropolitan?"

"Cosmopolitan Detective Agency."

"Yes. Well, if I sent the girl back with my deputy, it'd cost the County his salary plus considerable inconvenience to me. If you accompanied her on the drive, I think your fee could be guaranteed at this end."

"That's damned decent of you, Sheriff," Short said.

Clymer waved a hand. "Not at all. These emergencies come up. You may depend on it, sir; your firm will lose nothing on the girl's behalf. The truth is that although—" Clymer cleared his throat and his fat bulbs shook like bags of jelly—"I dislike and distrust sentimental speeches, I don't mind admitting I've a certain fatherly affection for the girl. It's a painful thing to see one so young and with so many natural advantages afflicted in such a way. It makes the heart ache and enlivens the skeptical elements of the mind. Indeed it does, sir. Were I not a devoutly religious man, the very senselessness of the girl's mania might cause me to suspect the order and harmony of the Cosmos. But on that score, who are we to decide what transcendent motives may or may not lurk behind seemingly senseless—even cruel—phenomena?"

"Who indeed?" Short muttered, draining his glass and getting to his feet. "Well, I guess that covers the situation. I'm going to talk seriously to Miss Shaw—Susan—at dinner and suggest we begin the drive back to Chicago tonight." He held out his hand. "I want to thank you for your patience and help."

"Not at all." Clymer came up from the rocker, vast belly quivering, and pumped the offered hand warmly. "You're dining at the Sierra Royal?"

"Where else?" Short grinned.

"Indeed. Well put—where else?" Clymer's answering grin made a tiny pink crescent under his stubby nose. "If you'll give me a half-hour to freshen up and dress, I'd be honored to be your host. Do you think you might convince the lady to accept my presence?"

"I think I can manage."

"Fine. Shall we say a half-hour?"

Short agreed and left. Out on the main street he glanced back at the Paloma Hotel, then turned and walked in the opposite direction. A hundred yards or so, where the brick and cobble-stones petered out into plain hard-packed clay, he came to a low building that suggested a converted stable. A pair of red gasoline pumps were posted in front of it, and between them, in the driveway, a short, husky, greasy-brown man was working over a tire,

banging with a pair of irons. He squinted up at Short.

"You Juan Colom?" Short asked.

The man didn't speak. He shook his head "no" and pointed to the door of the building with one of the irons. Short nodded and went inside. Another short, husky, greasy man—this one not so brown—was busy talking into a wall telephone. He looked at Short and frowned. Short shook his head by way of greeting, sat on a high metal stool by the door, and lit a cigarette. While he smoked, he let his eyes travel over the smudged wood and cement walls, which were decorated with oil and gas advertisements, frayed spark-plug and ignition charts, and cut-out calendar cuties in varying degrees of undress. Over everything was a film of grease that made the reflected light dirty and saturated the air with a rancid smell.

The man at the phone turned his back toward Short, as if by that movement to insure the privacy of his conversation. For his part, the conversation consisted of little more than a series of "Yeahs", pauses, and more "Yeahs". Finally he hung up, turned to Short, and asked, "What can I do for you?"

Short studied the man's face. Square, flat, framed in black hair, the mouth thin and cruel-looking, the jaw aggressive and surly, it was anything but pleasant. There was a three-inch scar, white-centered and purple-edged, lacing down the left cheek.

"Well?" the man asked. As he spoke his jaw formed a ridged line down from the ear on each side.

"I've a couple questions about Mrs McCrory and her car."

"Yeah?"

"You're an American? You sound like New York." Short tossed the question in an offhand way. The man didn't answer. "It doesn't matter," Short added. "Only when the hotel-clerk tossed the name Juan Colom at me, I sort of expected a Mexican."

"I'm not Mexican," the man said.

"But you're Juan Colom?"

"Yeah."

"All right. What was wrong with Mrs. McCrory's car?"

Juan Colom tilted his head back and to one side, ran his eyes up and down Short's half-seated figure, and smiled without a trace of humor. "Who're you?" he asked.

Short stood up. "You know who I am. I just left your boss's house. Just tell me a couple things and I'll beat it. Call Clymer back for the okay if you want."

Colom shrugged his shoulders and muscles rippled under his tight, sweatstained shirt. "The work on her car was just an ignition job. Couple plugs were fouled and the points needed setting."

"And she brought you the car herself last Friday evening?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Then she came back for the car a couple days later—Monday morning?"

"Yeah."

"But the car was supposed to be ready Saturday morning, wasn't it?"

"It was ready," Colom said. "She didn't show up till Monday."

"And you didn't see her husband?"

"Are you kidding? Everybody in town knows she came alone. She's nuts."

"Yeah, I'm being forced to that conclusion," Short said. "Did you actually see her drive into town?"

"No. I saw her when she came here with the car."

"How was she dressed?"

Juan Colom blinked and shook his head sideways. "How do I know? You think I notice women's clothes?"

"She had a dress on—you saw that, didn't you?"

Colom looked disgusted. "Yeah, sure. You think she drove up naked? I guess she's not that nuts or she wouldn't be running loose."

"Well, if you're not color-blind, what color was the dress?"

Staring at one of his ignition-charts for a few seconds, Colom worked his jaw silently, pulling up his lips and grinding the edges of his front teeth. Then he said, "Sort of light blue." He nodded. "Yeah, I remember now. It wasn't a dress; it was a skirt and jacket. When she got out of the car I noticed she had a nice behind and the suit fit pretty damn tight around it."

"Was she wearing a hat?"

"Yeah. A white hat—no, maybe not white—more like a light gray. She had a bag the same color."

Short grinned. "You remember pretty good for a guy who couldn't remember at all. Maybe if you try harder you'll remember a tall, thin, baldheaded guy with a beard."

"I never saw anything like that." Colom's face was sullen. "Now, if that's all, I got work to do."

"Yeah, that's all." Short got up. "That car of hers in shape to reach Chicago?"

"It was when it left here. Why?"

"Because I want to get there," Short answered. "See you later." He left then and chuckled softly as the man working on the tire glared evilly at him.

5

Susan McCrory was waiting at a table in the Sierra Royal when Short arrived. Her blond hair was piled high, green-violet shadows accented her eyelids, and she wore a strapless, backless gown of hard-finished emerald green stuff that hugged her figure and hid nothing at all. Short turned his surprise into a smile and an apology for being late.

"Oh, I haven't been here long," Susan told him. "Just a minute or two. The waiter seemed to be expecting us and had everything ready."

"Sheriff Clymer's work," Short

replied. "He's asked us to dinner. I hope you don't mind; I accepted because it's important to the job."

A tinge of annoyance crossed Susan's face. "That man." Then she shrugged her smooth, nude shoulders. "Well, if it'll help find John, I can stand it. Did you learn anything?"

"I learned one thing beyond all doubt — Clymer owns everything and everybody in this burg. He owns them body and soul."

Susan smiled. Far more relaxed than she'd been earlier in the afternoon, her high-fashion get-up seemed to give her confidence. She tilted an eyebrow and said in mock reproval, "I don't need a high-powered San Francisco detective to tell me that."

"I'm not from Frisco," Short smiled back. "I'm from the East—to the degree that I live anywhere. I was just wrapping up a job at the Frisco office when your call came. They were short-handed and I had an urge to see this country again, so I came down. And I'm glad I did." Short looked appreciatively at Susan and added, "You're the most beautiful client I've had in years."

"Thank you, sir. And you're the most handsome detective I've ever hired."

"Have you ever hired any other?"

"No," Susan admitted and they both laughed. Then Susan's face became serious. "Did you find out—is John alive?"

"I believe he is. In fact, the only sense I can make out of the whole thing depends on his being alive. And believe me, this case is not an easy one to make sense of. Now—I want to warn you that Clymer's going to toss a few bombshells at us during dinner. Think you can take it?"

"Now you're scaring me. But I'll do my best."

"Good girl." Short brought out his cigarettes and lighter. "Can you remember what you were wearing last Friday? What kind of an outfit?"

"Of course. My powder blue suit, a wide-brimmed gray hat, gray gloves, gray purse, and gray and blue shoes. Why do you ask?"

"I almost wish I hadn't." Short shook his head. "The guy at the garage—where you're supposed to have taken the car—described you to a T."

"But anyone could have told him what I was wearing," Susan protested. "The hotel-clerk, the bellboy—or he could have seen me himself, here or in the hotel or out on the street."

"I know. It's just that everything keeps adding up in their favor." Short hung a cigarette on his lip and spun the wheel of his lighter. "I guess that one's got to be handled by Sweeny's Law."

"Sweeny's Law?"

"Yeah." Chuckling softly as he puffed smoke, Short explained, "Sweeny's Law is the principle that

the better a thing looks, the phonier it is inside; and if you jam a monkey-wrench into an apparently perfect machine, the phony part will fly apart and destroy the rest. Very soon now we're going to toss a wrench." He paused a moment, then asked, "You want to tell me exactly what happened when you went down to Sonora?"

"But I did."

"No, I want more detail."

"Well, I went to the address I'd been given on the phone—No. 14 Balboa Avenue. It was a tourist-shop. A store full of stitched leather handbags, sandals, straw-hats—stuff like that—and on the second-floor was an attorney's office. The man and the woman in the store claimed they knew nothing about any phone-call or about John, and neither did the lawyer upstairs. He was an old, white-haired Mexican. He listened very carefully to my story and then went down and talked the matter over with the people in the store. All three advised me to go to the police. I did. The officer—a captain, I think—wrote it all down and said an investigation would be conducted. After that I went to the pawn-shop, bought the gun, and drove back here."

"And you can't remember anything unusual?"

"I got a flat tire—if that's the kind of thing you mean."

Short's face lighted with interest. "Where?"

"In Sonora. When I came out of the souvenir-shop I saw my front right tire was flat. Kids. The Mexican kids stick nails into tourists' tires unless you give them a nickel or a dime to guard the car. So the old lawyer explained. He was very apologetic." Susan shrugged. "I'd gladly have given the child a dime, but I didn't see any when I parked."

"Don't tell me—a man appeared from nowhere and changed the tire for you."

"No. But there was a service station directly across the street. The mechanic changed the wheel and repaired the tire while I had coffee in a place nearby."

Short nodded. "That about does it." His eyes flicked toward the restaurant entrance. "But look sharp now, Clymer's coming."

"But what happened down there?" Susan asked, frowning.

"No time to explain now," Short whispered. He stood up as Sheriff Clymer approached their table. "Good evening, Sheriff. Mrs. McCrory was delighted to accept your kind invitation."

Clymer, now wearing a maroon sash under a white dinner jacket, a stiff shirtfront and maroon tie, took Susan's hand, bowed as low over it as his vast belly would permit, and brushed it lightly with his cherubic lips. "I'm honored, Madam. Rarely has the Sierra Royal been graced with such beauty."

Susan flushed and withdrew her hand, murmuring, "Thank you." Clymer straightened, looked about the room, nodded, and snapped his fingers. A huge, ornately carved chair was brought by two uniformed flunkies, was placed at the table, and then a dark-suited waiter appeared, bowing and smiling.

"Everything's as ordered?" Clymer asked.

The waiter did his best to touch the floor with his nose. "Si, si —Es—"

"Speak English, Manuel. Now and throughout the evening."

"Yes sir. All is ready."

Short watched this little comedy with a glint of amusement in his eyes, but otherwise his face was expressionless. As dinner proceeded, Clymer went through an elaborate soup-testing, salad-tossing, wine-sampling ritual that would have done justice to the Ritz cuisine. And when a four-inch thick, 12 pound London broil was served, he made a great to-do over a special mushroom-onion-soy sauce of his own invention. The man was a gourmet and his joy in serving and consuming the meal was unalloyed. Short did full justice to his portion. Susan ate moderately, mostly in silence, but replying pleasantly enough to Clymer's compliments and little attentions. All during the various courses, Clymer kept up a light, cheerful conversation, mostly about food, and it was gradually revealed that he was a well-traveled man who had dined at the finer restaurants of most of the world's great cities.

When dessert arrived—a thing of chilled fruit, cream, brandy, and exotic spices—Clymer asked Short if he intended to adhere to the course he'd indicated during their earlier conversation. Short said that he did.

Susan looked first at Clymer, then at Short. He smiled and dug a spoon into his dessert, saying, "I told Sheriff Clymer we'd be starting the drive back to Chicago tonight."

Susan's eyes went wide. Short looked at her steadily and she said nothing. From his thronelike chair, Clymer, watched them both closely and then said, in the attitude of one who'd come to a decision, "I may take it then that some degree of the confusion of the past week has been cleared away?"

At these words, Susan's eyes snapped into angry fire. "If you mean have I changed my mind about having a husband when I came here, the answer is 'no'."

A sort of patient disappointment crossed Clymer's face; then a frown descended on the tiny black eyes and the little girlish lips drooped at the corners, merging into folds of fat on the chin. He shifted his glance from Susan to Short and let a question form by tilting his eyebrows.

"We're leaving," Short said. "Tonight if possible, and certainly in the morning."

Clymer nodded and looked satisfied. "Miss Shaw, I've a couple questions, more in your interest than mine—"

"I'm Mrs. McCrory," Susan snapped.

Short hid a grin behind a heaping spoonful of creamed iced fruit.

"Very well," Clymer conceded. "Mrs. McCrory, I believe you told me you were married in Chicago on the twelfth of last month?"

"In Fayetteville—a suburb of Chicago."

"In a church?"

"No. In a minister's private home. The Reverend James Bush. On Foster Street. I told you all this at least three times before."

"Please bear with me. Your husband, a man named John McCrory, is a music-composer, known in certain concert-music circles in Chicago?"

"He's not famous, but he's known. The Chicago Friends of Music Society certainly knows him. He's known at the Hibbard School. And at the State College." Susan sighed and looked at Short. "I've told him all this."

"It's all right." Short nodded and patted her hand.

"Hmmm," Clymer mumbled, rubbing his chin. "I wonder if you could explain this, Miss—Mrs. McCrory?" Clymer took a folded paper—a telegram—from his pocket, opened it out flat, and handed it to Susan. Her eyes turned to Short inquiringly and he bobbed his head once up and down.

Susan read. When she finished her eyes were deeply troubled and she nibbled at her lip nervously. Short took the wire and read:

SHERIFF MARTIN CLYMER COMMA SAN JACINADO COLON NO RECORD OF MCCRORY DASH SHAW MARRIAGE JUNE TWELFTH FAYETTEVILLE OR ANY LOCATION COOK COUNTY STOP NO SUCH RECORD PAST YEAR STOP SUSAN SHAW EMPLOYED AT MERCHANTS TRUST BANK AND HOME ADDRESS AS STATED STOP UNCLE THOMAS SHAW BANK PRESIDENT AS STATED STOP NO RECORD ANY JOHN MCCRORY MUSICIAN STOP EXTENSIVE INVESTIGATION INDICATE NAME UNKNOWN TO CHICAGO MUSIC SOCIETY COMMA HIBBARD MUSIC SCHOOL AND STATE COLLEGE STOP MAN IS UNKNOWN TO MUSICIANS LOCAL UNION COMMA NEWSPAPER CRITICS AND ASCAP STOP NO REVEREND JAMES BUSH IN FAYETTEVILLE FOSTER STREET OR OTHERWISE STOP LIEUTENANT HAROLD GEROME BUREAU OF IDENTIFICATION COMMA CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT STOP REQUEST ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THIS TELEGRAM

AND DEVELOPMENT IF ANY STOP REFER TO FILE WX 3 DASH 2977 STOP

When he finished, Short handed the telegram back to Clymer and said, "Kind of puts the lid on things, doesn't it? I know Harold Gerome; he's nobody's fool and his word's beyond question."

Clymer nodded and looked at Susan. "You see, my dear girl, even if someone had some reason to steal your husband—which nobody has—they could hardly influence a disinterested Chicago police lieutenant two thousand miles away. And even if you could bribe him, you could hardly get him to put obvious lies into the official record—that McCrory, Bush, and your marriage-record do not exist, if they really do. You understand my point, dear girl?"

Tears swelled in Susan's eyes. "Unless I'm really completely insane, I can't explain this, Mr. Short. It's just impossible. Unless when you're insane you don't know it and everything seems real and normal. John *does* exist. We were married. He came here with me. I just can't be crazy—it's all too real."

Sighing sympathetically, Clymer reached forth to pat Susan's hand, but she withdrew it quickly. She kept her eyes on Short and added, in a pleading tone, "There must be some explanation."

"Try not to worry about it," Short said. "Now after such a fine dinner, I hate to run off; but in view of the telegram I think we'd best get back to the hotel and pack. That is—" he smiled— "you'll pack. I haven't even unpacked."

"And we're really leaving?" Susan looked rueful.

"Certainly". Short's face was bland, composed, and relaxed. "I'm sure if we hung around here the next six months, we'd never find any John McCrory."

6

After parking the car in front of the Paloma Hotel, Short knocked on Susan's door and found her ready with suitcases packed. Unhappiness was written all over her face. "I don't want to leave without John."

"John isn't here." Short replied, picking up two large suitcases.

"You're sure?"

"It's an educated guess. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, he went back to Chicago that first night. He got up while you were asleep, quietly got his stuff together, made the bed, and left."

"You're saying he deserted me?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But *why?* I don't believe it."

"It's true. Nobody but John would have thought of a crumpled razor-blade wrapper behind that nightstand. Anybody kidnapping a full-bearded man wouldn't dream of moving furniture to find blade-wrappers. Of course, John knew it was there and took it."

Susan shuddered. "But *why*?"

Short nodded toward the door. "I think we'll know everything in a few minutes. We're going to jam in that monkey-wrench. Now keep your chin up."

When they arrived at the desk in the lobby, Short was not surprised to see Clymer on hand. Still in formal dress, he carried a small, but tastefully selected, corsage and he approached Susan with a beaming smile. "A little farewell gift," he said, offering the flowers, "which inadequately conveys my fond wishes."

Susan hesitated, then accepted the present. "Thank you," she said, but held it rather stiffly and away from her body, much as if it contained a poisonous asp. Clymer then handed Short a slim cedarwood box, saying, "Fifty Coronas del Supremos, if I may presume on our brief acquaintance, sir. Despite conditions, I still manage to have them shipped from Havana. A small token of regard, sir."

Short accepted the box and looked at its gold-embossed wax-seal and tuft of silk ribbon. He smiled, shook hands with Clymer, and said, "For a Southwestern small-town sheriff, sir, you're a man of the most delicate taste. If I recall, Herman Goering served these same vintage cigars at his dionysian orgies. A fellow agent of mine found some at a certain address in Berlin—a palace of pleasure—and being a curious and clever fellow, he worked three hours extracting a time-released wobbler with a kit of defusing tools contained in a case no larger than a pack of cigarettes. The man had ice-water for blood. Every now and then he stopped the work to snap 35 mm. pictures and report to me over a walkie-talkie. But he wasn't clever enough for the Nazis. Extracting the first wobbler primed a *second* wobbler by slipping out a thin insulator. My friend picked the box up and—boom!" Still smiling, Short looked down at the cigar-box ruefully.

Clymer laughed and slapped Short's back. "By Gad, sir! I'll wager you've a round of adventures you could relate, if you wanted to!"

"Yes, I guess I could." Short put the cigars under his arm. "Well, we're checked out, the car's waiting; so I guess this is it." Picking up the suitcases, he began walking toward the door. The Mexican boy followed with the remaining luggage.

"I envy you Chicago," Clymer said, waving a fat hand at chest level, "for you'll have the opportunity of dining at the New Munich. Second to none in the world, sir. Give my best regards to Karl Hoffman, if you do. He brews his own *weissbier;* you must try it."

Short smiled and shook his head. "Afraid I can't—not immediately, anyway. I've changed our plan. We're driving over to San Diego

instead of Chicago. Mrs. McCrory has an aunt there with whom she'll spend a month or two recuperating."

An ugly shadow crossed Clymer's face. "San Diego? You said you were driving to Chicago—to return Miss Shaw to her parents."

"She can go home later by plane. As for the car, I've a couple friends over in Diego—FBI boys. They'll get a kick out of looking it over."

Clymer dropped his right arm and snapped his hand forward. An inlaid silver pistol appeared in it, supplied from a spring-released sleeve holster. The gun was tiny, but it possessed a large, wicked-looking bore—a modern, efficient derringer. "I think," Clymer said, "that you and the lady will be going nowhere." He glanced quickly to his side and said to the Mexican boy in rapid Spanish, "Ramon, get his gun. Approach him from the left side. Quickly!"

A look of disappointment and disgust crossed Short's face. "A rod," he said in a tone that was practically a sneer. "So all your finesse boils down to that—a rod. That's the kind of answer I'd expect from your punk at the garage, not you."

Ramon passed a hand into Short's coat, frowned, then patted his hip pockets. He shook his head. "He has no gun, Senor Clymer."

Moving very casually, Short hung a cigarette on his lip and lit it with his Zippo. "It's packed in my bag," he said, shrugging. "The truth is, I thought I was in the big leagues. I tracked Otto von Keppelwise halfway round the world and played chess with him over white wine, caviar, and cigarettes of laudanum and Latakia while we plotted each other's death." Short paused and grunted. "For a moment I thought you were of that caliber. Keppelwise was responsible for the death of a hundred-thousand men, yet he loathed the sight of a pistol. The man was an artist." Short pointed his cigarette at Clymer and continued, "In your position, Keppelwise would have reasoned that if I was really going to Diego and the FBI, I wouldn't say it—I'd just go, pretending to head for Chicago. Then, knowing—as you do—that I'm wise to the lay, he'd have six counterplots going in his mind to suck me into the deal in a way that would use me and destroy me. But—" Short sighed—"there's a big difference between a top-level Nazi and a small-town, tin-horn punk play-actor. A rod?—phooey!"

"Be careful!" Clymer cried in a squeaking tone. There was a strange look on his face, a look combining shame, chagrin, hate, rage, and doubt. His vast body trembled and his skin went pasty white. But he held the pistol firmly leveled at Short's chest and at last he got control. "Sorry to disappoint you, my friend," he said in a high-pitched, strained croak, "but I'll succeed in an area where your Keppelwise failed—in killing you." He

shot a quick look at Susan and motioned with his small black eyes. "Stand over there beside him, Miss Shaw. That's it—fine. Well—" his eyes went back to Short—"why did you tell me you were going to Diego?"

Short grinned and puffed smoke. "Maybe I just got a boot out of pushing you round a little." He glanced at the Mexican boy and the desk-clerk, adding, "You want me to talk in front of these stooges?"

"Certainly. Go ahead."

"How much heroin's stashed in the car?"

Clymer shrugged. "Two hundred thousand dollar's worth—give or take a couple thousand."

"Probably not the biggest shipment you've ever made."

"No. But it'll do for now. The market's nervous." Clymer gestured with the gun. "You realize, of course, that in answering these questions, I place you and Miss Shaw in a position of certain death."

"Unless I could show you how foolish that would be."

Clymer frowned and wet his pretty lips with his tongue. "What do you mean?"

"A couple more questions first." Short shook his head. "Let's take Miss Shaw off the hook."

Clymer made a mock bow, carefully, so as not to disturb his pistol-aim. "As you wish," he said, "since we are in no wise pressed for time."

"John's waiting for the car in Chicago?"

"Yes."

"And the lay is this: he goes to a big city, plays long-haired composer in some Beat-joint long enough to find a likely girl, rushes her, hires some grifter to put a collar on backwards and perform a wedding with a fake license in a rented house near a church. He brings his 'bride' here after going through a little coin-tossing act up at the fork in the road. He signs only her name in the hotel-register, imitating her writing well enough to get by—after all, she's barely used to writing the new name herself. Then he quietly packs up and vanishes. You and your cohorts start to convince the girl she's nuts. Then she gets a tip to go down to Sonora and everybody steers her that way. Down there your agent is waiting and they build a dope-cache into her car, flattening a tire to delay her. She drives the stuff over the border—if she's caught, well, you lose some dope at the wholesale price, but otherwise it's no skin off your teeth. If she makes it—which she probably does, since nobody can pass a border-patrol like somebody who doesn't know what they're carrying—she hangs round here a few days and finally drives home, half convinced maybe that she is nuts. She transports your hop to Chicago or whatever the city is you've chosen. John's there waiting to unload the stuff—when she's not near the car, of course—turn it over to your job-

ber and collect the dough. Once again, if she's caught on the way, you're in the clear. It's not bad at all—plenty of profit and no danger—plus the fact that lover-boy John gets a nice bonus of pretty women. Who is he, anyway?"

"My son," Clymer replied. "And he *has* musical talent. When we retire far from this barbarous country, he will devote his time to creation and his work will rival Wagner. Not the decadent Wagner of *Parsifal*, but the glorious man-god of the Ring Tetrology."

"Could be," Short grunted. "I wouldn't know anything about that. Anyway, when you wire the police of the city you're working, the answer is no marriage, no John McCrory—or whatever name he uses—and no Reverend Bush. By then the poor girl's damn glad to get out of here."

"Quite so," Clymer smiled. "And now that you've shown your knowledge of the *modus operandi*, will you please explain how I can avoid killing you? And be assured of my safety, of course."

Susan McCrory swayed. All through Short's speech she'd been standing stiff and wide-eyed, hands clenched into fists at her sides. "Things are turning," she moaned. "Help, I—"

Short caught her round the waist with one arm and started to move toward a couch at the end of the lobby. He'd long before put the suitcases down, but he still held the box of Coronas del Supremos in his free hand.

"Careful!" Clymer warned. "I'll fire at the slightest provocation. Don't be fooled by the size of this pistol; it carries five 9.5 mm. bullets."

"I'm not fooled," Short replied. "I just want to get her on that damned couch."

"Go ahead, but move easy."

Susan's face was white and drawn, but she was still conscious. Short took her to the couch and eased her down into it. "Good girl," he whispered. "Hang on—we haven't much further to go."

"But John—" she muttered. "It was all a trick. He—"

"I'm afraid so. It happens a lot—in different ways. Life's not like the movies and television, kid—there's no romantic happy endings. If you had any good times with John, you better just remember those and write off the rest to experience."

The brusqueness of these words startled Susan into full awareness of the situation. Color flushed her face and she looked at Short with surprised eyes.

"I detest him now," she said. "He's loathsome."

"All dope-traders are," Short told her.

"What are you saying?" Clymer demanded. He moved nearer, brandishing his pistol.

Short looked round pleasantly. "I was just telling Miss Shaw that killing us multiplies your troubles

instead of solving them. My agency knows we're here and you yourself informed the Chicago police of Miss Shaw's whereabouts—that's a part of your scheme that backfired nicely. Even if you got away with killing us, it'd spell the end of your little empire."

Pursing his shapely red lips, Clymer raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "A chance I'll have to take, sir. Besides, there's always Argentina—a veritable heaven-on-earth for a man of culture and substance."

"And his entire retinue?" Short asked, glancing at the desk-clerk and the Mexican. "Or do they stay here as fall guys?"

Clymer giggled and his big belly shook. "That line won't work, sir. My people are loyal. Now—it's time to put an end to this." He nodded at the Mexican. "Close the door and shut the blinds."

"I wouldn't move if I were you," Short said. In his left hand was the cedarwood cigar-box; his right held the bit of red ribbon embedded in the gold seal. "I think a fine cigar is in order at the moment."

"Don't!" Clymer cried in high falsetto, his face becoming a pasty white blob. His fat finger trembled on the trigger of his ugly little gun.

"Go ahead—shoot," Short laughed. "I'll bet you a harp and a halo I explode this thing before I die." He began walking toward Clymer, who took a step backward.

"What's the matter?" Short asked. "Afraid to die? You want to play *Uebermensch*, don't you? Death's part of that game, mister. The guy you're imitating bit down on a cyanide capsule. Valhalla's waiting for you, Clymer."

As Short approached, Clymer went backward two more steps. "Tell the Spik to throw his knife," Short advised. "Or shoot. Or drop the gun and go to jail. Do *something*, you yellow-livered tub of lard. Christ, I hate a phony!"

Clymer licked his lips and moved them soundlessly while he stared with disbelieving eyes at Short. The gun in his hand began to sag. Short grinned and kept moving forward.

"Look out!" Susan screamed from the couch. "Behind you!"

Instantly Short threw himself sideways and dropped to the floor. Something swished past his head and, as if by magic, a short piece of steel protruded from Clymer's bulbous throat. It was the haft of the Mexican's knife. Clymer's eyes bulged horribly in their pockets of fat, while two big blobs of blood gushed from his lips and spilled down his white shirt-front. He gurgled, dropped the pistol, and grasped the steel with his fat hands, trying to pull it from his windpipe. There was another great gush of blood from his mouth and he fell, his huge mass collapsing into a disorderly mound of flesh and red-stained linen. The knife remained buried in his throat.

Short wasted no time. He scooped up the gun and fired twice at the Mexican boy, both bullets ripping into his chest and slamming him back against a plaster and wood post. His eyes glazed and he slumped to the floor, sliding down along the post. Then, coming up to his feet, Short whirled round in time to see the desk-clerk bringing a twelve-gauge, double barreled shotgun up from behind the counter.

"That's far enough," Short said, pointing the derringer at the man's chest. "Drop it."

The clerk did as he was told. He shrugged and said, "I wasn't going to use it. To hell with Clymer and his gigolo son."

"I don't believe you," Short said, taking the gun, breaking it, and removing the shells, "but I'm in a generous mood." He turned to Susan. She was standing now, and although pale of face and drawn-looking, she had herself under firm control. Short nodded. "Nice going."

"Did you have to shoot the boy?" she asked. "He was unarmed and he killed Clymer for you."

Taking a pair of handcuffs from his overnight bag, Short snapped them on the clerk. He said to Susan, "The kid threw that knife at *me*—this way he'll never throw another." Then to the clerk he said, "The Federal boys'll want you for evidence—that's what saved your life. Sing loud enough and you might get off with a couple years."

"And John?" Susan asked.

"They'll pick him up in Chicago when he tries to unload the car. An agent'll probably drive back with you. And that'll be that." Pushing the clerk into a chair, Short went to the telephone. "I'm sorry it turned out this way, but you sure picked a wrong guy. Maybe you should've got your uncle's opinion—I know it's an old-fashioned idea, but a guy don't make it to bank-president by accepting wooden nickels and it wouldn't hurt to hear what he's got to say. But anyhow, I hope you're smart enough to get over it."

Susan's chin became firm. She tilted it slightly before asking, "How long did you know—before now, I mean?"

"I didn't really *know* until Clymer admitted everything. But I put the pieces together almost as soon as I finished speaking to you and the clerk. You see, the whole thing was so senseless. Motiveless. All this trouble to deceive you and yet nobody seemed to *want* anything from you. Why had John disappeared? Well, the clerk there spoke the exact literal truth and gave the game away."

"Me?" the clerk looked up in surprise.

"Yeah. You told me Clymer'd be satisfied if Susan McCrory would just drive back to Chicago. That's quite a definite thing when you mull it over. He didn't just want her to get out of town and stop

bothering him; he didn't want her to take a train; he didn't want her in a mental institution; he wanted her *to drive back to Chicago*. This is a specific thing. Now why would he want this particular thing? Because something's in the car he wants to go to Chicago—something he wouldn't dare send in any normal way or take himself. What? On the Mexican border that's an easy question—pornography, dope, or espionage material. Clymer's operation was a little too big for pornography and not quite big enough for espionage, and that left dope. Heroin. Next question—who'll take it from the car in Chicago? Who knows where it's hidden? Who else but the missing person in the affair —John? So, when I put this all together, I proceeded to test it. I went along with the notion—" Short smiled at Susan—"that you were goofy and that John didn't exist, and told Clymer I was driving you back to Chicago. That suited him fine. But then at the last minute I threw in the monkey-wrench, telling him we'd changed plans and were driving to Diego. And when I mentioned the Feds, he knew the jig was up and showed his hand."

"But the cigar-box bomb?" Susan asked. "Why'd he do that?"

"A crazy piece of melodrama he couldn't resist. Clymer was one of those two-bit Nazi-worshippers. He fancied himself as the superior, cold, cultured arch-criminal—you heard the bit about Wagner? Well, Von Keppelwise said almost the same words to me years ago in Cairo. Clymer liked to play Hermann Goering, Goebbels, Keppelwise, and the rest of those butchers. And he shared their biggest weakness—an insatiable thirst for melodrama. That's the idea behind all the fancy cuisine, super-politeness, and ultra-sophistication. No doubt Clymer read every book and magazine article ever written about Hitler's gang and he picked up the information about the Coronas del Supremos from one. The idea of blowing you, me, and the car to hell and gone—even with the loss of his dope cargo —was too theatrical a chance for him to miss. Then, of course, there was always the possibility I'd open the thing later—much later, long after we'd delivered the stuff."

"I don't know much about Nazis," Susan said, shuddering.

Short picked up the phone. "No, I guess not. You were too young." He jerked a thumb in the direction of Clymer's body. "They were pretty much like him at that—dream merchants. Phony supermen."

Susan glanced at Clymer and quickly turned her head back to Short. "Why did you call his bluff —throw in the monkey-wrench, as you say, without even carrying your gun?"

Short laughed low and somewhat bitterly. "I guess I'm something of a ham myself. Maybe—"

Southern Comfort

BY SHIRLEY DUNBAR

"After all, honey, what's family for . . . but to help out in time of need."

AT FIRST GLANCE George Waton appeared to be deep asleep, but even when fully awake he had a half asleep look, with his small eyes set far back in wrinkle creased sockets and pale blonde-stubby lashes adding no color to his light blue eyes. "You really are taken with this quaint little town, aren't you Laurie Lee?"

"Why, honey, I just think it's so nice after all the hustle and bustle of our busy city life," she slowly answered him in her sweet soft southern drawl. Laurie Lee never raised her voice, got excited; always calm and composed. She was brought up to be what she was . . . a lady.

Looking at the large expansive lawn, tall trees with leaves slowly stirring in the mild breeze, he replied, "It is peaceful sitting outside here." The lounge groaned as he leaned back, relaxing in the lazy mild climate. Laughingly, he had an after thought, "Maybe I should have said, right peaceful as the natives do."

Laurie Lee didn't bother to reply, being what he referred to as a native, she was never argumentative. Removing her sun glasses, she smoothed the light tan linen dress over the snug hip line, crossed trim legs with feet encased in dyed to match tan shoes. She admired the large diamond ring on her finger, watching the fading sun catch the light in the stone. Her long blonde hair was coiled around her head, almost a halo effect. Petite and fragile appearing, Albert had loudly remarked when first meeting her . . . in fact, it was

still his favorite line, "Honey, you are just too tiny and pretty to be real, you look like a gorgeous lady doll."

"I'm so glad that all the ole bother with the land is finished. Aren't you just delighted with this darling house? Of course, some of the furniture is in poor condition, but then some of the pieces are just masterpieces."

Mopping his damp forehead, Albert said, "Anything to make you happy, baby." Placing his hands on the mound of his stomach, squirming in the lounge, as if he could possibly squeeze in tighter, "But I just don't think we will get a good return for our money. We can't afford to spend too many weeks out of the year here. You know, Sugar, I have a business to tend. But, if being a plantation owner makes you happy it's well worth the price."

"Yes dear," noticing that as always, he spoke to her as if she were a teen ager . . . a feeble minded one at that. "This is the house I've dreamed of. Why, when I was a girl the most influential family in the whole state lived here . . . and now, it's mine." Lovingly she admired the rich green grass, the beautiful full trees, flowers and shrubs, the curved drive. Her glance lingered longer on the huge white house with the four white pillars that seemed to hold the two story house upright. It was truly . . . a gracious home for a gracious lady.

Smoothing down the thin grey blonde hair, that was having a difficult time covering the large area of baldness, Albert inquired, "Sugar, I can't understand why you wanted so much land with this house. I guess you are a very sentimental gal. Yes, I'm glad we signed the final papers today and you are a big land owner."

Reaching over he took her small manicured hand in his damp one. "I hate to spoil your visit, but we will have to start packing tomorrow, close up the house and start back to the big city." Giving her hand a clammy pat, he added, "Back to our little love nest."

Laurie Lee's hand lay limply in his. She thought of their apartment. It was lovely as apartments go, large ultra deluxe, richly furnished. She would return to being the cute little Mrs. Walton . . . entertaining Albert's business associates, who were as he, older, well established . . . business upper most in their minds. Even their dull drab matronly wives talked business . . . diet business, the business of running a smooth house with such miserable help, duties of charity, and always thinking of her as Albert did . . . a little brainless doll with a cute accent.

Albert's fat hand slowly slid up and down her arm, "Let's meander to our mansion and have a nice cool drink."

"That's a wonderful idea. I'm so glad that we only have the house-

keeper during the day . . . It's so much nicer to be mistress of my own home, it makes it so much cozier."

"I wouldn't call this palace cozy. I really should have a white suit, bit white hat and a long black cigar to reside here . . . not this casual attire." He was refering to his baggy legged burmuda shorts, showing pasty white legs that were held up by flat feet encased in T-strap brown sandals. The shirt tail partially covered his round middle.

At the vestibule, Laurie Lee sweetly said, "Honey, you go in the living room and relax. I'll take just a minute to fix the drinks."

Carefully measuring his, then hers, she thought of the ways she would modernize the house . . . some of the furniture would have to go, some was dreadfully shabby. Then this kitchen would have to be completely done over . . . built-ins, a dish washer, a freezer, so much to buy. Also, a couple of bath rooms should be added . . . one up stairs and another down stairs. Why, maybe even a swimming pool in the back yard. It was a choice location.

Carrying the drinks, she joined Albert in the living room. She loved the living room too, with the large raised fire place. She would not change that, nor the glass picture windows over-looking the yard.

Albert gulped his drink down, "My I was thirsty. You sure fix a mighty powerful good drink, sugar." When he spoke with his put on southern drawl he was most obnoxious.

Charming as always, Laurie Lee said, "I'll fix you another one. After all you are the one on vacation."

Handing him his refill, she said, "This has just been the nicest three weeks. I'm so pleased with my new home, and all this beautiful land. Why, I'm just the envy of all my kin folk."

"It's hard for an old orphan like me to understand all this relative togetherness." He swirled the ice around in the glass, watching the amber liquor twirl.

"Is the drink all right, Honey?"

Starting to answer, he suddenly dropped his glass, ice and liquid rolling over the highly polished floor. He stiffened as a convulsive spasm passed through his body. "What!!" he gasped, "What?"

He tried to get to his feet, but another spasm caused him to fall back in the sofa. His naturally pasty face became flushed with a deep red glow . . . he grimmaced, the facial muscles twitching. Perspiration dripped from his forehead. He gasped, trying to talk. No words would come out, just gurgling noises. One hand tried to grab his shirt . . . as if to hold back the vise that was gripping his chest.

Laurie Lee sat with her legs neatly crossed, still the perfect lady, watching Albert's struggles . . . watching, but not staring . . . it

wasn't considered ladylike to stare at another person's discomfort. She heard the gasps become more shallow as she unmovingly took small dainty sips from her glass. The convulsions stopped as Albert's breathing became more shallow. Finally the labored breathing slowed, then stopped completely. He still had a most peculiar expression on his face . . . not at all contented.

Slowly Laurie Lee walked to the newly installed telephone. Albert had to keep up with the latest stock quotations, and had to talk to his office and broker every day. Her accent was pronounced as she slowly said, "This is Laurie Lee. Please come over right away. There has been an accident, something seems to be the matter with Albert."

Laurie Lee calmly waited for the doctor to arrive. She finished her drink and continued to remodel her house mentally. Before too long she heard a car in the driveway. She remained seated, waiting to hear the foot steps rushing in the hall.

Without looking at Albert the kindly white haired gentleman hurried to Laurie Lee, anxiously inquiring, "You all right, Honey?"

Patting her eyes carefully, she she ran into his arms, "Yes, Daddy. . . . but, Albert seems to be in real bad shape."

Before kneeling by the stricken man he adjusted his glasses. Albert's eyes were wide open . . . his mouth slack. The doctor felt his pulse, shaking his head. "I hate to tell you Laurie Lee, but Albert is beyond medical help. It appears to me you are a widow."

The tears flowed more freely now, with the horrible but expected news. "You had better take me home to Mama, Daddy. I just feel so faint."

"You sit down for a second . . . you'll be fine in a little while. You'll have to be a big brave girl, darlin'. Daddy has a few things to take care of."

Looking up adoringly at her father Laurie Lee innocently asked, "Do you have to call the coroner because of Albert?"

"Why, honey, no need to bother your Uncle Willie. I'll just sign the death certificate . . . any old intern could tell Albert passed away from a heart attack. A man that heavy should be more careful . . . take better care of his health. I'll just call your Uncle Ben to come with the hearse. We will see that Albert has the finest funeral this town has ever seen."

Laurie Lee sobbed, "Albert would like that. I just know he would want to rest here. Why just this afternoon he remarked how peaceful it was."

"You just come on home with me for a few days. I'll have Cousin Billy Bob go to the city tomorrow and take care of all that legal mess." Putting his arm around Laurie Lee, he said, "After all what's a family for, but to help out in a time of need like this."

NEEDLE STREET

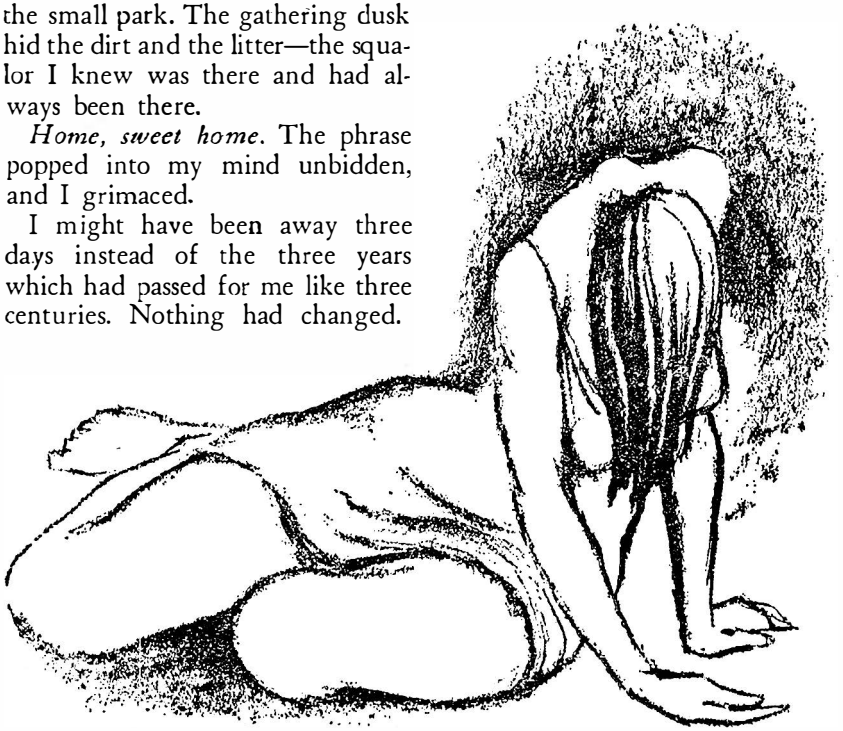
He'd been away for three years. Now he was back on the street and nothing had changed. Nothing and no one . . . except Carol.

BY
J. KENNETH O'STREET

I PAUSED, my back to the lighted subway exit, and glanced around the small park. The gathering dusk hid the dirt and the litter—the squalor I knew was there and had always been there.

Home, sweet home. The phrase popped into my mind unbidden, and I grimaced.

I might have been away three days instead of the three years which had passed for me like three centuries. Nothing had changed.



A couple of winos, imagining that they were hidden in the shadows beneath the large, guano-frosted statue of a long dead and forgotten mayor of New York, sat passing a bottle of white port. In small, scattered groups and singly drunks, bums and hopheads stood or walked aimlessly, waiting—for nothing. A junkie sat alone on a bench by the scum-streaked water fountain staring fixedly up the graveled walk. I walked toward him.

It's easy to spot a junkie, if you know what to look for. And I do. This one was waiting for his pusher. Any narcotics agent would have spotted him at a glance. Or any long-time junkie.

And I'm not a cop.

As I sat down on the other end of his bench the junkie jerked his head around and started to get up.

"Cool it, baby," I said quietly, shaking my head, "I'm just trying to locate an old friend. Get it?" *A beautiful girl. Her name is Carol, Carol, Carol and I am going to kill, kill—*

I forced my mind to break the familiar, tight little circle before it could get started, and watched the junkie. He was young and thin, hollow-cheeked and dirty. The pupils of his eyes were widely dilated.

"So?" he said flatly, not relaxing.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out two crumpled bills—a five and a single—my last. I rubbed them slowly one against the other between thumb and curled forefinger, letting him see the denominations. Six bucks. Not much to most people. Not much unless you've got a twenty dollar a day habit that demands satisfaction.

"Who?" asked the kid. He eyed the two bills.

"Gig Madison. Willie the Creep. A kid called Doodle. Bo Wheeler." I paused, surprised at the limited number of names I could dredge up from the old days. "Any of those," I finished lamely.

The kid frowned, licking his lips. "That last guy—Bo something. He a tall skinny cat, big nose?"

"Yeah, I said quickly, "know where he is?" I held out the bills, drawing my hand back fast as he reached for them.

"You first," I said, and waited.

He stared at the money for a moment, his hand outstretched, then spoke. "The Dalton. He's got a room there, second floor. O.K.?"

I stood and slipped the bills back into my pocket. "Thanks," I said as I turned to go.

"Hey! Wait a minute. What about the dough?"

"Bill me for it, punk," I tossed over my shoulder and grinned to myself.

Bo Wheeler. He'll know. And if he doesn't someone will. She won't be far away and she won't be hard to find.

I left the park and entered the narrow canyon beyond called Needle Street by the junkies, pushers

and cops who walked its dingy length each day; past dark pawnshops namless flophouses; past the dirty store with its bottledlined shelves, a sign in the window advertising VINTAGE WINES—35¢ PINT, where the neighborhood cops sometimes stood hidden in the rear watching the winos come in, waiting for one to flash more money than was good for him to keep; past the human derelicts with their blank eyes and the inevitable heavily made-up hooker, her wares displayed with the aid of a supposedly sexy off-the-shoulder peasant blouse.

Just before reaching the end of that first block of Needle Street I passed a pair of New York's finest, their badges dully reflecting colored light cast by cheap neon. One nudged the other and I ignored the knowing glance they exchanged as they made me for a brand-new excon, which is another easy trick if you know what to look for. I crossed the street feeling their eyes on my back, not caring.

I stopped on the corner and stared at the faded sign hanging over a dimly lighted doorway. "HOTEL" it stated tiredly—nothing more. A stylized red neon martini glass with swizzle stick hung suspended in a plate glass window by an open door through which poured the blare of a juke along with the odor of stale beer and stale bodies. There was no name but I knew that the bar was called "Harry's" by everyone who knew it, although the original possessor of the name had sold out and moved away so long ago that no one here remembered him, or cared.

And the hotel was called the Dalton.

I hesitated beneath the hanging sign then pushed open the glass door of the cheap hotel and stepped inside.

At the top of the single long flight of stairs a bare bulb dangled at the end of its cord, casting a few faint rays of illumination down to struggle fitfully with the pool of darkness gathered at the foot of the stairwell. I climbed the stairs slowly, listening to their creaking protest against my 180 pounds. As my head came above floor level the night clerk looked up from the comic book he had been reading in the small cubicle which served as an office.

"Yeah?" he said, not rising.

"A room. Second floor if you've got one," I said.

He stood, holding a can of beer down out of sight, a quick, appraising glance taking in my brand-new, cheap suit and fresh, short haircut. I could almost see the wheels turning behind his dull eyes as he rubbed a two-day growth of beard.

"Well, let me think." He turned and pretended to study an unpainted plywood board nailed to the wall behind him, tagged room keys hanging against black silhouettes of themselves from a triple row of

pegs. "I got one three-dollar room left on two—" he shot a look at my unresponding face and added, "oh, yeah. here's a two-buck room." He reached for a key. "Two-oh-five."

I dropped the single on the bare counter and smiled, "It's only a buck tonight, friend. Right?" The landlord collected one dollar per signature in the register each morning in these dumps and didn't care what the night clerk squeezed out of each room; but if the owner ever learned that anyone had been turned away simply because he wouldn't come across with a buck for the boy, then the boy would be looking for a new job.

Not that the buck mattered to me as such. But it might take a couple of days to find Carol, and a dollar might make a difference. *And when I find her I will kill her and she will know that she is dying and why. And when she is dead they will come for me and eventually they will kill me, not knowing that I am already dead.*

The grubby clerk shoved the open register across the counter, resentment apparent in his voice as he said shortly, "Sign the book," and resumed his seat, jamming the bill into his shirt pocket.

I ran my eye quickly over the registrations for the last three days —some illegible, others sprawled across the page, ninety percent phoney. There was no "Bo Wheeler" listed—nor had I expected there would be.

I shrugged and wrote "James Conway" beneath the last of several John Smiths, feeling a vague satisfaction in not having to add another John Smith to the list. I picked up the key and went up the next flight of stairs.

The hall was long and narrow, lined on each side with closed doors about ten feet apart. Yellow light fell through dirty glass transoms above several doors. The worn rubber runner muffled my footsteps as I moved down the hall, pausing briefly to listen before each door with a lighted transom. Toward the end of the hall I found the door I wanted.

The light shone very dimly through the transom. I stood and listened for a full two minutes to the muted sounds in the room. I could distinguish at least five different voices engaged in a desultory conversation against the background of a steady, pleading monotone. Twice came the flat sound of an open palm striking bare flesh. Dropping to my hands and knees I sniffed at the crack beneath the door. The smell was of sweat and smoke and heroin.

As I climbed to my feet my heart began to beat faster. I took a deep breath and released it slowly before knocking on the flimsy, paneled door. There was a sudden silence in the room broken after a moment by a voice I remembered well.

"What the hell. Who is it?"

"Jim," I answered, "open up, Bo."

Another pause then a key rattled in the lock. The door opened a crack sending a thin line of light cutting across the hall and up the opposite wall. An eye peered through the narrow opening, squinted at the darkness, and the door opened wider. I put my shoulder against the door and shoved. The guy behind the door yelped and fell as I stepped into the room, closing the door behind me.

The room was so familiar that I gagged a little. It was a "shooting gallery". One junkie gets a room and the word gets around. All his friends and their friends stream in. It's somewhere to go.

The room was littered with the debris of addiction—bits of toilet paper and rags that had been used to wipe blood from arms and the soft inner sides of thighs; paper cups half-filled with pinkish fluid —water tinted with blood from the cleaning of needles; scraps of electric-light cord chopped up and separated into thin strands with which to unplug needles; charred metal bottle tops used to cook the heroin. Everywhere on the floor clothing, magazines and cigarette butts were strewn. There was a large burn in the bare mattress on the narrow bed. Nodding junkies sat and lay on the littered floor, dreaming.

A girl was being supported by two guys in the corner by the bed. She was wearing a thin slip, a strap down over one shoulder half-exposing her breast. When they saw that I was not the fuzz one of them turned back to her, begging in a crooning, desperate voice, "Come on, baby, get straight—you've *got* to meet that john in a half-hour. I've already got the room, baby, and you gotta *be* there. No play, no pay, and we got no wake-up fix. Come on, goddam it, get straight." He slapped her face sharply.

The punk I had upended was crawling to his feet, cursing. He got a good look at me and shut up fast. I looked past him at the tall, thin, dark-haired figure standing bare-chested at the foot of the bed, a narrow belt pulled tight around a thin arm, its end swinging as if it had just been dropped.

"Hello, Bo," I said softly.

Bo peered at me, trying to place my face in a past in which one day was the same as the last—one face pretty much the same as another —the next fix being the only, all-consuming reality. Then his eyes lighted as he remembered.

"Jim—Jim boy! Goddam! When did you get out?"

I stepped over a nodding addict sitting on the floor and took Bo's outstretched hand. "This morning, Bo. How've you been?"

Bo shrugged his narrow shoulders. "You know how it is, man," he said, dropping his eyes. "Excuse me a minute, Jim boy," he added as he picked up the belt end and placed it between his teeth, drawing it tighter around his arm, forcing the veins to stand out.

I nodded and watched as Bo dumped the powder from a tiny bag of heroin into a bottle top already filled with water. He held a match under the "cooker" until the white powder dissolved. Then he placed the tip of a needle into the liquid, drawing it up from the bottom of the container. He stuck the needle into a vein and waited for the blood to start backing up into the syringe.

I waited while he squeezed in a few drops, let it back into the syringe again, squeezed in a little more, let it back up, squeezed in more, and continued the in and out process until the fluid was dark red with blood. Then he shot it all in and withdrew the needle.

Bo rubbed his arm with a dirty rag, his eyes closed, waiting for the drug to take effect. Then he opened his eyes and smiled. "Good stuff. Get it from Carlos. His stuff is always good. Hey, you want a fix, Jim boy?" he asked suddenly.

I shook my head not letting the old wanting that had began to churn up my insides as I had watched Bo mainline show in my face. "I'm not looking for junk, Bo," I answered. "I came to find Carol. Do you know where she is?"

Bo raised his eyebrows and looked at me searchingly, his eyes bright, the pupils already pinpoints. Then he laughed—a short, nasty laugh—and jerked his grinning head sideways.

I turned, not understanding, as the two junkies sat the girl down on the edge of the bed. She fell back, anesthetized, face up to the light filtering down fom a hanging bulb shaded by a pair of scorching shorts. Then recognition hit me and I must have shown the shock, because Bo laughed again, as if something were infinitely amusing.

I spun on him and hit him in his bare white belly with everything I had. He folded up on the floor making funny noises as he tried to force his paralyzed diaphragm to pull air back into his emptied lungs. I stepped past him and the two hopheads standing over Carol crowded back into the corner out of my way as I walked over and looked down at her sprawled form.

I had seen Carol before, often when she needed a fix badly, but I had never imagined that I would ever see her looking like this. Her eyes were widly dilated from heroin withdrawal. She obviously had been without a fix for at least six or seven hours. Her face looked as if make-up had been laid on it with a trowel, and one side was red and swollen slightly from her boyfriend's abortive attempts to slap sensibility into her. Her hair, which had been a rich, dark brown, was a ridiculous orange-red. One breast was fully exposed now and the dull red nipple stood out starkly against the flaccid, gray-tinged flesh. She was just barely conscious.

I became aware that I had been holding my breath and let it out

slowly, closing my eyes on the pitiful wreck that was, still, Mrs. James Conway—whose memory had made me a model prisoner for three, long years; a model prisoner so I could get an early parole for good behavior and go to her and feel her soft, white throat under my hands and watch her face as I strangled the life from her lovely, rotten body.

And now her body was no longer lovely or even remotely desirable—and she wasn't even aware that I was in the room.

I let the memories come welling up-memories which, along with the sweet contemplation of death, had been my sole mental activity for the last three years: Carol, Carol —the wild and beautiful girl whom I had met and married in my senior year at Columbia. Carol, so hungry for life and greedy for new experiences that I had flunked my finals in the effort to keep up with her.

At first it had been like a wonderful dream. We had eagerly explored each other's bodies, dreaming up wild sexual variations and, exhausting our imaginations but not our desire, turning to illustrated pornography for new ideas. I had been enough for her sexually, but Carol needed new people and new experiences like a flower needs the sun.

She was a magnet for off-beat characters, turning up with one new weird-o after another, and I followed her to parties and met people the likes of which I had never dreamed existed. Heavy drinking and marijuana had been the order of the day and the odor of the night, and where I only sampled she indulged deeply, which was her nature. I never did know where she had first experimented with heroin, but I do know that one day the dream had begun to turn into nightmare—she was hooked.

And I was hooked on her. I lied to my parents, cheated my friends, and stole anything I could lay hand to to get the money with which to supply her need, because I knew that if I did not she would sell her beautiful body for the little bags of white powder—and that final degradation I would not let happen.

Somewhere along the line I had become hooked myself and to supply both habits I had turned to pushing. I would not allow Carol to help me directly. Not my Carol, my life. I wanted her in no danger.

She did help out, though. For the six hours that I pushed the junk each day Carol sat in the bar across from our hotel, watching for narcotics agents. In case one did enter the building she was to have telephoned, giving me time to flush the snow down the toilet before the three flights of stairs could be climbed. It worked well in practice. I never found out if it would work in actuality, because the first and only time the narcos came calling the phone didn't ring.

I had not seen or heard from Carol since the morning of the day of my arrest, but the bartender from the joint across the street had come to see me one day before the trial. I was still sick and shaking from the hell of cold-turkey withdrawal from heroin. Mike, the bartender, had come to apologize—for failing to spot the narcos when they had entered the hotel. He thought I knew that Carol was in the habit of making pick-ups in the bar during the day, leaving Mike to keep a casual eye on the hotel for a small cut with the promise of a substantial bonus if it ever were necessary to actually call me.

It had not seemed odd to Mike that my wife would be hustling while I was pushing. We were junkies. At the time of my arrest Carol had been entertaining two sailors in a cheap hotel room and Mike had missed the narcos. It had taken three guards to get me back into my cell, and if the partition had not been between us, three guards or thirty guards could not have saved Mike.

Bo was on his feet now, slightly bent, holding his gut with crossed arms. The two junkies who had been trying to get Carol in shape to make her date had slid along the wall behind me and were standing in front of the door, watching me.

Bo managed to gasp, "Jesus, Jim, that was a hell of a thing to do." He spat on the bare mattress, perspiration beading his upper lip.

I ignored him and looked at the pair by the door. "Which one of you does she stay with?" I asked.

They exchanged a look and the one who had slapped Carol answered, a half-hearted sneer in his voice, his hand on the doorknob.

"She's been with me about four months. I was gonna ditch her. She don't make enough anymore—besides, her habit is too damn big and —well, *look* at her."

I looked. At the tangled hair and slack mouth; at the exposed breast and pasty skin; at the scarred arms and, where the dirty slip was hiked up the thin legs, the scarred thighs. And I thought: *You poor, pitiful bitch. Twenty-five years old and burned out. You can't make enough from your body to supply its demands. You poor, pitiful bitch.* And I felt no pity.

I turned to Bo, who was still holding his belly, and said, "Listen to me, Bo. Listen good. When she's had a fix and can understand tell her this for me: Tell her Jim was here, that I came to take her away. Tell her it was going to be just like the old days—me pushing and her watching and all the snow we wanted. Just like the old days. Then tell her I took one look at her and threw up. Got that, Bo?"

Bo repeated what I had said and I could see that he believed it. When he finished I nodded and walked out. In the darkness of the hallway I suddenly wanted to cry. The feeling passed and I laughed instead.

Kill her? The mirth welled up from deep inside. *Hell, I wouldn't think of interrupting the beautiful job she's doing on herself.*

I pushed open the door at the bottom of the stairs and stepped out into the night. I walked back down Needle Street toward the subway station in the park where junkies and pushers always hang out, my hand in my pocket fingering the lone five-spot. I felt elated. Carol *was* dead and I was *alive.*

Jesus, I wish I had a fix. The thought came, crystal clear and whole, as if someone had spoken suddenly inside my head. I rejected it, but the gate had been opened and I could not close it so easily.

The voice whispered: *Just one. Because you feel so great. You don't want to lose this feeling yet, do you? Just one fix can't hurt you, Jim boy, can it?*

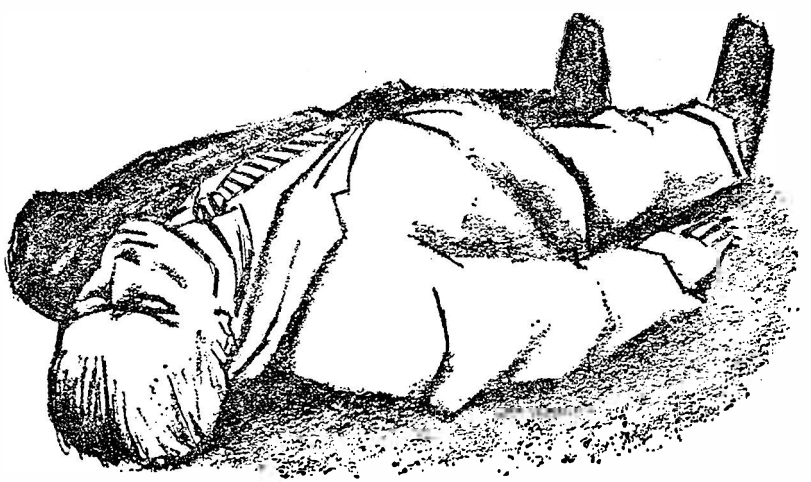
I walked on down Needle Street, listening to the voice in my head.

A DEADLY SECRET

EARLY September in the midwest is often unbearable, with a humid heat that digs deep under your skin and stays there. This was one of those days. The dried fields actually shrivelled under the sun's glare. Feeling pretty shrivelled myself, I watched them from the dusty window of the Long Lake bus. One thing, I had absolutely no premonition of disaster. Only a fierce urge to kick somebody, preferably a man, in the stomach.

Two weeks before, during our coffee break, Brad Halloway, the man I intended to marry, looked at me over the edge of his paper cup and told me he'd fallen in love with somebody else. "A blonde," he said, as though that explained everything and maybe it did. I haven't been able to drink coffee out of a paper cup since.

Since Brad was head of the department where I worked, I naturally turned in my resignation. No



They had a secret and they kept it well . . . but in the end it killed them.

A Novelette

BY

BEATRICE S. SMITH

dying swan act for me, thank you. Mr. Field, the personnel manager and a real sweet guy, found me this job in Long Lake. I was to be secretary to the principal of Long Lake Grade School, of all things. The idea tickled me. I'm no burlesque queen, but I'm a lot closer, as far as looks and personality are concerned, to being a stripper than I am to being a teacher.

I was the only passenger getting off the bus at Long Lake, which wasn't unusual. It was a real small town. But when the bus pulled away, I had a crazy notion to run after it. I remember that, though I'd hardly call the feeling a premonition.

There was a cab parked at the curb, the only cab in the whole place, I found out later. "Three-sixteen Maple Street," I told the driver, a short, long-nosed, bald-headed fellow, a Jimmy Durante type.

"Oh, Nettie Barnard's place over by the school. What you want over

there? You sellin' something?" the driver asked me, giving me the big eye from under his cap.

"I'm going to work at the school," I said, then, figuring there was no sense hiding anything, I gave him the rest. "I'm the new secretary. My name is Marta Hale and I've rented a room from Miss Barnard. Do you know her?"

"Yep," he said and spit out the window. "You're takin' Aggie Drury's place, eh?" I said I didn't know. "She was the secretary at the school for nearly forty years," he told me. "Forty years!" I said. "I didn't think anybody was a secretary that long."

"Yep, Aggie was. And I reckon she'd be here yet if she hadn't caught a lead ball."

"Hadn't what?" I leaned forward, sure I hadn't heard right. But the cabby didn't answer. He acted as if he didn't hear me. Maybe he didn't, I don't know. Anyway, a few seconds later we pulled up in front of a big two-story house. A screened porch covered with the standard grape vines stretched across the front with red geraniums beside the steps. A pretty place, in a small town sort of way. Cheap rent, too. And with my own private bath, yet. At least that's what Miss Barnard had said in her letter.

"Thanks," I said to my peculiar little driver. "I wonder if anybody's home." The house looked very quiet, even for a small town. A motel room was what I should have rented. More my type.

"Oh, Nettie's home all right. She don't go out much. Bad legs. Varicose veins, I guess. My brother Fred's got veins, too. Big ones. Like that," my friend told me, with gestures, of course. I paid my fare and started up the steps.

"Thanks. You want a cab sometime, you call me. My name's Oscar," Oscar yelled after me. I nodded and rang the doorbell.

Then, "Yes?" I couldn't talk. Never in my life had I ever seen such a character as this one. Purple eyeshadow, black mascara, pencilled-on eyebrows. That wasn't so bad. But add red rouge, pink lipstick, lavender hair and long ropes of beads and bands of bracelets and you have quite a picture. "I—I'm Marta Hale," I stuttered, really overcome and I'm no innocent abroad, if you know what I mean.

"Come in, my dear. I'm Nettie Barnard. I've been expecting you, but I wasn't expecting anyone as—anyone quite so young and pretty as you." She flubbed it. But she had a very nice voice. It didn't match her get-up at all. Actually, she looked a lot like a white slaver I used to know. The whole house smelled of disinfectant, too. A good clean smell, but inappropriate, somehow. It was awfully strong, if you know what I mean.

"I'm sorry I didn't call to tell you exactly when I'd be here, but you see I—" I stopped. I couldn't very well spill out my life history to this perfect stranger, but it would have

been easy. White slaver or not, she had a very sympathetic way about her, and I was lonely. In fact I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, though, I felt a lot better. The day was bright and I'd slept like a baby, in spite of my broken heart and jittery nerves. I went to the drugstore for breakfast. Nettie had said the night before that she positively wasn't interested in giving me any meals, which was all right. I'm not fond of cooking myself. There was just one other person at the counter, an old gent with a cataract in one eye. To tell the truth, I was hoping I might meet someone interesting. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't husband-hunting. Far from it. I just wanted a man. Any man. To bolster my morale, so to speak. But I didn't find him in the drugstore.

When I got to school, teachers were grouped in twos and threes outside their rooms, gossiping, I suppose. They were all female, unfortunately. A young girl, very pale and thin with long wispy brown hair, looked up as I walked into the outer office. "Hi," I said to her. "I'm Marta Hale."

"Oh, hi," she said. "I was wondering—that is, you're nothing like Miss Drury—I mean, well, I'm Betty Lou Sheldon. I help out here sometimes."

"Fine. I'm happy to meet you," I told her, really making it warm and cheerful. Sixteen or seventeen, I figured, seven or eight years younger than I was, but she looked like something left behind in Greenwich Village.

"Mr. Van Buren's expecting you. His office is straight through that door over there, the one that's open."

"Come in," a deep voice called from the inner sanctum.

I moistened my lips and smiled, the way I'd been taught by my mother who, when she was younger, had been a Vegas showgirl. And there he was. The man I'd been looking for. Tall and dark, the way Brad was, but more mature. Quite mature, as a matter of fact. Middle forties maybe, but he'd do. I decided that right away.

"I—I wasn't expecting anyone like you," he said, stuttering somewhat. "From Mr. Field's letter, I'd assumed you would be older."

"Sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone like you either," I told him, smiling, giving him the whole treatment. But gently.

"You've met Betty Lou, of course. She'll help you whenever you need her," he went on, very formal-like. "I'll introduce you to the teachers this afternoon. The children, of course, won't arrive for another week. That will be all, Miss Hale, unless you—unless you have a question."

I stood up. I have a pretty good figure, better than Mother's ever was she tells me, and I stood straight, with my shoulders back. "Thank you. I think I'm going to like it here," I said, politely, but

with a meaning he could take or leave. A tiny movement of his head showed that he'd taken it all right. I was satisfied and left, swaying ever so slightly.

Betty Lou showed me the ropes that morning and when she left at noon, I decided to work right through the lunch hour. But about twelve-fifteen this tall, sleek woman with silvery blonde hair done in a big pouf, stalked into the office. And I mean stalked, just like a big cat. "I'm Christine Anderson," she said. "I teach second grade. Let's go to lunch and get acquainted."

Puzzled, I introduced myself and told her I'd love to go to lunch. I tried not to show it, but I was surprised that a teacher would bother with a mere secretary. She wasn't young. I saw that right away. She had a creamy complexion and no wrinkles, but there was a faint crepiness around her throat and a thickness around her waist. Late thirties, maybe. I noticed that she was looking me over as carefully as I was her. Then it hit me. This was my competition. I grinned to myself. I like competition, so long as it doesn't sneak up from behind me like that dirty blonde of Brad's. I didn't even know she existed until that morning during coffee break, can you imagine?

"The school doesn't have a hot lunch program, so everyone has to go out at noon," Christine said, her eyes on my left hand. She looked rather wistful.

"Oh," I replied, wishing as much as she did that I was wearing a diamond. We both took a breath, ready to tee off.

"A kitchen would dirty up the place. Roger hates mess and disorder. Most men do," Christine said, carelessly dropping Mr. Van Buren's first name, thus letting me know her experience both here and afar.

"Is Mr. Van Buren married?" I asked, laying my cards on the table. I think if he had been, I would have left him to Christine. Back street affairs never interested me very much.

There was a pause. "No, he isn't." Short and to the point. I liked that in Christine. "Nor ever apt to be," she added bitterly. "All he thinks about is this school. He doesn't go anywhere or do anything. You should see where he lives. Way out in the country all by himself." She cocked her head at me. "By the way, where do you live?"

"With Nettie Barnard. Do you know her?" I asked, wondering if anybody else had the same impression of Nettie that I did.

Christine snorted. "That crazy old witch! I know her all right."

"She's been nice to me," I said, somehow anxious to defend the old lady. Witch or bitch, it didn't matter to me. I liked her.

Christine looked at me. "You're very young, aren't you, Marta?"

I laughed. "I don't know. I'm twenty-three, is that young?"

"Yes, that's young. What are you doing here anyway?"

I shrugged. Christine wasn't the type of person I felt like confiding in. You don't show your opponent your cards, do you?

When I didn't elaborate, Christine straightened her face and we went on to the hotel. At lunch she chatted about the town, the school, the people. All that. It was really quite boring.

"Did you know a Miss Drury?" I asked, more to cut her off than anything.

Christine spoke quickly. "Yes, of course I knew her."

"Why did she leave? Was she fired?" I didn't mention what Oscar had told me. I learned to keep my mouth shut a long time ago.

"Poor Agnes." Christine's comment sounded as if it had been made many times.

"What happened?"

"She shot herself."

"*Shot* herself?" So Oscar had been telling the truth, I hadn't misunderstood him.

"Yes. Poor Agnes. There are all kinds of rumors. But cancer is what I think she had. Ask Nettie. She and Agnes were good friends."

"How awful. The poor thing."

"Yes, it was awful—" Christine trailed off, sort of absentmindedly and that closed the conversation. I'm not fond of lingering over the gruesome details of anything anyway, so I didn't press her.

That same afternoon about four-thirty after all the teachers had left Betty Lou came tip-toeing in. "Is Mr. Van Buren still here?" she whispered, looking first one way then the other like a bedraggled little Red Riding Hood in fear of the wolf.

"No," I told her. "He left about fifteen minutes ago."

"Good. I wanted to tell you about Miss Drury when he wasn't around. You know Miss Drury, the secretary here before you came."

"I know about her, Betty Lou. Miss Anderson told me."

Betty Lou peered at me from under her long bangs. "Did Miss Anderson tell you Miss Drury was murdered?"

"Murdered!" I yelped. "You're kidding!" I felt as if I'd been hit in the back with a sledge hammer.

Betty Lou shook her head. "I heard Mr. Van Buren say so right after it happened. He was talking to Nettie on the phone and he said, 'My God, that isn't suicide, it's murder!' Those were his very words and his face got as white as a sheet."

I examined Betty Lou's flushed little face, feeling very sorry for her. Someone should have taken her in hand a long time ago. "Betty," I said as gently as I could. "I'm sure Mr. Van Buren didn't mean that someone actually murdered Miss Drury. He meant she couldn't be blamed for killing herself, that it was really her illness that made her do it. People hate to say someone committed suicide. They say in-

stead that illness drove them to it or that they were mentally disturbed, something like that."

"He didn't mean that at all! You should have seen his face!"

"Oh, Betty Lou, come on now. You're making this all up and you know it." Sometimes you have to be tough with these kids. She was mad at me when she left. I couldn't help it. There was just no sense in letting her go on living in the world of her imagination. I had a great imagination when I was her age myself and I knew the trouble it could get you into. I remember when my father died of acute alcoholism, I went around telling everybody he'd been poisoned. My mother nearly ended up in jail. It didn't take her long to set me straight, believe me.

For the next few weeks I was too busy to give much thought to Betty Lou or anyone else, including Roger Van Buren. There were records to be filed, reports to be made out, purchase orders to be checked, a thousand things. I really am a good secretary, even if I don't look it. Sometimes at night I'd be so tired, all I could do was drag myself across the street to Nettie's and fall into bed. On those nights Nettie would bring my supper to me on a tray, though she ate mostly frozen dinners herself. She may have looked like a side-show freak, but she was a doll, really. Oh, sure, she was snoopy, but what old lady with nothing to do isn't? To tell the truth, Nettie was the only friend I had.

After that first day Christine didn't have any more to do with me. I knew she wouldn't. She'd sized me up and got my number, and that was that. As for Betty Lou, I asked her to go to the show with me a couple of times, but she always refused. I think she was still mad at me. She was an odd little kid. The only family she had was her older brother, a bachelor, who owned one of the local pubs. What she needed was a mother, preferably one like mine, someone who would fix her up, set her straight, and then leave her alone.

I talked to Nettie about Betty Lou one day after school. Nettie was sitting in her little straight rocker near the window, knitting. She always sat there so she could see what was going on at school across the street. "Betty Lou seems so lonely," I said. "I wish she'd let me do something for her."

"You seem a little lonely yourself," Nettie said. "There's so little to do here. I should think you'd go home on the weekends."

I didn't say anything. I'd made up my mind to keep away from home until I was sure I wouldn't go to pieces if I happened to run into Brad and his blonde. And that time hadn't come yet.

"Don't you get along with your parents?" Nettie asked, her raspberry mouth pursed like an old movie star's.

"All I have is a mother and we get along fine. It isn't that," I told her.

She examined her knitting and without looking up, asked, "Don't you have a boyfriend, a pretty girl like you?"

I had to smile. She wasn't very subtle at fishing. "I had one. He's going to marry somebody else. A blonde," I added, for no good reason, except I figured well, why not, she might as well know the whole sad story.

"Oh, Marta, I *am* sorry. You'll have to find a new one. It shouldn't be hard."

"It won't be. I've got one all picked out, if I ever find time to work on him."

Nettie didn't appear to be listening. She was busy counting her stitches. "Who is it?" she asked in between a knit and a purl.

"Roger Van Buren. My boss," I said. "He's attractive, don't you think?" When she didn't answer I went on, "In some ways he reminds me of Brad, my ex-fiance, the one that got away. Only this time things are going to be different."

"For a while every man you see will remind you of the one you lost," Nettie said finally, but without looking up. "It's a normal reaction in all of us to look for something we've lost. But he's a little old for you. Aren't there any teachers or anyone your own age with whom you could be friends?"

"Betty Lou is the only person anywhere near my age who'll have anything to do with me. And she's so full of crazy ideas, I doubt she has any friends of her own, let alone finding any for me."

"Crazy ideas, what do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing, you know Miss Drury, the woman who was the school secretary before I came, well, Betty is spreading the story around that the old lady was murdered. Murdered! Can you imagine?" I laughed, forgetting completely that Christine had told me that Nettie had been a good friend of Agnes Drury's. But the minute the words were out, I remembered, and could have hacked off my tongue.

Nettie closed her eyes for a second. "Agnes Drury committed suicide," she whispered. "But she was the bravest woman I've ever known." She opened her eyes then and seemed to be looking at something way beyond me. I said I was sorry for saying such a stupid thing, but Nettie didn't hear and she didn't say goodnight when I left her. I hated myself. And usually I'm so careful about what I say, too.

The next day was Friday and Friday nights the stores in Long Lake are open. I had a notion that I might run into Roger downtown someplace and if not, I'd looked up his address and intended to hunt him down if necessary. I wasn't getting anyplace at work. But then, neither was Christine. He was barely po-

lite to her when she came in to ask him something, which she did about eighteen times a day.

I did a little window-shopping, bought a new lipstick at the drugstore, but all I saw were a lot of women and their kids. The taverns were crowded with men, but I was fairly sure Roger wouldn't be in a tavern. He wasn't the type. So not finding him downtown, I started walking. By the time I passed the business section and crossed the bridge which led to the older part of town, I must admit I had a few doubts about the sense of what I was doing. The edges of town were mostly weed-filled, empty fields pocked here and there by clumps of gloomy elms and oaks. And it was quiet. Lord, it was quiet.

Stumbling along in my usual hit-or-miss fashion, I didn't notice that the sidewalk came to an end suddenly. A narrow path led through weeds and bramble to a gray house almost hidden by tall trees and shrubs. The house was too far back for me to see the number, but the name on the mailbox near the road said R. Van Buren. This spooky place was where Roger lived. Uneasy, and kind of ashamed of myself for running after him this way, I turned around and headed back for the bright lights. This was no place to hunt anything except a rabbit.

"Miss Hale?" Roger's voice. I jumped. "What are you doing here in the dark?" He appeared out of the darkness like a ghost.

"Just out for a walk," I said, swallowing, but not so he could notice.

"You should keep to the lighted streets."

"Yes, I know." I hesitated, groping for something to say. Finally, "Is that your house up there?" An inane thing.

"It is." No more. He just kept looking at me.

"It—it looks very lonely." This was spontaneous, just popping out of me.

"Yes." Roger lifted his head. The shadows did something odd to his face, made it look old and forlorn somehow. I put out my hand and touched his arm. Old or not, he was all there was at the moment. He took a quick breath and backed away. "It's very dark," he muttered. "Come, I'll walk you back to the bridge."

"I'll be all right, please don't bother," I told him, smiling bravely in a chin-up fashion.

"It won't be a bother, I assure you. You're a very nice-looking young woman, Miss Hale. And a good secretary, too, by the way, I've been meaning to tell you."

"Thank you." I send him a limpid look from beneath my lashes. We didn't talk much after that. It wasn't necessary. Most women talk too much. I don't. Something else, my mother taught me.

When we reached the bridge, Roger stopped. "I think you'll be

all right now. And after this, young lady, don't walk around in the dark by yourself."

I turned to face him. It was now or never. Our hands touched, not by accident, and I swayed toward him, just enough. He pulled me close and pressed his cheek against the top of my head. I clung to him then. But something went wrong.

Suddenly his body trembled against mine and he pushed me away. Pushed me away, can you imagine that? As if there was something the matter with me. Startled, I looked up. Deep furrows lined his face and, good Lord, there were tears in his eyes. Tears! "What's the matter?" I gasped. I'd never seen a man cry in my life, except my father when he was drunk.

Roger turned his face away and closed his eyes, as if trying to shut out something too horrible to believe.

"What's wrong, Roger?" His first name just slid out of my mouth, not on purpose.

He opened his eyes, the tears were gone, but they'd left an extra brightness. He studied my hair, my eyes, my mouth, especially my mouth. "It's nothing, Marta. I—felt faint for a moment, that's all. Forgive me." And before I could think of a word to say he whirled around and disappeared in the dark.

What was the matter? Had he just had a weak spell or was there something more? I puzzled over it all the way back to Nettie's. My foot was just about to touch the first step of the porch when someone grabbed my shoulder, nearly scaring me to death. Christine, her eyes blazing. "Out for a walk?" she said, baring her teeth. But before I could answer, she leaned close. "Keep away from Roger or I'll kill you," she hissed and stalked off, leaving me there with my mouth hanging open, literally. *Kill* me?

I let myself into the silent house and like a cowed pup crept upstairs to my room. This was wild! Christine was hysterical, of course, but even so, I certainly never would have suspected her of being so theatrical. And Roger, what was his problem? It was a long time before I calmed down enough to go to sleep that night, I'll tell you, either everybody was crazy or I was.

I woke up a little before dawn the next morning with a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach, as though something horrible had happened or was about to happen. Nettie was stirring around. I could hear her. She must have heard me, too, because she tapped at my door. "Are you sick, Marta?" I told her no and to come on in.

"Now dear, what is it? Something's wrong. I can tell by your face."

I had to confide in somebody and Nettie was the only person I had any confidence in so I told her all about the night before, though I didn't say that Christine had actually threatened me. It sounded too

ridiculous. And I didn't say much about Roger's faint.

Nettie came to life with a rattle of bracelets. She had them on from morning till night. "Leave Mr. Van Buren to Christine, Marta. He's too old for you. There are many other men younger and more suitable for you. And if Christine loves him, be kind and let things be."

"No one was kind to me. The girl who took Brad didn't think about how I felt. And Brad didn't either. Why should I play the big martyr?" I continued. "Besides, Roger doesn't care anything for Christine."

Nettie frowned. "Don't be foolish, Marta. You're confusing too very different situations."

"I—I need someone, Nettie," I said. And I did. Really.

"Not Roger Van Buren. Forget him, Marta." The lavender head lifted, the old voice quavered. "Please, Marta, believe me. I know what is best for you."

She's old, I thought to myself, I shouldn't be bothering her with my problems. I wanted to say something, to reassure her, to comfort her, but I didn't. And I didn't back down because of her either. In fact I dressed with extra care that morning. I put on a cherry-colored, lightweight wool that did things for my figure and hair. I have dark hair, really quite nice, if you don't happen to prefer blondes.

Betty Lou was in the office when I got there with some special reports that she was going to help me with. "Do you have a new dress?" she asked me. No, I told her, I just hadn't worn it to the office before.

She looked at me. "I suppose you think it will make Mr. Van Buren notice you," she said, shaking her head. "How come you want a creep like that to notice you is beyond me."

"Do you have any other suggestions?" I asked her. "If so, I'm listening." What she said about Roger didn't bother me. I knew Betty Lou didn't like him. He was forever after her about not eating apples and candy bars in the office and all that. What pleased me is that at least she was talking like a human being instead of like something out of a third rate horror movie and I told her so. It was the wrong thing to say. She gave me one of those looks of hers and ran out of the office, almost knocking Roger down in the process. He was just coming in.

"What's the matter with Betty Lou?" he asked me, naturally. I shrugged. "Adolescence plus no fun," I told him.

"I guess nature doesn't intend for some of us to be happy," Roger said, his voice catching a little.

I snorted. "There's an old Chinese proverb that says you can't prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair. And though I'm not an old Chinese, that's what I believe."

Roger threw back his head and

laughed. It was an odd sound, uncontrolled, as though it was something he seldom did. "What a delightful young woman you are, Marta," he gasped. "I think you're right. We've all become too solemn around here." He took a breath. "Will you go for a drive with me tonight, no, not tonight, tomorrow night? Friday?"

I kind of gulped and nodded. I wasn't surprised exactly. But it had come pretty fast. I'd expected to work a little harder.

Nettie surprised me, too. I knew she wouldn't approve of my going out with Roger, but she was a lot more determined than I'd anticipated. "Don't be foolish, Marta," she snapped, then hesitating only a second, added, "I forbid you to go out with Roger Van Buren!"

I thought I must be hearing things. "You *forbid* me, Nettie." It struck me funny and I laughed. "I haven't been forbidden to do anything since I was five years old."

Nettie looked at me, then smiled a sort of bitter-sweet smile. "I'm an old fool. I wish—that is, I have no right to interfere. Forgive me, my dear."

The next morning I overslept and was ten minutes late getting to work. Roger was in the outer office waiting for me, looking a little upset.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Go ahead and bawl me out, I deserve it," I told him. I didn't want him to think that because he'd asked me out, I had any special privileges. I had some pride.

"I'm not angry." He smiled, then said softly, "Your face is very expressive, Marta. Every thought shows through. When you're worried, happy, angry, excited. It's—" His voice trailed off. But at that exact moment I knew Roger Van Buren was in love with me. Hooked, but good. For a fullish minute I wallowed in self-satisfaction, like a pig in the mud. Then, for no reason at all, my conscience began giving me a hard time.

"I—I'm sorry I'm late. Nettie usually calls me, but she didn't this morning and—and—" I actually stammered, but Roger seemed not to be listening. "Nettie?" he repeated vaguely.

"Yes, Nettie Barnard, my landlady. She's very nice. She kind of watches out for me." I was babbling, but I couldn't help myself. I didn't want this old fellow to look at me that way.

"Have you ever thought of living anywhere else? There's a small apartment not far from my place that I think you might like. I'd like your living in my neighborhood." There was no mistaking the emotion in his voice, or the intention either.

"I—I couldn't leave Nettie. She—she's been like a mother to me," I managed, nearly gagging. If Mom could have heard me, she would have howled.

Roger's black brows drew togeth-

er. "Yes, of course," he said, then he turned and walked slowly back to his office.

I started breathing again, and just then Christine came in. I had no idea how much she'd heard. Her eyes were narrowed and her lips tight, but when she spoke she was calm enough. "I had breakfast downtown and ran into Betty Lou's brother," she said. "He said Betty won't be in this morning. She doesn't feel well."

Right after she left, I called to see if there was anything I could do for Betty Lou. Her brother said no, but he sounded worried. Just why I decided to skip lunch and go see the poor kid I don't know. Maybe because she'd been in the back of my mind as somebody who needed a friend from the first day I met her. She lay in bed in her little bare room above the tavern all by herself. Big eyes, red cheeks, hair all matted. I wanted more than anything to wrap her up and take her home with me. She looked so pathetic, I told her I'd stop by in the afternoon after work to see her.

"That's nice. It's lonesome up here all by myself," she said, trying to smile.

I gave her a little squeeze and went home. Nettie, sitting in her rocker by the window, looked startled when I walked in. "What are you doing home at noon? Is anything the matter?"

I told her about Betty Lou stuck up there in that hole all by herself. Nettie hesitated only a second. "We have an extra bedroom here, why don't we bundle her up and bring her over?"

"Why Nettie, how sweet you are," I said and I meant it. And she was. I couldn't get over it. But after work when I went back to see Betty Lou and told her about Nettie's offer, she refused to come. I was sure it was because she thought it would be an imposition and I wouldn't take no for an answer, just bundled her up, called Oscar and away we went. I was certain she'd be grateful once Nettie and I settled her down. She wasn't.

"Why did you make me come here?" she whispered after Nettie went downstairs.

"So you'd have somebody to take care of you. Why else?"

"Well, I don't like it here with that crazy old Nettie. She'll probably try to kill me just the way she did Miss Drury," Betty Lou said, so loud I was afraid Nettie would hear her.

I was mad. "Betty Lou! What's the matter with you anyway. You're being ridiculous and you know it!"

"I'm afraid of her," Betty Lou said and started to cry.

That was Thursday night. All the next day Betty Lou was on my mind, but Fridays were busy at school and besides that, Roger was breathing over me. Around noon he came up and stood behind me. I kept on typing, pretending I didn't know he was there.

"Marta," he said quietly, too quietly. I knew the expression that was going to be on his face even before I turned around. And sure enough. His whole face had gone soft. It made me feel weak inside, helpless, cornered, "Marta," he said again. "What time shall I pick you up tonight? We are going out, aren't we?" He sounded more like sixteen than forty-six. It was pathetic. There was no sense in my prolonging this silly game. "I can't go out tonight, Mr. Van Buren," I said. "You see, Betty Lou is staying at our house. She's sick and I hate to leave her. Nettie's too old to be running up and down stairs, so—so I don't think I'll be able to go. Maybe some other time," I said, letting him down easy, but hoping he'd get the message.

Roger scowled. "What's the matter with Betty Lou? What's she doing at Nettie's?"

"Just the flu, but she's quite sick and needs attention that's why Nettie and I are taking care of her."

"Just the flu, are you sure?"

"I guess so. We haven't had the doctor yet, unless Nettie called Doctor Carberry today."

Roger came nearer, hovering over me like a wet nurse. "How long has she been sick?"

"A day or two, I'm not sure."

"Don't you go near her!" Roger cried suddenly, grippping my shoulder. I stared at him. "Flu is very infectious," he said fiercely. "Perhaps you'd better go visit your relatives for the weekend. I don't want you to get sick."

I actually blushed. Luckily, it was close to noon and I could leave. I gathered up my things and started down the hall, passing Christine's room on the way. Her door was open. And a really brilliant thought hit me. If I could get her and Roger together, I'd be doing everybody an immense favor. I'll admit I was mostly thinking of myself, but I felt sorry for Roger, and Christine, too, for that matter. My heart wasn't made of iron.

"Christine," I called. She raised her head, wary as a rattler. There was no use mincing words. "I'm throwing in the towel. Roger is yours."

She stared at me as if I'd lost my mind, then she laughed, a harsh sound. "Not any more. Ten years ago, he was. He loved me. He truly did. I know it." She examined the green blotter on her desk as if it offered a glimpse into the past. "Just when I thought he might propose, he said he didn't want to see me any more. I—I made a fool of myself, I guess. At least that's what Nettie said."

"Nettie?"

"I was living with her then, in your room as a matter of fact." Christine looked vague, as if the present was unfamiliar to her. "Nettie was right. I was a fool. I still am."

"Do you suppose there was a perfectly good reason why Roger couldn't marry you? Maybe he had

a mad wife hidden in the attic. Or a couple of dead bodies buried in the basement," I said, trying to lighten the conversation, but Christine didn't respond at all. "That was a long time ago, Christine. Ten years! My Lord," I went on, really quite shaken.

"I still love him," Christine said simply.

"Well, for Pete's sake, if you still feel that way after all this time, go after him. Only don't act so desperately. He likes people to be gay. Laugh it up," I said, making like Dear Abby or somebody. "Come on," I added briskly. "Powder your nose and let's have lunch. I'll call Nettie and see how Betty Lou is while you're fixing your face."

Christine smiled. Ten years seemed to have droped from her face. "Betty Lou?" she repeated conversationally.

"She's still sick. Nettie has her at our house now."

"That Nettie!" Christine shook her head, laughing at nothing, as a person does who is suddenly relieved of an enormous pressure. It was a little unsettling to see her change so fast, but I put it out of my mind and called Nettie. She said she'd telephoned Doctor Carberry and he had prescribed something to lower Betty's temperature and I wasn't to worry.

Relieved, I went out to lunch with Christine. But, honestly, she talked so much and so fast and about such disconnected subjects that by the time we got back to school my head was splitting. I even felt a little sick to my stomach, but whether from nerves or what I don't know. Anyway, I left work early, about four o'clock, but I didn't tell Roger, figuring he'd throw a fit if he thought I was sick.

Nettie was in the hall putting on her coat when I came in. "What are you doing home so early, Marta?" she asked and I thought for a minute she was going to feel my forehead the way my dad used to when I was little.

"Just a headache, that's all. Now don't you start worrying about me. Roger is enough!"

Nettie frowned, opened her mouth, then closed it again. "You'd better lie down," she said. "I'm going to the drugstore to pick up Betty Lou's prescription." Her fingers fumbled with the buttons on her purple coat.

Something in her voice made my stomach muscles constrict. "Is Betty Lou worse?"

"I don't know." Nettie's answer was distracted.

"I'll go to the drugstore for you."

"No, I need the air. I'll go."

"Is there anything I can do while you're gone?"

"No! Just stay away from Betty Lou. One person is enough to take care of." The unexpected sharpness in Nettie's voice surprised me, but I didn't let it bother me. She was tired, nervous, and too old to be nursing the sick.

The house was quiet after Nettie left. And it was chilly. Indian summer with its humid heat was suddenly over. I sat down in Nettie's rocker, arms outstretched and head back. It had been a hectic day. All I could hear was the clock ticking away on top of the piano. Gradually the sound grew fainter and my muscles relaxed.

"Help me!"

I jumped to my feet, not sure whether I'd been dreaming or what.

"Help me!" The cry again. Not a dream. It was dark and for a second I had no idea where I was. I snapped on the table lamp beside the rocker and looked at the clock. Six-thirty. Six-thirty? Where was Nettie? She'd left over two hours ago.

"Please, somebody, help me!" Upstairs. Betty Lou. I dashed up the stairs two at a time and there she lay half out of bed, tossing her head from side to side. "I want to go home," she moaned. "Please, somebody, get me out of here."

I pulled the blankets around her. "You're all right, Betty, but you mustn't get out of bed."

"Marta? Is it you?" Betty Lou's eyes were feverishly bright. She raised herself to a sitting position and her nose began to bleed. With blood streaming from her nose, she cried out, "Get me out of here! I'm being poisoned!"

"You're all right, honey," I told her, trying to keep my voice calm. There's something about a lot of blood that curls my toes. "Lie back and rest. I'm going to call the doctor."

With shaking legs, I hurried to the telephone. Doctor Carberry, a kind, tired, youngish-old man with black horn-rimmed glasses, was the only doctor in town. I dialed his number, my fingers thick and clumsy. "Doctor Carberry?" I told him who I was and that I thought that even though he'd already sent in a prescription for Betty Lou, I still thought he should come and see her. I went on to explain her latest symptoms, including the obvious delirium, being as specific as I could.

"Betty Lou?" Doctor Carberry said when I finally stopped talking.

"Yes, Betty Lou Sheldon. Nettie Barnard talked to you about her this morning."

"Why, I haven't seen or talked with Nettie in more than three weeks and that was about her legs," Doctor Carberry said. "There's some mistake here somewhere, but if the girl is as sick as you say, I'll be over in about fifteen minutes."

I managed a thank-you and hung up. Nettie hadn't called Doctor Carberry? But she said she did. She was on her way now to pick up a prescription. What was going on? I dialed the drugstore.

"Nettie Barnard?" the druggist said. "No, Nettie hasn't been in here tonight, haven't seen her in a couple of weeks, as a matter of fact."

"You have a prescription there

for Betty Lou Sheldon, don't you? Nettie was supposed to pick it up."

"Betty Lou Sheldon. Let me see." There was a silence. A long one. "No, there's no prescription here for Betty Lou. Sure you haven't made a mistake?"

I mumbled something and hung up. No, I hadn't made a mistake. Nettie had lied to me. But this was crazy. While I waited for Doctor Carberry a million thoughts ran through my mind, all senseless.

The doctor nodded briefly when he came in and I rushed him up the stairs. He looked as if he was going to say something, but I didn't wait to hear what it was. I had to find Nettie. She'd lied to me. That's all I could think about. Where could she be? She couldn't walk far. Bad legs, as Oscar put it. Oscar. Might he have taken her some place? "Yep," he said, after I got him on the phone. "But seems like where I take my customers is pretty much my own business, ain't it?" I can still hear him, the funny old guy.

"Oh, Oscar, please," I begged. I don't beg often.

"No need to sweat it, Miss Hale. About an hour or so ago I ran her out to Van Buren's old place, you know, out on the edge of town, the old gray house used to belong to that lumber man."

I couldn't believe it and still didn't when Oscar repeated what he'd said. "Oscar, listen, can you come and pick me up? Right away? I want you to take me out there, too."

"Sure thing," he said and was there in just a few minutes.

Before I left I hollered upstairs to Doctor Carberry that I was going out for a few minutes, but he didn't answer. I don't think he heard me, but I couldn't help it. I was in a hurry. Something was the matter, I could feel it in my bones.

Oscar lifted his cap a little when he saw me, but only to scratch his bald head. "Van Buren havin' a party? I took that silver-haired teacher out there a few minutes before I took Nettie. Some kind of a shindig, is it?"

I clung to the back of the seat to keep from falling flat on my face. Christine was at Roger's too? What in the world was going on?

"Van Buren never had no party before that I know of. Kind of a peculiar bird, ain't he?" Oscar glanced at me over his shoulder. I didn't answer. I couldn't. So we didn't talk until Oscar braked his cab to a stop at the foot of the hill that led to Roger's house. "No road up there any more."

"This is fine," I breathed.

"Want me to wait? You look kinda nervous. I won't charge for it."

"No, I—I guess not, Oscar. And thanks." The red tail-lights flickered and disappeared and after that I could hardly see my hand in front of me.

A faint yellow light far up the path was the only thing visible. I

don't know why I was scared. True, the house was spooky-looking, but it was Roger's house. And he wouldn't hurt me. Quite the opposite! Nettie? She'd lied to me, but there had to be an ordinary explanation. She was so kind, she'd never do anything really wrong. Christine? Well, once she'd been ready to slit my throat, but we were more or less friends now. Who else? Nobody. Then what? Nothing, that's what. Still I shivered as I groped my way toward the old house, my eyes fixed on the dim light.

Suddenly, from inside the house I heard a sharp explosive sound. I jumped, my heart in my throat. Then a woman screamed, the most horrible scream I've ever heard and I've heard some wild ones on my time. I stood paralyzed. Then, gradually, like a zombie, I moved forward. Someone was dead. I knew it. Though how you know things like that with such absolute certainty, I'm not sure.

I stumbled up the steps, waited, listened. Nothing. Then with my heart in my mouth, I took hold of the icy cold doorknob and with my hand still hanging to the knob for support I looked in the room. All the horrors of a lifetime were right there.

On the flowered carpet lay Roger, quiet, deathly quiet, blood streaming from his chest. Christine was kneeling beside him, her arms out, palms up, as if begging him to come back to life. Nettie, an ugly black revolver in her lap, was sitting as stiff as a painted doll on a high-backed straight chair near the fireplace. A floor lamp with a pale silk shade threw a yellow glow over the three of them. The picture will be printed on my memory as long as I live.

"Come in, Marta," Nettie said, hardly moving her lips.

At the sound of Nettie's voice, Christine began to scream.

I inched across the floor. "Nettie," I tried to say, but my throat was so dry only a croak came out. I swallowed and tried again. "Nettie! What happened?"

"Has Doctor Carberry been to see Betty Lou yet" she asked, completely ignoring my question. What is she talking about? What did Betty Lou have to do with this. "Nettie!" I said again. "What happened to Roger? Tell me! Have you called the police?"

But Nettie moved her head from side to side, as if she didn't understand. "Christine!" I cried. "What happened. Please, tell me what happened. We must get help. Where's the phone?"

Christine looked at me. "Roger's dead," she said dully.

"Marta!" I whirled around. "Did Doctor Carberry see Betty Lou?" Nettie's voice was sharp now and she got up from her chair, long beads jangling, back and forth, back and forth. I watched them, hypnotized, and jumped like a rabbit

when the revolver fell from her lap on to the floor. Could Nettie have gone crazy or what? "Answer me, Marta!

I nodded yes, too terrified to talk.

Nettie sighed. "I'm glad. Did you talk with him?"

I shook my head.

Then she raised her dark eyes to mine. "Betty Lou has typhoid fever. I left a note in Doctor Carberry's mailbox explaining everything. I couldn't let the child die. She was too young."

I was sure dear old Nettie had finally flipped. "No one has typhoid any more, Nettie. Not in this country. Now, sit down. You're sick. I'm going to help." I didn't mention Roger, she seemed not to notice him at all. It was the queerest thing.

"Listen to me, Marta," Nettie said and took hold of my arm, squeezing hard. "Betty Lou does have typhoid. She must have caught it from Roger. You see, Roger is—was a typhoid carrier." Her eyes filmed over and for the first time she looked at the body on the floor.

I couldn't believe what she was saying, and before it really sank in, Christine scrambled to her feet, her eyes like saucers. "Agnes was right!" she cried. "None of us would believe her when she told us that. She was right! And you—" Christine broke off, her mouth opening and closing like a fish.

"Dear Agnes," Nettie whispered. "She was very brave. Untreated typhoid is a terrible thing. Terrible."

I looked from one to the other. What was all this about typhoid? What was going on? And why wasn't anybody doing anything about Roger? It was like a bad dream where no one makes any sense except yourself.

"Poor Agnes," Nettie said again. "I did everything I could to save her, but I couldn't call the doctor." Tears began running down her face, making white streaks on the rouged cheeks. "Agnes understood after I explained. Bless her, she understood. But the pain was very great. She couldn't stand it."

Bits and pieces of what Nettie said were beginning to fall into place like a giant jigsaw puzzle. But I couldn't believe it. "You let Agnes Drury die?" I gasped. "You knew she had typhoid and didn't call the doctor, but why, Nettie? Dear God, why?"

Nettie stared at me, her pencilled eyebrows high. "I couldn't let anyone start an investigation," she said quietly. "And typhoid carriers, you know, have to be shut away from everyone else. They aren't allowed to live ordinary lives."

"But so what, Nettie?" I cried. "Roger *should* have been put somewhere. If he was a typhoid carrier, he was dangerous to everyone!"

Christine spun toward Nettie, her face savage. "What did Roger mean to you, you old witch? Were you in love with him, too?" Christine threw back her head and laughed.

Nettie turned away from both of us, her eyes coming to rest finally on the crumpled heap on the rug. "Roger Van Buren was my son," she said with absolutely no expression at all.

The three of us seemed to just hang there, then feeling nothing really, except an immense pity, I reached over and took Nettie's hand.

"Your son!" Christine lunged forward. "No wonder you were always snooping around school. Well, your son is dead now. You can't have him. No one can. He's mine. He's always been mine."

"Oh, Christine," Nettie said gently. "Roger didn't care for you any more and, being a typhoid carrier, he couldn't have married you if he had. But—" Nettie's voice trembled. "But he loved Marta, so much that I—I was afraid he might do something foolish, that's why I came out here—to talk to him. He wouldn't listen to me, though, he —"

"That's a lie! Roger loved me!" Christine shrieked.

"Then why did you kill him, Christine?" Nettie asked, with only the smallest of tremors in the question. "Never mind. It's—it's better this way, I guess. My poor dear tormented son—"

"Roger loved me! Me!" Hate raged in Christine's face, ripping away everything decent and human. "Roger loved me. Do you hear?" Her eyes rolled and her voice rose higher and higher. She seemed to be directing everything toward me, then with one swift motion she crouched down and scooped up the gun from the floor.

There was a short, terrible silence, with all of us just standing there like statues. And after that nothing was clear. I felt Nettie push me aside, then go limp as between us a long orange-blue flame flashed, followed by the roar of the revolver. A second flash. Another explosion. Then silence again.

I saw Christine's face, but everything else was dim, like in a cloudy mirror. The only thing that made any sense to me was the pattern the red blood made on the blue and gold flowered carpet. There was so much of it, it covered nearly the whole center design. I set my lips. Swallowed. Grew sick to my stomach. And then unconsciousness closed my brain and I felt myself slump.

"This is Doctor Carberry, Marta." A voice came out of the layers of clouds. "You're all right, do you understand?"

I fought through the haze. "Roger? Nettie? They're—" I broke off, terrified at the scenes that flashed in front of me. "They're all dead, aren't they?" I whispered and began to shake from head to foot.

Doctor Carberry tucked a wool blanket around my shoulders. "Christine killed Roger, then after you came, she shot Nettie, then her-

self. That's the way it happened, wasn't it?" he prodded.

Shapes, flashes, sounds came from the shadows, but not clearly. I drew back. But Doctor Carberry kept at me. "You must face it, Marta." I shook my head, not remembering, refusing to remember. But one thing stood out. Nettie. "Christine meant to kill me," I said behind my fist. "Nettie pushed me aside, she—" The hand against my mouth didn't help. I sobbed, great heaving sobs, like when my father died.

"Doctor Carberry swung a chair around to the bed, straddling the back of it. "Maybe I'd better talk for awhile," he said, but the words didn't come right away. Finally, "Nettie dropped a letter in my mailbox before she went to see Roger, telling me the whole story. I found it after you called, but I didn't mention it for fear of frightening you and since Betty Lou needed immediate help, I had to tend to her first." He shook his head, as though hardly able to believe was he was saying himself. "Then shortly after taking you to Roger's, Oscar came back. He said he'd taken you to the Van Buren place, but as he put it, the whole thing smelled fishy to him. I called the police immediately, in view of what I already knew and what Oscar had told me. But—they—the police arrived too late."

I shuddered. Betty Lou had been right after all. Betty Lou! "Is Betty Lou all right?" I cried.

"Betty Lou doesn't have typhoid," Doctor Carberry said. "Though Nettie thought she did. That's why she was afraid to call me."

"The—then it's all true?" I still couldn't believe it.

Doctor Carberry drew a long breath. "Yes, I'm afraid so. When Roger was about ten years old, both he and his father caught typhoid. The father died. The boy lived. And miraculously, Nettie didn't get the disease at all. They were living abroad at the time. After her husband died, Nettie and Roger moved back to the States. Everything was fine. Then the summer Roger graduated from high school, there was a typhoid flare-up, as happens every now and then. You've probably read how the board of health investigates these outbreaks. They're very thorough. Nettie knew this and became alarmed, figuring that Roger was the most likely culprit since he'd once had the disease, though he'd never been tested."

"But how could she be so sure? I've never even heard about typhoid carriers. Who are they anyway? Just people who have had the disease?" What a crazy thing.

"Three out of every hundred people who have recovered from the disease become carriers. There are about five thousand known carriers, that is people whose bodies harbor a living germ. But—" Doctor Carberry sighed. "But there are other thousands unknown. Oddly,

some of the carriers have never been consciously ill or shown symptoms of typhoid."

"Poor Nettie," I murmured. "But how could she do it?"

"I don't know. I guess she couldn't bear the thought of her only child being confined someplace, so she took him and ran, changed her name, disguised her face, kept to herself so that she and the boy couldn't be traced." Doctor Carberry got up from his chair. "They were both very careful, you know, so don't judge either of them too harshly. Roger allowed no food on the school premises, he stayed away from restaurants, he insisted that all children and all regular school personnel have typhoid shots every three years, all that. You had a shot, didn't you, Marta?"

I nodded. It had slipped my mind entirely. "What about Agnes Drury? How come she got it?"

"According to Nettie's letter, Agnes Drury refused to have shots of any sort, said she was too old for that nonsense. It made Roger furious, and Nettie too. I guess that's why Agnes became suspicious, but by that time it was too late."

"You mean she finally caught the disease from Roger?"

"Agnes thought she had typhoid and Nettie was sure she did, but—I don't know." Doctor Carberry squeezed the bridge of his nose, then, abruptly, crossed the room and stood looking out the window with his back to me. "Agnes's suicide was handled very routinely," he said after awhile. "Death by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Simple. I called the coroner and signed the death warrant myself." He whirled around and faced me. "I performed no autopsy, nothing. I was negligent! Too busy. Too hasty. Too careless. Negligent. That's what I was."

I tried to think of something decent to say. "Well, Doc," I said finally, "Whatever you did or didn't do would have had no effect on Christine. And, after all, she was the one who pulled the trigger. Rog couldn't marry her, was that it?"

Doc blinked a couple of times. "No, marriage was impossible for Roger. Being married would be much too intimate an arrangement for a typhoid carrier, especially one who is unwilling to acknowledge it. That's the thing that disturbed Nettie the most. She panicked when Roger began showing an interest in anyone. She was certain that if ever the time came when he couldn't control his emotions, the secret would be out and that would be the end of him."

"Oh, no. I deliberately—" I stared at Doc. If I hadn't gone after Roger he might still be alive. And Nettie, too. And Christine. I had killed them all. Me. "Oh, God," I whispered, "I'm to blame." It's awful to come face to face with yourself.

Doctor Carberry cleared his throat. If he'd spoken before I had-

n't heard him. "I guess we're both too anxious to blame ourselves, Marta. Oddly enough, the real culprit never even knew."

"What do you mean?"

"Post-mortems, which I got back this morning, show that Roger was *not* a typhoid carrier at all," Doctor Carberry said.

I jerked straight up. "What are you talking about? All this was a big farce then?"

"No," Doc shook his head. "Nettie was the typhoid carrier."

"Nettie?"

"Yes, Nettie. And she never even knew it."

"Nettie!" I gasped, feeling suddenly as if the whole world had gone over a big bump.

"Poor Nettie." Doctor Carberry sighed. "Think of the years of suffering she could have spared herself and her son if she'd only faced her problem squarely and been willing to accept its limitations."

"Yes," I said. "I guess there are some things you can't run away from or scream about or get even with or anything."

"You're so right, Marta," Doc said, smiling a little, at my bad grammar, I suppose.

The next day I went home and the day after that Brad called, saying he'd seen my name in the papers and was I all right. I was cool, but very polite. Really. Funny thing, I didn't feel like kicking him in the stomach any more. And, as my mother says, for me that's something.

DOUBLE DAMNED

It seemed the best of all possible worlds . . . a beautiful mother-in-law and a heavily insured wife.

BY
C. G.
CUNNINGHAM

THE sun reflected in shimmering ripples on the fiberglass windbreak beside the pool when Louise dived in. I would have been content to sit there and watch, slung in the comfort of the dacron hammock—enjoying the advantages of marrying the daughter of a rich woman, but Louise called to me.

"Come on lover . . . your mother-in-law might drown and need your strong arm for rescue."

I snuggled deeper into the hammock. "Ha. You swim like you had scales."

"But I don't. Come feel." She grinned and her slim body sliced the water as she started toward me. She tred water as she cupped a handful of it and shoved it my way. The pool had been freshly filled and the water hit my chest in a frigid, splattering ball. She disappeared beneath the surface as I made a lunging dive into the pool.

I broke the surface trying to keep my teeth from chattering. She slid up out of the water beside me laughing. She rammed the blunt prow of her hand in my direction drenching my face with its miniature surf. Then with the grace of an eel she disappeared in a surface dive.

Watching her body move with the freedom of youth it was hard to believe that Louise was my mother-in-law, would be the grandmother of my children. Her figure was pert and firm and damned alluring. It often reminded me that I could have married Louise just as easily as Bet. And then I wouldn't have had to wait for the money.

Her body brushed my legs under water. I could feel her hands sliding up my legs, using my body like a diver's life line steering her toward the surface. She rose slowly, her hands gliding along my skin, groping toward the air, seemingly innocent. She surfaced her body tight against mine. She held the position, in full contact with my torso, while

she made a show of working air into her lungs. Her back arched, pressing hard against me with each breath. She made it last until she laughed at my reaction and withdrew into the innocence and unassailable position of my wife's mother. Somehow, the warm contacts—firm and soft—made it hard to believe we planned to kill her.

I let myself drift away, breaking the contact. Louise's face was bland as she stared into my eyes. I stared back. Then I felt her leg moving over to touch mine. I spashed backward. Assured of her powers, she gave me a slow, sly smile.

"Someday," I said, "I'm going to . . ."

"What?"

"Drown you."

"Such a waste. And me in the full bloom of youth."

"Ha. You're a potential grandmother. A hard woman who harried one man already to his grave."

She gave a low throaty chuckle. "But he died happy, lover."

"I don't doubt it."

She breast-stroked close to me and her toes started exploring my leg. It was an old game with her. She had been at it, with increasing boldness, since the day I had married Bet. But she played with her own special rules. Enticing and teasing without ever making it clear whether she was after an adventure or testing the fidelity of her daughter's husband. There was always the air of combined threat and promise. So even when things proceeded too far, as they were this morning, I never made a counter-move. It made me feel a little silly.

I pulled myself backwards again and studied her face.

She grinned back at me, her face shining with water in the glare of the sun. "Go ahead. Drown me. Collect all that yummy insurance."

I felt a sudden urge to do it. It would be so easy. Then it would be over with. But the feeling immediately gave way to a heavy emotional shock. Even it wasn't one sided. It was a mixture, like my relation with Louise. I felt a heated desire, half sexual, to grab her and hold her lithe body, squiring and struggling, beneath the water until it stilled. It was what she deserved in a way; pay her back for the misery she had given me with her teasing. But the thought of it hurt. The pain of loss. Life would not be the same without Louise. And hovering over all of these feelings was fear, made worse by the realization that someday, somehow, I would actually do it.

Louise rolled over on her back and paddled gently toward me. Her smile was speculative. "Hmnnh. think. All that insurance. You and Bet could live here in solitude and comfort . . . hog heaven."

Her description was apt. And Bet was the sow. She was everything Louise wasn't. Louise was petite. Bet was huge. Even when

I first met her she was exceptionally large. She had a heavy body, muscular and athletic, with huge firm breasts that could barely be contained in a swim suit. She had been a statuesque beauty in the classical style. Her life of indolence and steady drinking had changed her to a—the exact word was—pig. Her muscular thighs had degenerated to huge hams covered with rippling fat. Her torso looked like a chunk out of a redwood log with two waterfalls of flesh attached to the front. Her face resembled a doughy albino basset hound.

At first, I had been shocked when Bet suggested we get rid of Louise. It seemed strange. It was her own mother. Soon, however, I understood it. Louise was—and probably always had been—one of Bet's major frustrations, a continuing, living example of what she was not.

I felt Louise's leg drift over against mine. I rolled over and started a sloshy imitation of the Australian crawl. I had hoped it would change my train of thought, but it didn't. As I plugged along I realized Bet had been thinking about it a long time. It started with the insurance.

When Bet had suggested the policies, Louise had laughingly declined. Bet stayed with it for several days. She harped on the unfairness of her grandfather's will. It stated that the money stayed with the blood lines. Of course, Bet would continue to get her small income, but Louise's income would go to her sister unless we had children at the time of her death. And since Bet and I had had no luck at having children, it would leave us in a bad spot if something happened.

Louise merely recommended we apply ourselves more assiduously in the bedroom. And then she had laughed, quite loud and quite long. She knew it was becoming increasingly hard for me to do. At least with Bet.

I had listened for several days to this running battle and then suggested, as a joke, "But what if something happens to you and Bet both . . . like getting hit by a truck on the freeway. It would leave me destitute." I hadn't even had time to laugh before a studious look had come into Louise's eyes. To my everlasting surprise she liked the idea. The next morning they went down to start arranging for the policies. Louise even insisted—her idea of going along with the joke—that both sets of policies name me as the beneficiary.

Since then I hadn't thought about the policies. Not until Bet started harping on me to help her kill Louise. "It's our only sure way of getting hold of some money right now," she had said. Churning through the pool, I couldn't help wondering how long she had planned it. I hated myself for not realizing it when she started talking about the insurance. Maybe then I would have had the strength to stop it. Now I didn't.

Blowing hard I gave up after seven laps just as Bet came out onto the pool deck. She was wearing a faded blue wrapper and carrying an extremely dark looking drink.

Louise broke off her laps several feet from me. "Where's your suit?" she called. "Come on in, the water's —you know how."

Bet looked at her without a smile and settled herself into the hammock. I watched as the synthetic marvel strained nearly to the breaking point with her bulk.

She raised her heap up and looked at us. "Not for me. I'm saving myself for Mazatlan. Warm water. Sunshine. I'm going to have a real fling." She gave me a jowly grin.

A real fling. A final one. Another of Bet's ideas. She wanted to do it on the trip. There were too many complications and I was trying to talk her out of it. Better to do it in the United States, not Mexico. For one thing, I had my own plans for this trip. It was also going to be Bet's last fling. When we came home I intended to do something about restoring her to her former glory, shape her up, physically and spiritually. Strangely, I also suspected that once Louise was gone Bet would regain some of her self-respect. Also I intended to relax myself. I had about had it. I only had one job, keeping some control over how much booze Bet put away. She needed it. Even though she was an experienced drinker, she didn't know when to stop. Without external control she became a sloppy, obnoxious, vomiting drunk. Therapy for me and for her: let her. Maybe it would burn some of it out.

We spent the next week getting ready for the trip. When we were finally on the road, it was obvious that Bet had taken something of a head-start. She was a half-bottle gone. However, without any more fuel, she got groggy and slept all the way to Tijuana.

We dumped Bet in the room to sleep it out, Louise changed and we went to dinner. As we were led to our table, her small gloved hand slipped momentarily into mine and she gave me a glowing smile.

We joked and teased our way through the meal. I would be a liar if I didn't admit it was pleasant. She wore a simple beige suit that didn't hide all of her figure and a silly little matching hat on top of her dark brown hair. Her green eyes flashed with animation across the table from me. She was a stunning dinner companion.

Over coffee, she grew silent. "You look tired," she said.

"Long drive."

"Is that all? You have a hard life."

I inclined my head toward our sumptious surroundings. "Not too hard."

"You know what I mean. You deserve better."

I forced a chuckle. "Maybe I'm getting what I earn."

"That may be right . . ."

A group of mariachis moved near the table and I didn't hear the finish of her sentence and, when they left, she didn't bother to repeat it.

The next day, Bet got another jump on us and was in bed drunk-sick by noon. Louise and I went to the races where she demonstrated near clairvoyance by picking winners. We had dinner again in the same place, but the conversation remained bantering. A couple of times, though, I caught her watching me with a quietly speculative smile on her lips.

By getting up exceptionally early, we got Bet in the car before she could become incapacitated. We wound our way along the Mexican side of the border and turned south to Guaymas. Bet had dinner with us that night in a sodden and sullen mood. It was quite a contrast.

We left her sleeping off the evening potables the next morning and Louise and I went fishing. Louise was, as usual, superb. She fought a fish fully as big as she was to utter defeat. We returned to the hotel exhausted and sun-burned.

It was hardly the best shape for facing what I had to face—a cold sober Bet. She was waiting for me, grim-faced and predatory.

"How was the fishing?" she asked with a glint in her eye that I didn't catch.

"Great. Louise hooked onto one big enough to eat her."

"Did it?"

Then I understood the look in her eyes. I sat down and started taking off my shoes. "No, it didn't."

"But it could happen, couldn't it?"

"I suppose it could." I lay back on the bed and shut my eyes.

I've been thinking," she said. "This is a good place for it to happen."

"No."

"Why not? A fishing accident. She gets pulled over the side. Sharks. Or something."

"Not in Mexico. It would be too messy. That many more people, authorities, checking into it."

She eased her bulk onto the bed beside me. "What difference does that make. It could just happen. Take a couple of bottles, get the crew drunk, and push her over."

"Bet, it isn't that simple. She's a strong swimmer. I'd have to hit her over the head or something. Then when we brought the body back how would we explain it?"

"She hits it on the side of the boat."

"And what was I doing? Just watching? Why didn't I get her out."

"You didn't see."

"Come off it, Bet. It's too messy. Why make things tough?"

She sat silent for several seconds. I could hear her steady breath and wished for the end to the episode. Finally she said, "You're not going to do it, are you?"

I sat up and looked at her. She looked kind of pitiful, so gross and so alone.

I sighed. "Yes. Yes, I am. You've convinced me. It's the best thing to do, so don't start in on me again. But, not in Mexico. In my own way and in my own place."

"You don't act like . . ."

"I don't have to like it do I?"

"I guess not. But, it's got to be done," she added with determination.

I nodded and went into the shower.

We all had dinner together. It was an amazing experience. Bet was in top form, joking and chiding her mother, very urbane and witty. Somehow, it was slightly heartless.

I felt better when I decided to leave Guaymas the next day. I had wanted to fish another day, but the thought of a sobered Bet who might go along and heave Louise overboard was more than I cared to face. Worse yet, a drunk Bet doing the heaving.

We got to Mazatlan late in the evening and I slept in the next morning. Both of the women were gone when I awoke. I found Bet well along in the bar. She said Louise had gone down to the beach. Only she said beesh. It reassured me. The pressure was off, at least for a while.

I had a surprisingly good lunch —my breakfast—in the dining room. It was an old and quaint hotel, one Louise had picked because she spent her honeymoon there. It had been modernized, but still had great charm. It also had the nicest beach on that part of the coast.

I set out for it hoping to find Louise. I did. In spades. She was wearing a bikini made of red material with large white polka-dots. On someone else, someone lacking the grace to wear it, it would have been vulgar. On Louise it was stunning.

We had a gay afternoon on the beach. Building sand castles, swimming. Her version of water games went further than usual.

When the sun lowered in the sky and the beach chilled, she led me by the hand back to the hotel. We found Bet snoring in the room and Louise led me on to hers.

When the door shut behind us she stepped into my arms with a throaty laugh. "Umnh. This feels good. I'm cold," she said.

Her hand guided mine to the little string tie that held the top of the bikini on. I pulled it and she remained close to my body letting the pressure hold it up. Then she guided my hand to the other tie on the hip. When I pulled it she stepped back. The two wisps of cloth fell to the floor.

She raised up on her toes in front of me. "Not bad for a forty-four year old woman?" The corners of her lips turned into a smile.

I could hardly breathe and my reply came out a loud gulp.

She turned and walked away from me. Halfway to the bathroom she looked over her shoulder. "I thought you would like it," she said. She made a long, noisy business of locking the bathroom door.

All I could think as I left her room was she deserved it. It would be a pleasure to kill her. The little bitch had it coming . . . and from me. I hoped I could make it slow.

I went into town and had a couple of drinks. Then I met this Texan. He managed to convince me it was a matter of national honor to show the Mexicans how to drink tequila. It seemed important to salvage someone's honor that night.

Backscratchers he called them. A straight shot of tequila followed by a squirt from a wedge of lime and a lick of salt from the back of your hand. It also seemed the ideal kind of bottled courage I needed. Each shot added a fresh charge of determination. They burned going down—annealing the cherry-glow of indignation in me.

I had too many before I realized it was the wrong name. Backbreaker would be more like it. Or spirit breaker. My determination faded to nauseous mush. I put down two more quick ones to try and bring it back before the stuff exploded inside me. My back and my guts shattered to a writhing mass of slime-colored goo. I barely managed to get back to the hotel.

The next morning I was trying to negotiate a glass of warm milk into my stomach when Louise found me. She was wearing a bright red beach robe open in the front to show the matching bikini. It was still a powerful sight. Almost enough to make me forget my desire to kill her.

She sat down and smiled at me. "Mad?"

I shook my head. "Too sick." Not exactly a lie.

"My fault?"

I wouldn't give her the pleasure. "No. Bet and I hung on a small one."

She arched her eyebrows and pursed her lips. "Come on, lets go to the beach."

I shook my head.

"Come on. I've got your suit. You can change in a cabana. I've got something I want to talk to you about."

"About yesterday?"

She nodded.

I fought—with success—against her obvious appeal. With a half-formed plan, I let myself be led out. She waved to Bet slumped on a stool in the bar as we went out.

She came out of the water and sat on the beach beside me after I had managed to fumble into my swim suit. She talked quietly for a long time. I guess I was too foggy to figure out exactly what she was saying. At least I was for several days. Then it was too late.

After a while, she got back in the water. She dove in with a flat racing

dive through the surf and swam straight out. A long ways, maybe four hundred yards before she turned over on her back. I could barely see her bobbing with the ground swell. I waved and settled down to force my poisoned brain to think.

I never did hear what she called. I just heard her voice and looked out. She had raised her head out of the water and was calling. From the sound of her voice I knew she was in trouble.

I started swimming too soon. I should have waded as far as I could, but it seemed too slow. So I started swimming as fast as I could. By the time I got to her I was sick with fatigue and biting for air.

Her face was warped with pain and she was spitting water. She managed to croak, "Cramp . . ."

I got my hip under her and hooked an arm over her shoulder. For a while her head rode well out of the water, but I was too tired. I slowed and she kept pulling me under water. My arms ached and burned and my fingers felt so numb I could no longer tell whether I had a grip on her.

Finally, I had to stop. And I had to let go of her to get turned in the water. She went straight under. I grappled for her and pulled her up again and, in turn, submerged myself. Then I managed to hold us both up for a few quick breaths. When I got my other hip under her and reached across her shoulder, I knew it was too late. I knew she was dead. Where her breast touched my arm, its springy roundness had turned to slack flesh. Still I started out with her. I didn't think about it. I didn't care. It just seemed important to get her to shore.

We still had another hundred yards to go when we both went under. Thought was impossible. I did the only thing I could. I let her go. Somewhere in my oxygen-starved brain was the idea that I would dive for her as soon as I rested.

I tried it a couple of times before I realized that one more and I wouldn't be able to make it to shore myself. So I left her and slowly sidestroked until I could feel sand under my feet. I lay with my head on the beach for thirty minutes before I could manage to get to my feet.

Divers with Scuba gear worked two days searching for the body before they gave up. The tides had taken her out.

The event worked a transformation on Bet. She sobered up and had to fight hard to keep from showing her jubilation when people were around. Her pride in me was so boundless I never told her how it happened. I just let her think what she wanted. She showed her happiness by smothering me, almost literally, with affection.

For a while things looked indescribably good. Up to where the insurance refused to pay until

Louise was declared officially dead. The process takes seven years.

We managed to make it work partly for us. Louise's income was put in trust just in case we had a child before the seven years was up. Bet was sweet about it.

"At least we have seven years to try for a child and no Louise around to spoil it," she said.

Then her morale ran out. She started drinking. I let her, as much as she wanted. It became a standard joke for Bet to go to a party and be sick on the rug.

I got into the habit of taking her home and going back to the party. With my troubles I needed all the fun I could get. That's what I told everyone, amid gales of laughter and assorted evil snickers.

It made it work out easy. During a party one night I took her home after being sure she had drunk enough to be thoroughly unconscious. I lugged her into the dry pool and carefully picked the place under the board. I smacked her head, once, very hard, on the bottom of the pool and drug her half way to the shallow end. I started the water back into the pool and returned to the party. At the time of death, from drowning after a swimming pool accident, I was at a party thirty miles away in the valley.

When I got home that night, I carefully chlorinated and neutralized the pool. I took a chilly swim to stir it up. Then I sprinkled half a pail of dust over the water. By morning, it looked like the water hadn't been changed in a month.

The newspapers ate it up. An authentic irony, a double tragedy. Both women in my home dead from drowning. I played along and had the pool filled in. For one thing it wasn't the same without Louise to swim with.

It had been easy. Ridiculously simple. Louise had been right that afternoon on the beach. It *was* easy. Louise had known that even if she hadn't figured out just how to do it. That had been my own invention. And I'm not so bad off. By the time I add Louise's insurance to Bet's I'll have a nice income. It could have been a lot better. But, with Bet's shape, how could anyone tell she was three months pregnant?

MANHUNT'S

Book Bargains

1. **FANNY HILL.** (Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure). By John Cleland. Now available for the first time after 214 years of banning and suppression. This is the classic tale of Fanny Hill, young girl who turned prostitute and whose charms and abilities made her the quest of London's male, and female, gentry. **$5.00**

2. **1601.** By Mark Twain. One of the most suppressed yet most eagerly sought-after masterpieces of American literature. Issued anonymously in 1880, its circulation up to now has been relegated to the realm of "forbidden books." Unexpurgated, handsome collector's limited edition in a decorative slip case. **$4.95**

3. **DISGUISED HYPNOTISM.** By J. Whiting. Fact filled easy to follow manual—you'll learn the amazing techniques for inducing the hypnotic trance without the subjects awareness. **$2.00**

4. **THE NECESSITY OF ATHEISM.** By Percy Bysshe Shelley. An important and profound little known work by the great English poet. Charged with indignation and damnation, the tract created a great amount of trouble for the author. **$1.00**

5. **APHRODISIACS.** By Alan Hull Walton. The first full-scale history of "love potions" through the ages, from ancient times to the present day. Includes a large section on aphrodisiacs in cooking, a fascinating evaluation of the effects of more than 100 foods and beverages. Large, handsome volume profusely illustrated. **$7.95**

6. **THIS I BELIEVE.** This is the famous anthology containing the basic beliefs of 100 great thinkers of the world. Represented are Stevenson, Franklin, Baruch, Confucius, Sandburg, Socrates, etc. A must for every library. **$1.00**

7. **TROPIC OF CAPRICORN.** By Henry Miller. Exactly as published in the long suppressed Olympia Press edition of Paris. Called a creation of genius by some a piece of pornography by others, it is undoubtedly one of the most outspoken and astonishingly frank books dealing with sexual realism. A handsomely bound edition. **$1.00**

8. **SEX LIFE IN THE SOUTH SEAS.** By B. Schloff. A scholarly study by the noted authority on the South Seas. Chapters included are: Sex Life of Savage Children, Savage Prostitution, Incest and Rape, Love Dances and Erotic Songs, Savage Sex Technique in Marriage. Illustrated with photos and prints. 441 pages. **$4.95**

9. **THE GANGRENE.** Currently banned in France. This is the true, first-hand detailed account by seven Algerian intellectuals of the most horrible tortures ever inflicted on man. Copies of this book were confiscated by the French police who raided the printing plant and smashed the plates. Not for people with weak stomachs. **$3.00**

10. **LOST BOOKS OF THE BIBLE:** The Books of the Apocrypha. This should be next to your Bible. Authorized version of the divinely inspired books that the scholars took out of the Bible. The rest of the chapters of Book of Esther, the first and second book of Esoras, Book of Tobit, Wisdom of Jesus, etc. **$4.95**

11. **OUR METHOD OF GENTLE MASSAGE.** By G. Rama and B. Light. Put out in a limited edition, this cardboard covered pamphlet was published for $15.00. Limited to 777 copies. **$1.00**

12. **BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PROHIBITED BOOKS:** A bibliography with critical notes of erotic, pornographic and curious books. By "Pisanus Fraxi." Three volumes, 1,746 pages. Privately printed in Paris (in the English language) this rare book sold for $500—when you could get it. Edition limited to 500 sets soid by subscription to mature adults only.
The entire three volume set: **$45.00**

13. **PORNOGRAPHY & THE LAW.** By Drs. E. & P. Kronhausen. Scholarly, remarkably candid look at erotica novels, erotic autobiography, and hard core pornography. Here for the first time you can read actual selections from such secret "pornographic" classics as "Autobiography of a Flea," "The Lascivious Hypocrite," "Lustful Stories," etc. Complete bibliography at the end of the book. Handsome collector's limited edition in slip case. 418 pages. **$4.95**

14. POETRY GRAB BAG. Eight original first editions of aspiring poets. Some will no doubt become famous when these works are no longer available. Pub. at $21.00. **$1.00**

15. MODERN SEX TECHNIQUES (Illustrated). Frank discussions of sexual practices, presenting for the first time detailed instructions for achieving mutual satisfaction. Plain-talk, straightforward information on basic sex techniques and positions. Controversial and startling. **$3.95**

16. TEN LESSONS IN SEX TECHNIQUE. A frank and important book on sexual pleasure in marriage. Positions, techniques and correct applications, etc. Includes an account of normal and abnormal sexual acts for every married person. **$2.00**

17. CURRIER & IVES (FOUR SEASONS). Four prints. Faithful full color reproductions of the rare lithographs that sell for hundreds of dollars. Interesting peaceful country scenes. 7" x 10", perfect for framing. All four:
Pub. at $10.00. **$1.00**

18. SEXUAL RELATIONS OF MANKIND. By P. Mantegaza. This banned and suppressed classic of sexual science now available to serious adults. Hundreds of topics including Sexual Initiation, Erotic Positions, Brutal Methods of Defloration, Self-Defloration, Lesbian Contests, etc. **$5.00**

19. FEMALE FORM. Two photo-filled 6" x 9" magazines featuring a parade of female nudes, posed the way you like them. Many photographs. Both books. **$1.00**

20. SEX WITHOUT GUILT. By Albert Ellis. Our sex code is such that countless men and women must fight a lonely battle against guilt for doing those sexual things which are neither harmful to themselves nor to others . . . One purpose of this book is to help you understand sex guilt so that you may throw off its shackles. **$4.95**

21. SPORT GRAB BAG. 5 books. Boxing, hunting, fishing, skiing etc. Pub. at $12.00. All 5 for **$1.00**

22. ADVENTURES IN SMALL BUSINESS. 119 success stories of ideas products and inventions developed into profit-making businesses. **$1.00**

23. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A PIMP. Fast moving, true story of life in a hotel as seen through the eyes of this self-confessed procurer. Stiff wrappers. **$2.00**

24. ON THE CAUSE OF HOMOSEXUALITY. By Hamilton and Legman. Unusual, sometimes sympathetic approach to lesbianism and homosexuality. Cases include lesbianism, incest and the sex life of monkeys as personally observed. Illustrated. **$2.00**

25. SEX MYTHOLOGY. Includes an account of the Masculine Cross. Scarce, scholarly study of ancient sex worship. The Phallus, Sexual Vocabulary of the Bible explained for the first time, religious prostitution, phallic and sun worship, etc. Privately Printed. **$3.00**

26. THE PLAGUE OF LUST. By Dr. Julius Rosenbaum. Indispensable addition to the library of history and medicine. A history of strange sexual practices. The author quotes Greek, Latin and early Christian authors, revealing ancient erotic practices, strange sexual rites and unnatural loves, such as: Cult of Venus, Lingam and Phallic Worship, Cunnilingus, Sodomy, Brothels, and Courtesans, the Fellator, and Unique Sexual Practices. 635 pages. **$7.50**

27. THE KAMA SUTRA. Banned from the United States for 75 years. The most intimate sex secrets of the Orient are revealed in this frank book of detailed "under-the-counter" dealers who had copies smuggled in from Europe. **$5.00**

28. SUNTAN NUDIST BOOKS. Two large size pictorial books vividly illustrated with unposed and candid photography of men and women in nudist camps. Two books. **$1.00**

Mail this coupon to:

MANHUNT, Dept. 46, 545 Fifth Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

Please send me the books circled below:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

Enclosed please find $_____

IMPORTANT: Add 50¢ per order for all orders less than $5. No CODs. New York residents add 3% city sales tax.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____STATE_____ZONE_____

"A girl named Tillie Miles was found beaten to death and criminally . . . hell, raped . . . in her father's barn."

CITY COP

BY
JACK BELCK

He checked his watch. Ten a.m. It would be after noon before he arrived, got out of his suit, and started to breath fresh air again. Half the weekend shot already. Damn.

Damn them anyhow, complaining about the way he did his work. Always complaining, but that didn't stop them from shoving a sixty or seventy hour week down his throat. Pushed for an excuse, they probably would have mumbled something about a critical shortage of manpower in the department and needing every man they could get, even a detective sergeant who was too quick to shoot, too quick to use his fists, too quick to bully witnesses and threaten suspects.

He slowed for one of many sharp corners on the back road, driving from habit while he thought. The cabin was his one escape from people. The precinct captain had said he needed rest, but he didn't understand that Martin's homemade shack in the woods supplied him with all the rest he needed. Each month for two days, or one and a half if he was unlucky like this time, he could get away and let off steam by just cooping himself on his two acres with only a bag of groceries, a portable phonograph, and a bottle for company.

He knew that he could get to the cabin faster by going through town, but the second grade, tarred road he was on served as a silent insult to the townsfolk. He was bypassing them, detouring around them, so the nosey ones wouldn't see his five-year-old car every time he came up for a weekend and say, "Just seen Martin, the city cop, go by."

The road was bordered by brushy fields and an occasional rundown house that still managed to stand erect long after farming had ceased to be profitable, if it ever was, in this neck of the woods.

He lit another cigarette and slowed the car as it approached a low-lying white house on the left, its front yard littered with rusting derelict machinery and scavenged cars. Across from the house was an odd-angled, leaning and weather-beaten barn to which was fastened a lazy fenced corral.

The horses were there as usual, and so was the girl. He could see her sitting on the fence when he was still a hundred yards off. His practised eye told him she wasn't wearing a bra under her faded man's shirt, and there wasn't room for anything more inside her blue denims either.

She didn't turn as he drove past, showing the back of her head with its long black hair.

Horses, Martin mused to himself. Horses! She was about the closest thing to a real, live human being he had seen around these parts, and all she cared about was horses.

Some day the right kind of man would come along, and the horses would go and starve.

He picked up speed again, then braked as he saw a small cluster of whitehelmeted men leaning against a pickup parked on the gravel shoulder just ahead. They wore ordinary work clothes and seemed to be looking at a map. One of them, a pot-bellied, red-faced hick if he ever saw one, had his big ear glued to a walkie talkie. He wondered about it for a moment, then realized they were playing Civil Defense games. He laughed aloud. In the cities, the big ones, no one gave a damn about Civil Defense, and they were the ones who would get the big fat bombs if a war started. But the hicks, the yokels in the one horse towns you couldn't hit with a bomb even by accident, they were ape on CD

He grew suddenly irritated by his own thoughts on the stupidity of mankind and flicked on the radio.

Detective sergeant Martin was fast asleep when the pounding started on his rough boarded door. He grunted and forced an eye open. Nobody ever came to his cabin unannounced, nobody, especially at this time of night. He peered at his watch. Christ! Three in the a.m. "Who is it?" he yelled without making any effort to go to the door.

"Tom Barkus, Head Selectman. Can we see you, Mr. Martin?" The voice was deep and carried authority in its rural tones.

Martin slipped into his shirt and pants and shoved his revolver into its holster. He'd been a cop too long to take opening doors to strangers at three in the morning lightly.

Wordlessly, he stood in the open doorway for a moment, looking first at the beefy, sparse-haired man, the selectman, and then at the tired-looking thin man with him wearing a gaudy police badge on his greasy sweater. "Come in."

Martin dropped into a wicker chair and waited for someone to talk.

Barkus looked ill at ease. "Sorry to bother you this late, Mr. Martin, but we had to see you."

"What about? I'm on vacation, and it's pretty damn late."

Neither of the two men sat down, even when Martin gestured to his other empty chairs.

The selectman slipped his hands into his back pockets and rocked slowly on his heels. "There's been a murder and we thought you could help."

Martin frowned. "This town isn't in my jurisdiction, you know that. I got no authority around here." He pointed at the elderly man with the badge. "Why doesn't he take care of it?"

"I'm only the constable," the man replied apologetically. "I don't know nothing about this sort of thing."

The selectman looked sympathetically at his companion before addressing Martin. "You know how it is with us in the country, Mr. Martin. Charlie here has been re-elected as constable for close on twenty years. All he ever got to do is post town meeting warrants, draw jurors, round up stray dogs, and do traffic duty in front of the church Sunday mornings. He's not expected . . ."

Martin cut in. "So?" Call in the state police. They love to get away from washing cruisers and nailing speeders. Let them handle it."

The selectman spun a chair around and sat down on it, resting his large hands on its back. "We'd kind of like to keep them out of it for awhile, if we can."

"Oh?"

"Tell him who got murdered, Tom," the constable suggested.

"Yeah, I guess we better start with that. A girl named Tillie

Miles was found beaten to death and criminally—hell, raped—in her father's barn."

Martin said nothing.

"Her old man works the eleven to seven shift down at the plastics plant in the city, so he doesn't know anything yet. We got about four hours before he finds out for himself."

"Who found her?" the city cop asked finally.

Tom Barkus wiped his brow with his sleeve. "That's why we came here instead of calling the state cops in. You see, my son was the last one to see her alive and the first one to see her dead."

While he dressed and stuffed a few stale cookies into his mouth, detective sergeant Martin laughed to himself, thinking about the two men waiting for him out in the constable's battered old car.

What a hell of a lousy alibi! The son had been courting Tillie, he said. Then he said goodnight and went home, he said. Then, just before he went to bed after the late movie, he found his wallet was missing and went back to the father's barn to find it. And there she was, dead. Or so he said.

No wonder the selectman was having a fit. Well, he'd go through the motions of being a dedicated cop, he decided, but come seven in the morning one selectman's son was going to find himself in the county jail for murder. The selectman wouldn't like it, and the son's wife wouldn't either, but that was tough.

He played the beam from his flashlight on the ground in front of the barn.

"See!" the selectman said. "The boy's tire marks are right here in the mud, clear as can be. And there's his foot prints, I guess."

How dumb can anybody be? Martin wondered to himself. "It's bad. Let's look inside."

The girl lay in a skimpy pile of dusty brown hay, her arms and legs at odd angles, their whiteness marred by ugly gashes and welts. The blood looked black in the probing light. "Really gave it to her, didn't he?" Martin said to no one in particular. He bent over to study the broken pick axe handle lying next to the body. "This is it, all right." He stood up again. "You didn't touch anything I suppose?"

"No sir," the constable said.

"Good. OK, let's go talk to the boy."

A typical two-bit punk, Martin decided, watching and listening to the boy tell and retell his story. A big, gangling, slow-witted nitwit who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar and was about to cry.

His story wouldn't hold up for a minute, even if he stuck with it. With a sharp lawyer, it would probably go second degree murder. With a sharp psychiatrist, he might end up with only a few years in the nut house.

He was getting tired of asking

the same questions over and over again. "But you haven't got one single idea who might have done it, not one?"

The boy shook his head slowly. "No, I told you."

"All right, you wait here." He stood up, noted that there were no windows or other doors in the room, and slipped out into the stuffy living room where the constable waited with Jim Barkus and his wife.

The foursome sat silently, drinking coffee as the sun came up and brightened the cluttered room. The selectman stared into his coffee mug and said for the hundredth time, "I guess there's nothing else we can do, is there?" Martin shook his head tiredly. "Guess not." He looked at his watch. "And I suggest you get ready for the state police. Her father's due home any minute."

"I'll walk you to the car," Barkus said finally and rose to his feet.

As the selectman's wife reached from behind to pour him another cup of coffee, Martin stood up. His arm slammed into the enamel pot, sending it clattering across the room.

He yelled, more from surprise than pain as the overcooked brew soaked through the side of his shirt. A look of animal wrath disappeared as quickly as it came and he laughed. "Thanks, don't mind if I do take some home with me."

Mrs. Barkus began making fretting sounds, making futile efforts to wipe the browness off the big man's shirt.

"Never mind, Sarah. I'll give Mr. Martin one of my shirts to wear home. It's the least we can do for him."

The woman dropped her rag onto the table, a look of remembrance mingled with fear crossing her lined face. "Oh! My boy!" She turned and fled from the room.

The constable watched silently as Martin slipped out of his dripping shirt. The room was strangely quiet. The detective turned to look at the selectman, who stood in the doorway holding a fresh shirt over one arm. The old man said nothing. Puzzled, he looked at the skinny constable behind him. The long time elected keeper of the peace held an elderly revolver in a knotty fist, its muzzle aimed at Martin's middle.

"What the hell is this?" the city cop demanded.

The selectman pointed at him. "You've got scratches on your back." He lay the shirt carefully on the table and lifted the telephone from its hook.

Martin started forward, then thought better of it as the constable backed cautiously away and cocked the gun. "What the hell have my scratches got to do with anything?"

He sat down again after the selectman had made his call to the barracks.

Barkus looked levelly at the city cop. "My boy didn't do it. I knew it then and I know it now."

"OK, so you're kid didn't do it.

So what? Any one of a million creeps could have come into town, fixed the girl, then taken off! Why me?"

The constable allowed the trace of a smile to cross his face. "It's a funny thing. Us small town lawmen may not be much on police work, but we got one big advantage over you city fellows. We know everybody in town, everybody. And that can come in mighty handy.

Martin reached for a cigarette, then thought better of that too. He said nothing.

"You remember seeing some fellows out on your road wearing white helmets? They were on a civil defense exercise. It's a big thing around here. And you know what they were doing?"

Martin didn't reply, showing no sign of having heard. He hated his new role and loathed the little man who had taken on his.

The constable went on, ignoring the silence. "They were setting up check points on every road coming into town."

"In other words," Barkus added, "we know that no strangers stopped in town anytime around the hour the girl was murdered."

Martin hunched his shoulders, drove them into the table and sent it flying while his right hand dove for his gun. It was gone.

Now another gun was pointed at the city cop; and this one was his, and it was in the hand of the town's highest elected official. "Put the table back up, Martin, and sit down."

This quick defeat forced him to think again, urging him on to some defense, some comback that would get him out from under those guns. "But why me? Hell, there's probably a dozen guys in this town alone who might do a thing like that!"

"Except for one thing, Mr. City Policeman."

"What's that?"

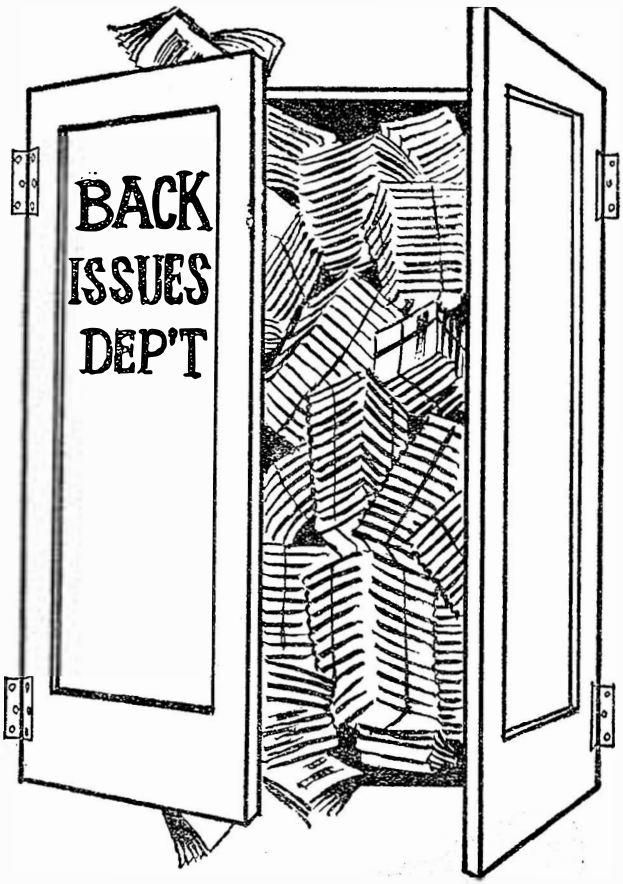
"Like you said out at the barn, somebody really gave it to her."

"So?"

The constable almost smiled without losing a speck of his caution. "Nobody but you could have raped and beaten her."

"Why the hell so? What do you think I am?"

Selectman Jim Barkus craned his neck at the sound of the siren in the distance. "You're the only stranger in town. Any of the local men would just of asked for what they wanted. You see, city cop, Tillie Miles was the town whore."



If you missed any of the past issues of Manhunt you can still catch up while we clean out our files to make room for the new issues ahead. The issues available are listed on the facing page. Supplies are limited . . . so please hurry.

50¢ apiece . . . or all six consecutive issues for $2.50. Send cash, check or money order. Use the handy coupon

3-64 **RICHARD PRATHER** *pits his ace, Shell Scott, against a fiendish killer with an eye for luscious victims. And more spine chillers by our staff of experts: Bernard Epps, San Luis Rey, Ed Hoch, etc.*

5-64 **EVAN HUNTER'S** *operator-without-license, Matt Cordell, ops for some bone-snapping vengeance in "The Dead And The Dying." It's a baker's dozen this issue, 13 stories of exciting crime fiction.*

7-64 **HENRY KANE** *weaves a plot of intrigue and action that involves Peter Chambers with the strip dancer, Manaja. Also along to keep you on the edge of your chair: Joe Gores, Ed Lacy, W. Engeler, etc.*

9-64 **FLOYD MAHANNAH'S** *superb mystery, "Kill and Run," is a fast action whodunnit that will keep you guessing right up to the last paragraph. Also on board: Frank Sisk, Michael Zuroy, H. L. Greene, etc.*

11-64 **JAMES HARVEY'S** *novel on the stag film business may be fiction, but once you've read it you'll think you were there. Also Robert Page Jones, Edward Wellen, R. A. Gardner and others.*

1-65 **DAVID GOODIS** *mixes a bitter brew of betrayal and revenge with a dash of brutality and concocts "The Sweet Taste." Adding to the larder with an assortment of goodies are: Ed Lacy, Charles Freylin, Will Cotton, etc.*

MANHUNT (4-66)
545 FIFTH AVE.
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

I am enclosing $2.50 *Please send me the issues I have circled below.*

(3-64) (5-64) (7-64) (9-64) (11-64) (1-65)

My name is: Jerry L. Schneider

Address: 12015 Hartdale Avenue

City: La Mirada State: California

an angle on death

Vera was a beautiful girl with a body that drove guys nuts. Trouble was . . . nobody seemed to want to marry her.

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY ROY CARROLL

SHE was a cute kid and I hated to do this to her, but it had to be. I couldn't fool around. I gave it to her straight, told her I couldn't afford to get married, didn't want to get married and that I wasn't paying for any operation, either. Those things cost two—three hundred bucks, today. I didn't have that kind of money. I told her, too, that if she tried to put the pressure on me, I'd just take off, fast. I didn't have to hang around this town.

It was while she was putting on the big sob act that I figured an out for her. I told her to shut up for a minute and then I said: "Vera, listen. I think I've got it figured what you can do."

She cut off the tears fast, but her big, brown eyes stayed full and glittery as she looked at me. "What is it, Van?"

"It's simple," I told her. "You know the boss is nuts about you, don't you? Absolutely nuts. So when he hears you and I have busted up, he'll ask you for a date. You give it to him. And you keep on giving it to him. Not only the dates."

She sniffled and dabbed at her nose with a little wad of handkerchief. Those cowlike eyes stared at me dumbly. She said: "Go out with Mr. Owen? I—I don't think I understand, Van."

"You don't understand." I went over to the dresser mirror and started combing my hair. I knew Vera was watching me, thinking what nice curly hair I had, and how handsome I was, and big, like a college football player. I knew that because she was always telling me. It got monotonous.

"What do you want me to do?" I said. "Draw you a blueprint? After a few dates the dumb old slob will want you to marry him. Okay, you marry him. Your troubles are over."

I turned away from the mirror and she was sitting very stiff in the chair, her usually round, pretty face looking drawn and shocked. "Van," she said. "Do you know what you're saying? I—I can't marry someone I don't even love. Especially a fat man old enough to be my father. Van, what do you think I am?"

I didn't tell her.

"Van, you can't be serious. I—What's got into you, lately?"

"Nothing's got into me," I told her. "You're the one in trouble. Remember? I'm telling you, that's your out. Your only out. It's simple. Easy."

She came flying out of the chair, squalling and sobbing again and flung herself at me. I held her for a minute. "Van," she said. "I thought you loved me. How can you do this to me? Van, I only want to marry *you*. I only love *you*."

For a minute I almost felt sorry for her. In spite of the fact that she was a good-looking kid, with a body that drove the guys in the office nuts, she was kind of shy and dumb. Maybe that was because she was all alone in the world, no folks or anything, lived by herself, didn't even seem to have any girl friends. I was the first guy she'd ever gone out with steady. I was the first guy, period. But what good does it do you to feel sorry for someone? What does it buy?

"Look, Baby," I said, softly. "It won't be so bad. Harry Owens is stinking with dough. He's a nice old guy. You'll have the best of everything. And maybe after awhile, you and I can still get together."

She thought about that and the weeps died down again. Finally, she murmured: "Suppose he doesn't ask me to marry him, Van? What then?"

"He will," I said. "If he doesn't, you make him. You tell him he's got to because you're——"

She yanked away from me, and for a long minute she stared at me, a funny look in her eyes. "You're really serious, aren't you?" she said, finally. "You're really asking me to do a thing like that!"

Then she turned and ran out of my flat, still crying, slamming the door behind her. For a minute I was going to go after her, try to talk her into it. But then I realized I didn't have to. She had the idea, now. When she calmed down, she'd go through with it. What else was there for her to do? I knew she was scared stiff of any operation, even if she could get the dough.

The next day at the Owen Advertising Agency where Vera and I both worked in the mail room, she didn't even speak to me. She acted sullen and pouty, all day. Other people in the office started noticing right away and soon they were kidding both of us about it. They stopped, though, when Vera burst out crying and ran out to the Ladies' Room. That was good. I knew now that Harry Owen wouldn't lose any time hearing about it.

The whole thing worked out smooth and fast after that. I called Vera in a couple of days and she told me she was dating him. She said it was being done on the QT, though, that Harry didn't want the rest of the employees to know about it. Then she said: "You know something, Van, the joke's on you. I'm already beginning to like Mr. Owen —Harry—a lot. He's not so old, after all, and he's not so fat, either. He's kind to me, too, Van. Can you understand what that means to me after going with you? He isn't cruel like you. He doesn't do the—the things you used to do. I think this was a very smart idea of yours, Van. I'm not having any trouble forgetting you, at all."

"Good for you," I said and slammed the receiver in her ear. I don't know what I got so damned sore about, but I did. Wasn't everything working out the way I'd planned? But it bothered me, somehow. I got mean drunk that night, the kind of drunk I don't like to get. The next day I was all right, though.

It was about a month or so later and I wasn't sure whether Vera was beginning to look a little chubby already or if it was just my imagination, when she called me one night, told me she had to see me. I tried to shake her off but she insisted. She came up to my place.

She looked terrible, her hair not fixed right, kind of ratty looking and her eyes too dark underneath and with a kind of haunted look. She sat there, twisting her hands in her lap and told me how she and Harry Owen had gotten real cozy together and he'd told her he loved her, wanted to put her up in a swanky apartment and like that. But he never even came close to asking her to marry him. Well, today, one of the other girls in the office made a funny remark to Vera

and she knew she couldn't wait much longer. So tonight she gave Harry the business. She told him.

"Van, he went crazy," she said. "He told me I'd have to get it taken care of, I'd have to. He'd pay for everything. I told him that was out. I told him I wouldn't go for an operation, no matter what, and he couldn't make me, and that my—condition was his responsibility and he had to marry me. Well, he really went wild, then. He cursed me and, all of a sudden, he grabbed me, and started choking me. Look."

She undid a little silken scarf around her throat and showed me the imprint of his fingers. I didn't know what to say, couldn't figure it. Harry Owen was one of these Man Of Distinction types, gray temples, clipped mustache, a little paunchy, but always well groomed. Always quiet and polite, too. Every inch a gentleman. I couldn't even picture him doing something like that. Something was wrong, somewhere. I'd never even heard him raise his voice in the office. I didn't get it.

"What am I going to do, Van?" Vera said. "I—I'm afraid of him, now. No kidding. Van, he wasn't fooling. His eyes were murderous. He would have killed me right then and there, but I managed to break away."

I said: "You go home and get some rest. Try to forget about it. Maybe he'll calm down and be sorry and change his mind after he thinks it all over. What else can you do? Forget this crap about being afraid of him. He was just trying to frighten you. Guys don't kill girls for things like this, today. What have you been reading, *American Tragedy* or something?

I talked to her some more, calmed her down, and got her out of my place. But the thing kept bothering me, all that night. I didn't sleep much. I knew that these quiet, gentlemanly guys like Owen were the worst kind when they did finally flip about something. I wasn't really so sure Vera had nothing to worry about. But it wasn't my business any more. This was between the two of them.

The next day, I noticed that the boss was grouchy and irritable, the first time I'd ever seen him that way. He looked pale and drawn and about ten years older, too, as though he hadn't slept very well. But late in the afternoon, I met Vera by the water cooler. Nobody else was around. She broke out in a big smile.

"It's all right, Van," she whispered. "He apologized today. And he said he'd be glad to marry me. He said it was just that the shock of finding out about my—you know—condition, was too much for him. But he was sweet as pie, today. Tonight he's going to drive me up to show me his country place in Westchester. And next week we'll announce the wedding. Isn't that swell, Van?"

I said I guessed it was and then somebody came along and we couldn't talk any more. At five o'clock, going down in the elevator with Joe Harvey, the office manager, it came to me that something was wrong. A guy doesn't change just like that. Not from one complete extreme to the other. And this taking her up to see his country place sounded a sour note to me. Down in the lobby, I told Joe Harvey I had a big date tonight, and would he loan me his car? He said sure.

I drove right to the block where Vera had a room and parked there and waited and watched. About seven-thirty, Harry Owen's big Lincoln swerved to the curb in front of the building and he went in and got Vera and the two of them drove off. I followed them.

They drove up deep into Westchester before the Lincoln turned off into a lonely dirt side road. I cut the lights on Joe's car, eased in behind them, way behind, because Owen would have suspected something if he'd seen another car behind him on this lonely country lane. Then I saw him stop, about a quarter of a mile ahead. I slewed into the side of the road, cut the engine, quick. I got out and started to walk, keeping in the shadows, toward the red glow of the Lincoln's taillight, up ahead.

I was about ten yards from their car when I saw Harry Owen get out of the driver's side, walk around the car to the other door, open it and start to drag something out. I edged a little closer. What he was dragging out, I saw, was Vera. He was dragging her out by the legs and her skirt got hiked way up and the starlight gleamed on the whiteness of her thighs. Then Owen went around to the trunk compartment of the car and got out a spade. He held the spade under his arm while he dragged Vera's corpse into the woods. I followed him and saw the clearing where he was going to bury her, and then I got out of there, fast. I drove home.

All that night I was so excited I could hardly sleep, hardly wait for tomorrow. I knew it would be better that way. Be more of a shock to him. When nothing had happened by morning, he'd pretty well figure he was safe. I waited most of the next day, too, until the middle of the afternoon. Then I took some mail into Harry Owen in his private office.

"Hi, Harry," I said. "How's Vera?"

He took it nice. He just looked up quietly and said: "Vera? Oh, you mean that little brunette you used to go with?"

The one I used to go with. I had to admire this guy, the way he'd got control of himself, even though he did look terrible. I said: "Yeah, that one."

"She doesn't work here any more," he said, fussing with papers on his desk, not looking up. "I got

a call this morning, said she was resigning, had another job."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yes, Van. She was a nice girl. Too bad you two had a falling out. I'm busy, Van. Anything special on your mind?"

"Yes," I told him. "Vera. I'm wondering how she made that call this morning. Any phone booths up in those lonely Westchester woods? You know, where she's tucked in for the long sleep?"

He jerked almost out of his skin. His head went back so hard his neck snapped. I've never seen such a scared, sick look in anybody's eyes. His face looked like crumpled parchment. He didn't say anything, Just looked at me.

"She didn't quit any job, did she, Harry?" I said. "She's just took a one way ride along a dirt road, off the Hutchinson River Parkway, with a guy who had her in some trouble."

"Van," he said. His voice sounded like a frightened child's. He tried to say something else but all he could do was keep saying my name over and over.

"Don't worry about it," I told him. "I won't be greedy. But I think it's about time I got promoted, got a big raise, don't you, Harry?"

He said: "Go away, Van, for a few minutes. Leave me alone. Let me think."

"There's nothing to think about. I've been here long enough to get promoted, get more pay. Nobody will think anything. Not like what they would think if they knew about that grave up there in Westchester. I could take the cops there easy. I know just where it is."

"Wait a minute, Van," he said. Some of the color was coming back to his face. He loosened his collar. His eyes narrowed a little. "You're forgetting a few things. Vera and I were very—uh—circumspect. Nobody knows about our relationship. Not anybody at all. There's nothing to tie her in with me. I went back to her place, last night, and got rid of all her stuff, left a note written on her typewriter, explaining to the landlord that she'd gotten a better job in L. A. That angle's well covered. Van, the way it's set up, *you'd* be the one the police would jump on. Everybody in the office knew *you* were going with her, then had a fight when she got in trouble. It will just look like she let it go for a month, then really went after you. You got panicky—and took that way out. That's the way the police would figure it. So, you see, you've got no real hold on me."

I stared at him, unbelievingly. That turned my guts over for a moment. But not for long. I laughed. "Nice try," I told him. "But police work is super-scientific these days. When they go over your car, they'll find proof that Vera was in it, last night. They'll go over that car with vacuum cleaners, with a fine tooth comb. There'll be plenty of evi-

dence that you're the killer and you'll never in a million years get rid of it. The shoes you wore, the shovel." I grinned at him. "A nice attempt to pass the buck, Harry, but it won't work. Let's talk about that raise some more."

I got to be Supervisor of the mailing department that day. With a big raise. And from then on I began living it up. I got a better apartment, a lot of clothes. My boss was a real good guy. Whenever I ran short I could always borrow a hundred from him. He wasn't in any sweat about me paying it back, either. Especially since I didn't overdo it. Poor Harry Owen wasn't enjoying life so much, though. He began to drink a lot. Even in the office, during the day, you could smell it on him. It started some talk but not much. So maybe business was bad or something and he was worried.

Once, I got curious, and asked him: "Why did you do it the hard way? Why didn't you marry the kid? She wasn't so bad."

He told me, then, that he was already married, although separated, and that his wife was against divorce. I borrowed an extra fifty from him, on that.

During that next month, I began to take it easy on the job, too. When I felt like taking an afternoon off or something, I did it. If I felt like sitting around, reading for awhile, I did it. Who was going to say anything? Harry Owen? It griped a lot of people in the office. They got jealous. I didn't care. The hell with them! One wise guy even said:

"Who does this guy Van think he is, a privileged character or something? I never saw a guy get away with so much. He must know where the body's buried or something."

The funny part was, he wasn't kidding. He just didn't realize it, that's all.

This went on for a month. Then one morning, in front of the whole office, when I came in an hour late, Harry Owen told me: "Van, you come in late one more morning, take another afternoon off, or sluff on the job any more, and you're through. You're fired."

I looked at him as though he'd said something in Arabic. "What?" I said. "Are you kidding?"

He'd aged badly in the last month but right now his jaw was set firmly. His eyes looked sunken way into his head and bloodshot from drinking so much, but they held mine steadily enough. "Try it and find out," he said.

There was only one thing to figure. The guy'd gone crazy. He couldn't do that to me. For this, for humiliating me like that, I was really going to rub his nose in some dirt. Now he was really going to pay. I'd get ten grand out of him, or else. From now on I'd bleed him dry. But it was late afternoon before I got into his office to see him. By then he was pretty drunk. A kind of controlled drunk, so that he

could still talk all right, and sit fairly straight in his chair. But he was loaded, no question, in spite of that.

He didn't even give me a chance. "Whatever you're going to say, skip it," he told me right off. "The honeymoon is over, Van. You have no more hold on me."

I got so mad I felt as though I was swelling, like a puff adder. My collar got too tight. "I haven't, huh?" I said.

"No, Van." He showed his teeth in a ghastly grin. "I moved it. It isn't where you saw me put it, any more. I put it where nobody'll ever find it. Never. So now what can you prove?"

It took me a moment to get it through my head. I said: "I can still go to the cops."

"Sure," he said. "And they'll go up there and find nothing, and slap you around for bothering them."

"Wait a minute. You couldn't have moved her. She's been there a month. She'd have been a mess."

He looked for a moment as though he was going to throw up. Then he got control, and said: "She was. Don't let's talk about it any more, Van. It's all over."

"You're bluffing!" I shouted it at him. "What do you think I am, a chump? There wouldn't be enough left of her to move."

"Okay," he said. "Have it your way. Now get out, before I call someone to throw you out."

I went back to the mail room but I kept thinking about it and the more I thought the more I knew he wasn't bluffing. Yet he *couldn't* have done what he said. I had to find out. I borrowed Joe's car again that night and drove up there. Along that same dark, dirt road, to the same spot. It gave me the creeps a little. I hadn't brought a flashlight and in the dark it took me a little time to find the clearing. But I found it. The only thing was, he was right; he hadn't been bluffing. The shallow grave was still there but it was all dug up. It was empty. She was gone.

"I'll be damned," I said, out loud.

"Yeah," someone said, and I whirled around to stare into the blinding beam of three flashlights. Three flashlights held by cops.

They took me back into the city and I told the cops the whole story. I had to. They thought I'd killed Vera, buried her out there, just as Harry Owen had first said that they would. They'd gotten an anonymous phone tip about the corpse and where it was buried, earlier in the day. They'd gone out and dug it up. The same tip told them to watch me.

I told them, of course, that their phone tip had been Harry Owen. They said they questioned him, after that, investigated him. He denied knowing anything about any of it. Apparently, as he had said, they weren't able to dig up any connection between him and Vera. They couldn't find anybody who'd

ever seen them together, or knew they were seeing each other. They'd been circumspect, all right. He was clean. I wasn't, as far as the cops were concerned.

I knew what had happened. I'd pushed him too far. He'd finally decided to take a chance on winding the whole thing up, getting rid of me, by putting the cops on me. It hadn't been much of a chance. He'd realized that the police couldn't see anybody but me. It was cut and dried. They wouldn't investigate him, too much, Harry Owen figured. And he was right.

I couldn't talk the cops out of it and my lawyer couldn't convince the jury, either. After the trial he told me that he'd heard Harry Owen was drinking himself to death, had wound up in the Alky ward a couple of times, already. A lot of good that did me.

The stupid part about the whole thing, the Police lab worked on the remains. And like I'd heard it happens sometimes, Vera may have had all the symptoms, but according to those lab boys, it must have been something else, because they said she wasn't that way at all.

Jo-Jo Olsen was Norwegian, a descendant of the Vikings. But when you're one of five kids trying to claw a life out of New York's west side . . . it's pretty hard to live up to your heritage.

VIKING BLOOD

A Novelette

BY DENNIS LYNDS

IT BEGAN with the mugging of the cop.

Person or persons unknown jumped the patrolman, dragged him into one of our dark alleys near the river, and cleaned him out. We all knew him: Patrolman Stettin on one of the river-front beats. A young cop, Stettin, not too long on the beat, and eager. The mugger took it all: billy club, gun, cuffs, summons book, watch, tie-clip and loose change.

The story went around the back rooms like the news of free drinks at some grand opening. Because it didn't figure. Who robs a cop?

"What's a harness bull got worth stealing?" Joe Harris said.

"The pistol," I said.

Joe thought about that while he

poured me a second free shot of Paddy's good Irish. Packy Wilson, the owner of this saloon, was too busy talking to his other morning customer about Stettin's mugging to notice the free drinks. Some good comes out of everything.

"There're a lot easier ways to get a gun," Joe said.

Joe was right. Getting a gun isn't exactly like picking fruit off a tree, even here in Chelsea, but there are easier ways than mugging The Man. Kids born between the river and Broadway know that much before they're weaned.

"Cops make less than you do," Joe said. "When you get around to working."

Joe and I live together, we have for a lot of years, and his name is on my life insurance. That doesn't tempt him, and it says a lot about his character these days when you read about kids who kill their parents to get the insurance money to go to college. Joe thinks I should bring in more money, but I point out to him that he really likes tending bar and I need a reason to work.

"Try hunger," Joe said. "That's my reason."

"It's not enough," I said.

And it's not. You don't need much money to eat and sleep and get enough to drink to quiet the voices in your head or the pain in an arm that isn't even there. The missing arm holds me back a little, but we make enough to eat. Real work is for something else. There has to be a reason for real work—a reason that's part of the work itself. That was a fact Jo-Jo Olsen had to face before it was all over.

That morning I hadn't even heard of Jo-Jo Olsen, and no one had mentioned the other robbery or the murder. Nothing is that neat in real life, and the cops don't tell all they know to the neighborhood grapevine. On the West Side we get maybe 40 burglaries a day alone, and another robbery isn't news. The mugging of a cop is news.

"A cop gets killed, that I figure," Packy Wilson said. The other morning customer had left and Packy had to talk to me. "It's the robbing and not killing I don't get."

Packy's Pub is kind of a fancy name for a Tenth Avenue saloon, but Packy has ideas of drawing the young executive crowd and their Vassar-girl secretaries. He might even do it. The bright kids are always running out of places to "discover" these days. It's a nervous time we have, everyone on the go-go. It doesn't matter where they go, just somewhere else.

"I guess it was the gun," Joe said, decided.

"Even an out-of-town hood oughta have better connections," Packy Wilson said. "Jumping a cop is the hard way."

"A junkie, maybe," Joe said. "A junkie could sell the gun, and the other stuff, for a couple of good fixes."

"Even you don't believe that," I said. "A junkie shakes when he sees a cop in the movies."

"Maybe just a cop-hater," Packy Wilson said. "And he took what he could while he was at it."

It was good for a lot of talk for a while, but after a week or so even I had almost forgotten it. People are strange. I mean, cops are killed somewhere every day, but cops don't get mugged and robbed very often. Yet a cop-killing rates headlines, and a mugging, which is real news, gets forgotten. People are more interested in death.

That's the way it is, and the talk about Stettin faded fast. I guess I would have forgotten it completely in a month. But I didn't get the month. I got Jo-Jo Olsen and a couple of killings, and I caused a lot of trouble myself.

The kid walked into my office about three weeks later. It was a Monday and Joe's day off. The Mets were away, it was too hot for fishing, and I was broke anyway. So I was in my office. The kid was looking for his friend Jo-Jo Olsen.

The experts tell you that a man can't think up an alias that won't give him away if you know enough about him. I believe that. A man can't have something inside his head that didn't have a start somewhere. Sometimes you have to know a lot, and sometimes not very much, but if you know enough about the man you'll spot the alias. That was one of the things I knew and Jo-Jo Olsen didn't know, and it almost cost him.

Another thing they tell you is that a good man is a man who faces up to his obligations, accepts his duty. Maybe that's true, too. Only I've seen too many who face up to every obligation except the hard one. The hard one is a man's obligation, duty, to himself. It's hard because it always has to hurt someone else, the way it had to for Jo-Jo Olsen in the end.

"You writing a gossip column," Joe said, "or you telling about Jo-Jo Olsen?"

Joe likes to read over my shoulder when I decide to write about all of it instead of working. He's my friend, and he's got the right, and most of the time he was there when it happened so he can help me tell it the way it was.

"They pay by the word," I said.

Joe thinks I go off on angles, don't tell it straight. He's right, and he's wrong. He wants me to tell the story of Jo-Jo Olsen. But what I've been telling is the story, the real story of Jo-Jo Olsen.

Most of the time it's not the facts, the events, that tell the story, it's the background, the scenery. It's all the things floating around a man in the air he breathes, the air he was born to and lives in. Things waiting for a spark to set them off. That's the real story of Jo-Jo Olsen, not the spark that blew it all up, or the dead faces he never knew.

Joe would say it started on the day Petey Vitanza happened to find me in my office that Monday morning. Or maybe on the day Patrolman Stettin was mugged, and the woman killed. But it really began the day Jo-Jo Olsen was born, or maybe a hell of a long time before that when the Vikings still roamed the seas. Petey Vitanza, sitting in my dingy office with the brick wall for a view out the one window, was just one of the sparks.

"Almost three weeks, Mr. Kelly," Petey Vitanza said.

"A rabbit act?" I said. "Try the police."

"Jo-Jo wouldn't never stay away three weeks on his own," the Vitanza boy said. "He just bought a new bike. We was fixing it for racing."

The kid was scared. That was one of the things I mean. He was scared, and should have minded his own business, but Jo-Jo Olsen was his friend, so he came to me. He picked me because I'd known his father, Tony, before Tony Vitanza died building the Lincoln Tunnel so people could get to Atlantic City faster.

Missing persons are jobs for the police. Even when I was working steadier at private snooping, I didn't like them. Most of the rabbit cases I got were fathers after stray daughters, or wives after stray husbands who had all of a sudden wondered why they were working to their graves for women who weren't any fun. There could be a message. I mean, what happens between the time the daughter runs and the wife is run on? Makes a man think.

This time was different. Jo-Jo Olsen was a nineteen year old boy. He hadn't been lured into bad company, he'd been born into bad company. He wasn't married or even going steady.

"Sure," Petey Vitanza said, "we got girls, you know? Only no steady. Jo-Jo and me got motors, you know? I mean, Jo-Jo is studyin' hard by Automotive Institute. He's good. We're gonna go over 'n work for Ferrari someday. Maybe England, the Limeys sure knows cars."

And it wasn't Jo-Jo's parents who were looking for him.

"They said he went on a trip," Petey said. "His old man told me to stop botherin' him, and his old lady got mad. She said I should mind my own business and go dig dirt with the other hogs."

I didn't know the Olsens, and I was glad. From that crack about hogs, they sounded like those people who think hard work is for suckers. We have a lot like that in Chelsea. They live around the rackets and the fast buck, and honest sandhogs get their contempt. The story sounded like that. It also sounded like a cover up.

"Is Jo-Jo in trouble, Petey?" I asked.

"Hell no!" Petey said, but he looked scared.

"It's got the sound," I said.

Petey was scared. "That cop, the one got beat up bad? The fuzz got it the day before Jo-Jo took off. The bull got beat right down the block from Schmidt's Garage."

"And you and Jo-Jo were working on the bike in Schmidt's?"

Petey nodded. "Jo-Jo works by Schmidt's. Only we been there near every day for months, the both of us! We was working on his new bike, fixin' the motor for racin'. It's a sweetheart, a Yamaha. I mean, we was together all the time!"

"A Yamaha costs real bread," I said.

"Jo-Jo he stashed his loot. He's a good mechanic, Mr. Kelly, and Schmidt pays him good."

I had a funny feeling in my arm, the left arm that isn't there. I get that when things don't sound right. This didn't sound right.

"He had a good job," I said, "he was studying hard at school, and he had a new cycle you were readying for racing. But a cop's been beaten right on the block where he works, and he's run."

Petey nodded. Nobody is with somebody else *all* the time. Like I said, my advice on rabbits is go to the cops. They have the tools. Most rabbits are repeaters. Once a man runs, unless the pressures change which they usually don't, he will run again. It's the rabbit's answer to run. Some men drink, some mainline, some watch TV, some beat their wives, some let everyone beat them to see how much they can take, and rabbits run.

But this sounded different. Jo-Jo Olsen had no reason to run, and a cop had been attacked on his block. Jo-Jo sounded like a straight kid, but in Chelsea if a man wants quick money his mind turns only one way, and it isn't to a bank loan. Besides, if Petey went to the police they would check with the parents and go home.

"Okay, Petey," I said. "You go home, I'll check it out."

I meant it, but you know how it is. It was summer and so hot the chewing gum on the streets turned liquid, and I was having my troubles with Marty again, and it all made me thirsty and tired.

Marty is my woman. Martine Adair, that's her name on the off-Broadway theater programs and the signs outside the tourist nightclubs on Third Street. Her real name doesn't matter. She changed her name, and I don't tell how I really lost my arm. She's fifteen years younger than me, and she gives me trouble. That's my own private business. I wouldn't mention Marty except that she was the reason I was almost too late, and she knew about Pappas.

Anyway, I did get around to checking with precinct on Jo-Jo. They had no record on the Olsen boy, but Lieutenant Marx was interested. Maybe it should have interested me, the fact that Jo-Jo had reached the age of nineteen in our

neighborhood without picking up any record at all, and yet his name seemed to ring some kind of bell with Lieutenant Marx. But it didn't register at the time, and Marx didn't offer any comment. Most cops don't.

I put out a few other feelers asking for any information on Jo-Jo, and went back to my own problems. It could have stopped right there, too, but the spark had been set off. Marty got friendly again, and I got mauled a little, and they picked Petey Vitanza out of a gutter beaten blind, and Captain Gazzo down at Homicide told me about the other robbery—and about the killing.

The guy who mauled me was big but slow. I'm not big, and I'm not slow. When you've got only the average number and size of muscles, and you picked up a handicap like one arm along the way, you need good legs and fast thinking. It's called compensation, or adaptation, or just learning to use what you have in a world you can't do much about.

It was a night about a week after I'd talked with Petey Vitanza. Hotter than the engine room on some old coal-burners I've sailed on, and I was heading for *Packy's Pub*. I passed one of our convenient dark alleys, and he came down on me like a whole hod of bricks.

He hit me once on the right shoulder. He'd lunged off-balance, and he only got the shoulder. He was no trained fighter, but he had muscles, and his fist felt like a small bowling ball. I bounced off a wall. His second blow was slow, and I had time to roll with it. That was lucky because it was aimed at my chin and was more accurate. I think his trouble was that he had something on his mind, and his brain was too slow to think of two things at once.

"Lay off Jo-Jo!"

He grunted that message just as he swung the second punch at my jaw, and so he was slow, and I rolled with it. I threw one punch just to make him slow down, kicked his shin hard, and rolled two garbage cans into his path. He ducked the punch, howled when I got his shin, and sprawled over the cans as he lunged again. By the time he had picked himself up I was nothing but heels going away fast. I think I was leaning on Packy Wilson's bar, and half way through my first drink, before he was sure I had gone.

"A big guy," I described to Joe. "Blond, I think, or going grey. Kind of a square face, flabby. Dressed good in a suit from the little I got to see."

Joe shook his head. "He don't drink much, I don't know him."

"He drinks," Packy Wilson said, "only not in bars you work, Joe. He drinks in the good joints, the Clubs over in the Village and down Little Italy."

"The racket-owned places?" I said.

"If he's who I think, and it sounds like him," Packy said.

"Who?" I said. "Or are we guessing?"

"Olsen," Packy said. "Lars Olsen. They call him Swede only he's Norwegian, I think."

"Jo-Jo's old man?" I said. There is a big difference between not looking for a missing son, and trying to stop someone else from looking. Good or bad, Jo-Jo had some kind of trouble.

"Yeah," Packy said. "It was Jo-Jo told me they was really Norwegian. The kid come in here for a beer sometimes. He was real hipped on the Vikings and all, that's how he come to tell me they was Norwegians not Swedes."

"Vikings?" I said. "Jo-Jo knew history?"

"The kid knew the Vikings," Packy said. "Read all them old Sagas he said. He used to say they was tough, and brave, and always won because they was daring and could outsail anyone. He said they never took no handouts from no one."

I listened to Packy, but I was thinking of something else. In my mind Jo-Jo Olsen was moving down two streets. It didn't make sense. Everything that had happened, the events, put Jo-Jo more-and-more into trouble, some kind of trouble. But everything I heard about Jo-Jo made it more-and more clear that he did not sound like a kid who would get into trouble.

"Those old kings sure had names," Packy said, remembering. "Harald the Stern, Sweyn Blue-Tooth, Halfdan The Black, Gorm The Old. The kid used to rattle them off like they tasted good just to say. He said that today was nothing, his old man even let guys call him Swede and didn't give a damn."

"History and motors and racing," I said. I was talking to myself. I rubbed the stump of my arm where sweat from the heat had made it sore. No record, history, motors, a bank account, and maybe joining Ferrari in Italy just didn't sound like either a cop-beater or a rabbit.

"They never come in here much," Packy said. "The old man is too good for the place, and the kid is saving his dough."

I needed a key, a link that would connect motors and racing and dreams of Ferrari in Italy, with a mugging-robbery of a cop that might make a man do a rabbit.

"Maybe saving his money wasn't fast enough," I said.

And Packy gave it to me. The possible zinger, the "maybe tie-in between a vanished kid, an angry father, and a mugged cop.

"You think maybe it was Jo-Jo pulled that job on the dame?" Packy said. "You know, I was thinking about that myself."

"What job?" I said.

"The couple-of-grand jewel heist down on Water Street," Packy said. "Maybe you didn't hear. The Man got it under the cool for some reason.

Not much, just a few grand take, but the dame got killed. In one of them new buildings."

New York is a peculiar city. Most big cities have slums and rich areas, but the rivers make New York special. Manhattan is an island, so there isn't much space to move in, and the whole city moves in slow circles from good to bad to good and back to bad. You end up with tenements, businesses, factories, and luxury buildings all on the same block.

Water Street is a slum street near the river that is getting good again. There are three new apartment houses on the street, a lot of old-law tenements—and Schmidt's Garage. It is also on the beat of Patrolman Stettin. It is the street where Stettin got hit. Now it had another robbery, and a killing!

I waited until next morning to pay a call on Captain Gazzo down at Homicide.

"The killing and robbery happened the same day our man was mugged, Kelly," Gazzo said. "We made the connection too."

Gazzo is an old cop. He says he's crazy because the world he lives in is crazy and you have to be crazy to handle it. He says he wouldn't know what to do with a sane person, he never gets to meet any. He includes me with the crazy. Maybe he knows.

"Jo-Jo Olsen," I said. "He's done a rabbit it looks like."

"Olsen?" Gazzo said as if listening to the sound. "Any part of Swede Olsen?"

"Son," I said. "I think Swede doesn't like me."

I told him about the inefficient mangler of last night. He seemed interested, but with Gazzo you can't tell. I've known him over twenty years, and I don't know if he likes me or hates me. With Gazzo it doesn't make any difference, he does his job.

"The kid worked at Schmidt's Garage?" Gazzo said.

"He did," I said.

"Interesting," Gazzo said.

"Tell me about the murder, robbery and cop-jumping?" I said.

"I thought you gave up on the world?" Gazzo said.

"I try," I said, "but it just hangs around. What have you got, Captain."

Gazzo had a file, but it was thin. A woman named Myra Jones was robbed and killed. Fake name, Caucasian, 22 years old, blonde, five-foot-eight, profession: model and chorus girl. Two diamond rings and a diamond necklace stolen, value about $2800, nothing else missing and plenty left behind. She lived alone in a four room luxury apartment in a non-doorman building on Water Street with a self-service elevator. Death was quick from a massive brain hemorrhage. No suspects on record.

"It looks like a grab and run, unintentional killing," Gazzo explained. "The stolen stuff must

have been lying open, a lot more was left behind inside an unopened jewelry box. The girl hit her head on the corner of an andiron in front of one of those fake fireplaces. She hit hard. There was a big bruise on her chin."

"She surprised him in her pad, he panicked and hit too hard," I said.

"That's the way it reads right now," Gazzo said. "No one saw him leave who's talking to us. He went out the back way and into an alley from the look of it. Tell me about the Olsen kid."

"What could he see?" I said. "Two rings and a necklace don't show. Schmidt's Garage is at the other end of the block."

"Maybe he recognized the guy," Gazzo said.

"What, just walking on the street?" I said. "You just said the guy ducked out the alley. If he just killed a woman, he'd have been pretty careful not to be seen by anyone who knew him."

"Accidents happen, Kelly," Gazzo said drily.

For myself I was thinking about Swede Olsen. There aren't many men you would see on the street, just walking, and wonder what they were doing. But your father you might. For some reason this did not seem to have occurred to Gazzo, and I wasn't about to bring it up.

"What about the cop?" I said. "Maybe he saw the burglar and was slugged for that?"

Gazzo rubbed his chin. He needed a shave. He usually did need a shave unless City Hall wanted to see him. Gazzo took some acid in the face twelve years ago, and his skin is tender. The Captain was shaking his head.

"No one ever accused our men of being *slow* on the trigger, Kelly," Gazzo said. "If Stettin had seen anything there would have been a rumpus. And why would our killer just knock him out and rob him? Anyway, he's okay now, and he can't tell us anything."

"He was just jumped?" I said. "Persons unknown?"

"Unknown, unseen, and unexplained," Gazzo said sourly. "Poor Stettin is embarrassed. He's an eager rookie. It hurts him to have been slugged and not even guess why."

"Clues?" I asked. "That you can talk about?"

Gazzo grinned. "Clues? Sure, we got a clue. A losing stub on a slow nag at Monmouth Park the day before the job. It was the only thing we found didn't belong to the lady or her lover."

"Thanks," I said. Monmouth Park is a popular track. I'd hate to be chased down a dark street by half the losers there in a single day. "What about the times?"

Gazzo checked his file. "Woman died between five and six in the afternoon. Stettin was hit about six-thirty." And Gazzo looked up at me. "The kid play the horses?"

"Cars and motorcycles are his line," I said. I got up to leave. I had a breakfast date with Marty, and I hate to keep her waiting when she feels friendly. "I don't really see Olsen in this, Gazzo. I don't even know he's run. His family say he's just on a trip."

"Swede Olsen was only trying to give his boy some privacy, eh?" Gazzo said.

"Maybe he just doesn't like people talking to the cops about his family," I said.

"I believe that much," Gazzo said.

I left Gazzo putting in a call on Jo-Jo Olsen.

Out in the street I headed for the subway. The more I looked at it, the less I could see Jo-Jo in the robberies or the killing. I didn't think Gazzo could either. Police work on patterns, records, the facts. Jo-Jo had no record, and the pattern stank. In Chelsea kids are born knowing better than to pull a job on their own block—and then point the finger at themselves by running.

But it looked like Jo-Jo *was* running. Swede Olsen was worried. I thought again about the older Olsen, but it played rotten. If Swede was the killer, he should have run not Jo-Jo. Why would a boy run just because he knew too much about his father? Afraid? I doubted that. Ashamed? That was possible, but I didn't like it. If Swede was a thief, and Jo-Jo knew it, one accidental killing wouldn't be likely to bring sudden shame.

Since it wasn't noon yet, I had plenty of time for my breakfast date with Marty, so I took the local north. The local is more comfortable, there's more room to stand. While the local rattled, I went over it all again. The way it appeared now, I couldn't fit it to Jo-Jo, so maybe there was another way to look at it all.

I didn't like the way Myra Jones had died. You'd be surprised how few burglars panic—unless they are amateurs or junkies. Jo-Jo was an amateur, but he wasn't a junkie. I never heard of a junkie with money in the bank, or who needs wheels to roll.

I didn't much like the robbery. The thief had gotten in and out totally unseen and undetected, not a trace left behind. And yet the haul had been peanuts.

I didn't like two violent crimes on the same block so close together—but unconnected. Somewhere there should be a connection between the robbery and the attack on Officer Stettin.

By the time I climbed out of the subway into the 90° cool of Sixth Avenue, I was working on the other side. Burglars did panic. Junkies made clever but sloppy robberies, and grabbed and ran. And unconnected crimes happened on the same block every day in New York.

To wash it all away I stopped in

a tavern a block from Marty's place. There was still a half an hour until noon and a decent breakfast hour for Marty. I planned to relax and think about her and get into the mood. Burglaries were a dime a dozen, the cop had probably written a ticket and got someone mad, and Jo-Jo Olsen had probably had a fight with his old lady. Marty was much better food for the inner man.

But they knew me in this saloon. Before I had a chance to blow the foam off my beer, I had heard all about Petey Vitanza. Marty isn't the kind of woman you forget about for any reason, so I called her and told her I'd be late. She didn't like it, and neither did I.

I like bars. Everything is cool and dim and simple in a man's relation to a glass of beer. And I don't like hospitals. But I left that bar and took a taxi down to St. Vincent's because I liked Petey Vitanza.

They told me that Petey would see again. He wasn't blind, it only looked that way. His face wasn't a face, it was a bandage. They had broken both arms. But the real serious damage was the splintered ribs and the internal injuries.

"Very complete job," the doctor said. "I had a case on the Bowery, but this is more complete."

The cops were there, since it was pretty clear that Petey had not fallen down some stairs. One old cop agreed that it was a good beating, but not professional.

"Amateurs," the old cop said. "They used their hands. Too much blood and damage without enough pain. Just amateurs."

Petey could not talk, but he could hear. They gave me two minutes. They said that he would probably live and I could ask him more questions later. I asked him if he had known the ones who beat him. He shook his head, negative. I asked him if it had been anything to do with Jo-Jo Olsen, and he nodded that it had. I asked him if it had any connection to the robbery-killing, or the cop-mugging, and he seemed agitated. He passed out then.

When I came out of the hospital it was still summer and hot. It seemed that it should have been dark and cold.

At that point I didn't really care about Jo-Jo Olsen, or about law and order. But I cared about Petey Vitanza and men who would, or could, beat a boy that badly. It's like politics for me—I don't care much about Anti-Poverty Crusades by politicians, but I care a lot about the poor.

I had let enough normal lack-of-interest in another man's troubles slow me down. Now it was time to go to work. It was time to find Jo-Jo Olsen, and I had one new fact to go on. Petey knew Swede Olsen, and he had not known who beat him. Which meant that some-

one else had a strong interest in Jo-Jo Olsen beside his doting father.

It was past time to meet Swede Olsen and family formally. Not that I expected the Swedish Norwegian to want to tell me much. The big older Olsen had tried to dissuade my interest in Jo-Jo forcefully. The question was: was it only me he wanted to keep away from Jo-Jo, or was *all* outside interest a worry to him?

When I walked up to the building on Nineteenth Street, I was not surprised to find that the Olsens lived in the best big apartment in a not-too-good building near the river. And I was not surprised to find Swede at home at mid-day. Both Gazzo and Lieutenant Marx seemed to know Olsen, and from what Petey Vitanza had told me I had already guessed that the Olsens were not a hard working family.

Swede Olsen *was* surprised. The big man took one look at me and clenched his large fist. I dangled my not-so-large Police Special in my hand. I didn't point the gun, you understand, I just showed it. He had the muscles. I had the equalizer. He scowled, but he stepped back and let me walk inside.

"What you want, Kelly?" Olsen growled.

I looked around. The apartment was big and ugly. Not lack-of-money ugly, but just plain rotten-taste ugly. It fitted. I mean, everything about Olsen and his apartment talked of enough money but not much experience in spending the money wisely. The place had cost a lot to furnish, but it still looked like a slum room. The rent in such a building would be high for our section, but low for anywhere else.

Swede himself looked like a slob, and yet Packy Wilson said the big man went to the expensive bars for his beers. The whole picture was of making money too late. And the woman who came into the living room now fitted right in. She looked like one of those Okie women in *Grapes of Wrath*, except that her clothes had cost a bundle and her hands were clean. Too late. The woman had money for clothes and clean hands now, but the hands had been ruined long ago, and the years had left her nothing to hang the clothes on but a bag of old bones.

"Stay out of this, Magda," Olsen snapped at the woman.

"It's my business," the woman said. She looked at me as if I was a cockroach she knew too well. "You the one askin' about my boy?"

"I'm one of them," I said. "I'm the one who doesn't play so rough. The others are the mean type."

"Get lost," the woman said.

I turned to Olsen. "You don't want your boy found?"

"Who said he's missing?" the woman said.

"I say he's missing," I said. "The question I can't answer is the one about if he's missing from you, Mrs. Olsen."

"He ain't, Kelly," Olsen said.

"Then where is he? If the other guys find him they might play rougher."

There was a long silence. I watched them. Olsen looked unhappy, and he was sweating. The woman looked like the rock of Gibraltar. Olsen looked worried. The woman, Mrs. Olsen, looked determined. I got a funny feeling —they were worried about themselves, not about Jo-Jo.

"What did he run for?" I asked.

"He ain't run," Mrs. Olsen said. "Beat it."

"Did he jump that cop?" I snapped.

"No," Olsen said, cried, and realized he had shot his mouth off. He looked green. His wife, Magda Olsen the mother, glared at him.

"He did nothing. He took a trip," Magda Olsen said.

I was ready to go on with the dance when the two boys came into the room. They were both big and both young. They looked enough like Swede to tell me I was looking at Jo-Jo's brothers. A pretty girl behind them told me Jo-Jo had at least one sister. The girl was pretty, but the boys weren't.

"Take off," Olsen said.

I went. But all the way down the stairs and out into the mid-afternoon sun, I knew I had learned a lot. They were worried. Not worried about Jo-Jo, but about themselves. All of them, as if they were all in some kind of collective trouble, but not police-type trouble. They were *angry* worried, not *scared* worried.

And they were not surprised that others were looking for Jo-Jo. Olsen knew Jo-Jo had not beaten and robbed Officer Stettin, and I had a pretty strong hunch that he knew who had. Olsen didn't like what he knew. The old lady, Magda Olsen, didn't like it all either, but she was standing pat. They were all like people on eggshells. Like they didn't want to breathe if that would rock the boat.

Only what was the boat? I'd have staked my reputation on them being clean about the killing and mugging. So it had to be that they *knew* something they wished they didn't know, and that maybe Jo-Jo knew it, too. Then why had only Jo-Jo run? And what was there about a simple robbery-murder, and even a cop-mugging, that knowing it would worry Olsen and his family so much? It didn't figure a small-time heist man would worry them.

It was a good question, and I thought about it all the way across town in the sun. A good question, and I got a good answer a lot faster than I expected.

I told you that Marty was my girl. I had kept her waiting all day. Or maybe it'd be truer to say I'd kept myself waiting. I liked Petey Vitanza, but a man has to think of himself. It was too late for breakfast at Marty's pad, so I met her at

O.Henry's. Outside, at one of the sidewalk cafe tables.

I needed a drink by then, two drinks, and Marty matched me all the way. She's not so pretty, Marty, not really, but under the lights, and to me, she's beautiful.

"That's what counts," I said. "To your audience and your man you're beautiful."

I got a nice smile. She's small, and this month she was a red-head, and she's built. But the real thing is she's exciting, you know? She's alive, she never stops moving even sitting there doing nothing. When I'm with her she keeps me busy. That was why I missed Pappas until he was sitting down at the table.

I've known Andy Pappas all my life. We're the same age, we grew up together on the river, we stole together, we learned to like girls together and we graduated high school together. Andy, me, and Joe Harris. That was where it ended. Joe is poor and hardworking. I'm poor and not so hardworking. Andy is rich and no one knows what he works at.

I mean, Andy is a boss. For the record, Andy Pappas is boss of a big stevedoring company on the docks. Off the record, Andy is the boss of something else. Everyone knows this something else is a racket and illegal. Only no one really knows just what Andy's racket is. He's got a piece of a lot of dirty pies, is my guess, but the main one is keeping the riverfront peaceful. He gets the ships unloaded—for a price and by force.

"Hello, Patrick," Pappas said. He's got a nice voice, low and even. He took lessons everyone says, but I remember he always had a good voice.

"Hello, Andy," I said. I nodded to Marty that she should leave. Andy grinned.

"Let the lady stay, I've seen her work," Andy Pappas said. "Besides, we're friends, right, Patrick?"

"You don't have a friend, Andy," I said. "You're the enemy of everyone."

Pappas nodded. He did not stop smiling. It was an old story with us.

"You don't soften up, do you, Pat?" Pappas said.

"And you never change," I said. "This isn't a social visit."

I nodded toward the lamppost a few feet away. It was one of those old gas-light lampposts *O.Henry's* had put up for atmosphere. Just leaning against it, pretending he was watching the little girl tourists pass, was Jake Roth. Roth wasn't watching girls, he was watching me. They say that Andy Pappas never carries a gun. But Jake Roth went to bed with a shoulder holster under his pajama top. Roth is Pappas's first lieutenant and top killer.

Across the street I could see Max Bangio. Bangio is Pappas's next best gun after Roth, and the little gunman was trying to read a newspaper in front of the stationery store

by spelling out the words in the headline. Actually, Bangio was watching me in the store-front window.

Just up the block toward Sheridan Square, Pappas's long, black car was parked in front of a Japanese knick-knack shop. The driver sat behind the wheel with his cap down and his arms folded. I didn't need a ouija board to know that there was a pistol ready beneath those folded arms.

Pappas shrugged. "You said it, Patrick, everyone's my enemy."

"That isn't exactly what I said, but let it pass. What's on your mind, Andy?"

"Let's have a drink first, Patrick. You're my friend if I'm not yours," Pappas said.

"I don't drink with you, Andy. Those days went a long time ago," I said.

I know I go too far with Pappas. There was that glint in his cold eyes. I've seen it before, and I push too hard. It's not brave to refuse to back off from a mad dog, it's stupid. But with Andy I can't help it. I know him, and that makes it worse. It's one thing to hear about Andy Pappas and hate him, and another to really know him and hate him. I feel guilty around him, because in some way I failed and he's my fault. I have to share the blame.

I can't back off from Pappas, tread softly, because he is what is wrong with it all. A man like Andy Pappas is where we went off the track. All the men like Andy who believe that all that counts is some advantage, some victory, some success, here and now, no matter how or who gets hurt. The men who will destroy us all just to try to win something even if only King of The Graveyard.

"All right, Pat," Pappas said at last, "I'll make it short. Lay off Olsen and his family."

And there was the answer. Somehow, Andy Pappas was mixed up with this. If I were the Olsens I would be worried, too. I'm not the Olsens, and I knew nothing, and I was still worried as I watched Pappas.

"Why?" I said.

"Olsen works for me," Pappas said.

"Olsen?" I said, and the question was clear.

"Odd jobs, driving, stuff like that," Pappas said. "But he gets my protection."

"Does he need it now, Andy?" I said.

Pappas laughed. "Look, Patrick. I don't know everything. I don't want to know everything. All I know is that Olsen doesn't want you bothering him or his boys, okay?"

"Did he tell you why I'm bothering him?" I said.

"I didn't talk to him," Andy Pappas said. "I got the request through channels. If it was anyone except you, I'd have sent a punk to tell you."

"His boy's done a rabbit," I said.

"So it's a family matter," Pappas said. "Since when you work for the cops on a rabbit?"

"I'm not working for the cops," I said. "I'm working for a nice kid who wants to find his friend. A nice kid who got beaten ninety-percent to death today. You wouldn't know about that, would you, Andy?"

"I don't beat ninety percent, Pat," Pappas said. Pappas stood up. He was smiling, but his eyes were not smiling. "He's got my protection, Patrick, remember that."

When Pappas stands up it is a signal. I heard the motor start in the big car up the block. Max Bagnio crossed the street toward us. Jake Roth stepped up to the table. Roth never took his eyes off me. I watched Pappas.

"Olsen must be in real trouble, Andy," I said.

Jake Roth answered me. The tall, skinny killer leaned half down like a long-necked vulture. He stank of sweat.

"Listen, peeper, Mr. Pappas said lay off, forget it, you got that? Mr. Pappas said cool it, he means cool it. Forget you ever heard about Olsen."

Roth's black, luminous eyes seemed to float in water. His breath was thick, his breathing fast as he bent close to me. Andy Pappas touched Roth lightly. The skinny gunman jerked upright like a puppet on a string.

"I told him, Jake, that's enough," Andy Pappas said. "You can tell Olsen that Kelly got the word."

Roth nodded. Max Bagnio said nothing. The black car slid up to the curb. Andy Pappas touched his hat to Marty, and climbed into the back of his car. Roth climbed in beside him, and Max Bagnio went around to get in beside the driver. The car eased away into the traffic and turned uptown on Sixth Avenue. I didn't breathe until it was gone. Then I ordered a double for both of us. Marty was still staring after Pappas.

"I know you know him," Marty said, "but I'm surprised every time. Just seeing him makes me shiver."

"Join the club," I said.

The drinks came and we were busy gulping for a long minute. Then I sighed, let out my breath, and smiled as I sat back. Marty still looked toward where the black car had vanished.

"How can you talk to him like that, Patrick," Marty said.

"I can't talk to him any other way," I said. "What I never really understood is why he lets me. I guess even Andy needs to think he has some human feeling. I'm his charity."

Marty shuddered. "But now," she said. "I could hardly look at him. I heard he was almost insane he was so mad."

"Mad?" I said. "Now? Why now, Marty?"

"His girl friend was killed, Patrick," Marty said.

"Killed? But Andy's married," I said slowly.

Marty gave me a withering look. "I never heard that marriage had much to do with a girl-friend, except to make it harder on the girl."

"How was she killed, Marty?" I said. "How do you know about it?"

I had forgotten my thirst. I was not holding my breath because I had no breath to hold. I was seeing Andy Pappas's smiling face as he told me to lay off the Olsens. I was remembering the thick air of worry in the Olsen's apartment.

"I know because she worked sometimes at the Club. Not much, she had no talent. Just a pretty girl," Marty said. "She had to tell someone about Pappas. She was a dumb girl."

"Did Pappas kill her?" I said.

"I don't know, Patrick. They say not. They told me it was just an accident, during a robbery," Marty said.

"Myra Jones," I said.

"You knew her?" Marty said.

"No," I said.

So there it was. I could imagine a sneak thief learning that he had killed the mistress of Andy Pappas. I could imagine the problems of *anyone* involved. Jo-Jo Olsen? I did not want to think about it. But I had to think, and I still did not see Jo-Jo Olsen as a thief. But I saw him as a witness. Everyone in Chelsea knew Andy Pappas. Men had killed their mistresses for thousands of years.

I wanted to talk to Gazzo.

Captain Gazzo leaned back and shrugged when I walked in and told him what I knew. Gazzo looked tired, too tired to amuse himself with me.

"Why didn't you tell me she was Pappas's girl?" I said.

"You didn't ask, and it was none of your business," Gazzo said. "As a matter of fact, it still isn't your business."

"It might have saved a boy from almost being killed", I said.

"I doubt it," Gazzo said. "Pappas is pretty busted up."

"I'll bet," I said. "It's a classic, Gazzo. Andy always was jealous."

"If anyone got the Vitanza kid beat up it was you," Gazzo said. "You went around looking for Jo-Jo Olsen."

"I mean Pappas," I said. "It's a thousand to one he killed her! Who would kill Andy Pappas's girl friend?"

"No," Gazzo said.

I blinked. "No, what?"

"No, Pappas didn't kill her," Gazzo said.

I laughed. "Alibi? Of course Andy would have an alibi!"

Gazzo swore. "Knock it off, Kelly. Don't you think I've been around long enough to know a real air-tight alibi when I see one?"

"I'll listen," I said.

Gazzo smiled. "Andy Pappas was in Washington in front of a Congressional Committee at the exact

time. He'd been there all day, and he was there half the night."

"All right, he had it done," I said. "That would be perfect. Pappas would pick just such a time. Were all his boys with him?"

"No," Gazzo said. "But they all have alibis."

"Sure. Each other, probably."

No, Roth was at the Jersey shore swimming. Bagnio was in Philadelphia. All the others were in Washington or somewhere else they can prove."

"Air tight alibis?" I said.

"Not like Pappas," Gazzo said. "No one saw any of them who could not be bought, I admit it. Roth has the best. Jake says he was on the beach all day. We checked that his car never left the shore. Bagnio was seen, off and on, in Philly, but only by other hoods. The rest can account for a lot of their time, but not all."

"It's got to be Pappas himself!" I said. I suppose I wanted it to be Andy. It's nice to think that evil always trips itself up; that a human monster like Andy Pappas would finally be betrayed by his one weakness—that he was, after all, human, and not a pure monster.

"I was there when we told him," Gazzo said. "I saw him. Pappas almost fainted when we broke it. I know real shook when I see it. He cried, Kelly. I mean, Pappas really cried."

"Touching," I said, but I wasn't as hard as I sounded. It was just that I wanted Andy to make the mistake that way. I wanted Andy to get it from something as stupid and simple as a jealous rage; some lousy little mistake anyone could make. I wanted it real bad.

"Give us some credit, Kelly," Gazzo said wearily. "I've been a cop a long time. The Man isn't all stupid, no matter what you hear around the city. We checked it all ways and upside down. Everything says that Pappas was really hooked on the girl, treated her almost like a daughter."

"Daughters cheat," I said, because I was still hoping.

"We dug deep, Kelly," Gazzo said. "There isn't a whisper that Pappas might have done it. A year ago he caught her holding hands with a young punk. He didn't do anything except tell the kid to get lost, and tell the Jones girl to choose. She's dumb, but not that dumb. She chose Pappas."

I had nothing to say.

"Think of the odds, Kelly," Gazzo said.

"What odds?" I said.

"The odds that a guy who meant to kill her would have been able to do it with one punch that happened to make her hit her head on an andiron. The Medical Examiner says it just about couldn't have been done any other way. The odds against it being deliberate, the way it happened, are so big you'd laugh."

"He knocked her out," I said,

"and then belted her with the andiron. Then he arranged it to look good."

Gazzo shook his head. "The M.E. says it's possible, but only barely. I say it's impossible because the andiron had not been touched. It had clear, unsmudged prints of the girl and her maid, and no one else. It had not been wiped. It still had dust on it."

I gave up. Even Andy Pappas could not arrange for a girl to be killed by a real accident. I still had enough problems without Andy.

"Damn it, Gazzo, *someone* is looking for Jo-Jo Olsen," I said. "And I don't think it's some sneak thief or junkie. The kid has run, Pappas and the Olsen family are involved with each other, and Pappas's girl is dead. It's too much coincidence. Jo-Jo Olsen knows *something*."

"We'll know it too when we find him," Gazzo said.

"If we find him," I said.

I was thinking of the others looking for Jo-Jo. At least they were still looking. Which meant that Jo-Jo was not in some shallow grave yet—or he had not been about noon today.

I thought about them, the ones who had beaten Petey Vitanza, all the way down and out into the evening streets of the city. The old cop at the hospital had called them amateurs. He was probably right, and Andy Pappas did not use amateurs.

It was now evening, the city cooled down to a nice 89° in the shade, and I was getting a theory. I took a taxi uptown to get a wind in my face and think better. By the time the cab got to Fourth Street and Sixth Avenue I had the theory down solid. I looked in at *O. Henry's*, but Marty was gone. I went on down the block and into the dingy plebian silence of *Fugazy's Tavern.*

I had an Irish with my theory.

What had been wrong all along was the small-time nature of the bit. In Chelsea even the best of kids would not fink to the cops over a small-time robbery and accidental killing. Mind your own dirt is the motto here. Kids drink it from the bottle. No one would have been really afraid that Jo-Jo Olsen would run to the cops over such a crime—and the Olsens had the protection of Andy Pappas. If all it was was a simple robbery-killing, then silencing Jo-Jo would have been more dangerous than the original crime.

But Myra Jones had been Andy Pappas's girl. That changed it. Now the killer of the Jones girl had a reason to be scared. Now he had a reason to silence any witness. Now the Olsens had a reason to worry: two reasons. First, that the original killer might be after Jo-Jo. Second, that Pappas might be after Jo-Jo! It wasn't the cops the unknown killer was afraid of, it was Andy Pappas!

That was my new theory, and it

made a lot of sense, but I didn't like it. There was still too much that rattled. A big loose piece was the killer himself—a small-timer who killed a woman in a robbery, and found out she was Pappas's girl, should have run far and fast. It was double-jeopardy: a felony murder that carried the chair; and a capital offense against Pappas that carried maybe worse than the chair. A small-time jewel thief would have run, not hung around trying to cover. Penny-ante crooks don't hire men to work for them, and I couldn't see even amateurs letting themselves be hired to get mixed up in the killing of Andy Pappas's woman!

The second big rattler was that the Olsens were tight with Pappas. If Jo-Jo knew something about who had killed Pappas's girl, why not tell Pappas? Even if Jo-Jo himself were not part of the Pappas-Olsen scene, he would have no reason to protect a killer from Pappas. From the cops, yes, that was the code, but tipping Pappas would only get him a medal, especially from his old man Swede Olsen.

Unless the killer was Swede Olsen! I could see Jo-Jo saving his father. But I could not buy Swede as the killer—he was not *that* worried.

Pappas himself was out as the killer, which was too bad because that would have explained it all. If I knew Pappas was a killer, I'd fly not run.

If Jo-Jo was the killer that would explain it all, too. But in this world you have to go on more than facts, and I did not see the Olsen kid as the man.

Which left me still nowhere, and with my one last big question: Officer Stettin. Somehow the mugged cop figured in this. He had to. You have to go on probability in this world. The pivot, the center, of this mess was Water Street. That street was all that Myra Jones, Pappas, Jo-Jo Olsen, Petey Vitanza and the unknown killer had in common. And Patrolman Stettin had Water Street, too.

I finished my Irish and headed across toward the river. The block I wanted on Water Street was right on top of the river. It was still twilight when I got there. I stood at the head of the block and looked down it toward the docks.

The apartment house stood up like a giant among shabby pygmies half way down the block. The other two good buildings were across the street and nearer to me. The alley beside the good building where Myra Jones had been killed opened on both Water Street and Sand Street behind it. Which meant that the killer had not come out on Water Street unless he was crazy.

Schmidt's Garage was all the way down at the far end and across the street. Cars were parked on both sides of the block, bumper to bumper at this hour, except in front of driveways and two loading docks. There was a light in Schmidt's

office. And I thought of Schmidt. Maybe he had seen, or knew, something.

I was the second one to get that idea.

They had worked the old man over before they killed him. I don't think they meant to kill him. Amateurs again. His grey hair lay in a pool of blood that had poured from his nose and mouth. Blood that was still wet. I didn't look to see what they had done in detail to get him to talk. I called Gazzo.

Then I walked out into Water Street again. The old man had not told them, I was sure of that. He had not been killed on purpose after talking. He had died while they were still asking. Either he was, or had been, tough, or he had not known what they wanted. I figured it was the last. Schmidt had not known what they had killed him to find out.

I took deep breaths in the twilight of Water Street. I lighted a cigarette. At times like this the dangers of cigarettes don't seem so big. You have to live a while for the coffin-nails to kill you, and I'm not sure many of us are going to make it. The guys who control the bombs wear better clothes and speak better in more languages than the killers who worked Schmidt over, but they are the same kind of men.

Then I saw the cop. A patrolman walking lazily along the block. Officer Stettin's replacement until Stettin got back to work. This cop had his billy in his hand and was idly batting tires with it as he passed the parked cars. He stopped in front of the loading docks, and at the fire hydrants, and looked real close at the cars parked on either side of the open spaces. He seemed annoyed that no one had parked illegally.

That was when I heard the click in my head. Like a piece suddenly slipping into place in a busted motor. All of a sudden, the motor hummed as smooth as silk in my brain. The piece had fitted like a glove. The old missing link. I dropped my smoking butt into the gutter, and headed back toward the brighter lights of the avenues. I looked for a taxi, but there weren't any except six Off-Duty whizzers, and I walked all the way to St. Vincents.

It took me ten minutes, but they finally let me see Petey Vitanza. He was propped in bed like a side of meat wrapped in cheesecloth. He could talk now. He could not see yet, and his words were like the speech of an idiot with a rag stuffed in his mouth, but he could talk.

"That day, Pete," I said. "The day before Jo-Jo ran, what were you doing?"

The boy shrugged.

"Anything and everything," I said. "They killed Schmidt."

Behind the bandages Petey did not move. Then his eyeless head nodded. His thick voice was shaky. They could easily come back.

"Two . . . of . . . them," he said, or he said something like that and I was able to translate. "Big guy . . . fat . . . with muscles. Twenty-five, dark hair, scar . . . on his eye. Other guy . . . maybe twenty . . . real good build . . . lifts weights type . . . blond. Punks . . . tryin' for the big . . . time . . . yeh."

I could fill in the picture. Two young hangers-on, eager to get in the "organization," and ready to do anything to please. Amateurs who wanted to be pros and live the good life. And that meant the one who had hired them was a man who could do them favors, get them "inside." It fitted with what I had had in mind.

"That day," I said.

Petey shrugged again. "Work . . . on the bike. Same as always. Just work on the . . . bike."

"At Schmidt's?" I said.

"Yeh . . . the steering . . . I remember," Petey said, nodded as eagerly as he could with a plaster neck. "Jo-Jo was doing . . . turns . . . you know, like figure . . . eights and . . . all."

"And you needed space?" I said. "You needed room to run the bike."

"Yeh, sure . . . so . . . ?"

The angle of his head showed a question. I answered it.

"So you moved a car, maybe a couple of cars. You . . ." I began.

I could not see his eyes, but I know that Petey blinked. It was just one of those little things that happen every day that you never remember you did. Like which car you got onto when you took the subway uptown. Like walking to the corner to drop your empty cigarette pack into a basket. Like nicking yourself shaving, and then wondering how blood got on your collar.

"One car," Petey said. "We shoved it down by the loading dock. We . . . needed room . . . to make . . . the turns. A small . . . black convertible . . . guy left the brake . . . off. Jo-Jo he saw . . . the cop . . ."

"And he took the ticket off," I said, because that was the click I had heard when I had watched that cop on Water Street. "The cop, Stettin, ticketed the car because you had shoved it into a No Parking zone. Jo-Jo got worried. He took the ticket off so the owner wouldn't get mad."

Petey nodded. "I forgot all . . ."

"Yeh, of course. It was funny at the time," I said. "You shoved a car and it got a ticket. Only you had been on the street all day, and Jo-Jo figured the owner of the car would guess who had shoved his car, moved it. So he grabbed the ticket off, and you both beat it. Did you know whose car it was?"

Petey shook his head. No, the two kids would not have known at the time. But I guessed that Jo-Jo had found out later. He had grabbed the ticket, figuring that by the time the police got in touch with the car-owner, no one would remember the

day. But he must have done a bad job.

"He must have left the string on the wipers, or wherever it was," I said. "The owner came back and saw the string. He knew he had been ticketed. That placed him on the spot, on that block, at that time. That was why he mugged Officer Stettin—to steal the summons book. The rest was window dressing."

It all fitted like a polished mechanism. And, of course, the killer was no burglar. I had not really believed he was a burglar all along. The grabbed jewels were a cover, grabbed after Myra had died. As smooth and simple as one of those Japanese *haiku* poems.

A man called on Myra Jones. A man who had an argument with her and hit her and she died by accident. A man who went out through the alley, circled the block, and came back to Water Street to his car. Only his car had been moved and ticketed! A man who knew there was a record of the ticket in Stettin's summons book. He jumped Stettin and stole the book. Then he went looking for the original ticket and the person who had taken it.

This left me with three questions: who, why he was so worried about the presence of his car being known, and how Jo-Jo Olsen had learned that the ticket was a danger. I had a pretty good idea of all three answers.

I did not know exactly *who*, but I had a picture. A man big enough to be able to hire men to go against Andy Pappas. A man who would beat and even kill to get what he wanted. A man the Olsens knew. Someone big enough to risk two-timing Andy Pappas with Myra, but not big enough to want Pappas to know.

Because that was the second answer. The mere presence of his car would not be enough for the police to nail him. The police would have to place him, somehow, in the apartment. No, the answer to why he was so worried about the ticket, had to be that it would tell *Pappas* he had been with Myra. Which meant that he was a man with an alibi, an alibi not intended to cover the killing, which had not been premeditated, but to cover that he was seeing Myra!

This left me with a sub-question. How would a summons have told Pappas? A summons would come back to the owner of the car. I thought I knew that, too, but I would find out for sure when I checked out my last question. How had Jo-Jo learned the danger of that ticket?

I had reached Swede Olsen's apartment before I had finished all those interesting thoughts. I had made a straight, fast passage from St. Vincent's to the Olsen pad. The big Swede and his sons were no happier to see me this time. The mother, Magda, was less happy than anyone. I faced her vicious face, and the clenched fists behind her.

Before they could swing into action I hit them with the crusher.

"What was it, Olsen? Was Jake Roth driving one of Pappas's own cars the day he killed Myra?"

Because I had remembered what Gazzo had said: Jake Roth's car never left the Jersey Shore that day. Roth had an alibi, he had been on the beach but his car had not moved. And Roth would have known Myra, could hire men afraid enough of *him* to risk bucking Pappas, and would kill to keep Andy Pappas from knowing what had really happened to Myra Jones.

It took Swede Olsen an hour to tell me what I already had guessed. When they heard what I knew, the man and boys had lost all fight. Only the old woman still would not budge. The girl sat silent in the gaudy, cheap room.

"He's my cousin," Swede Olsen said. "What could I do? His name ain't Roth, its Lindroth. Jake Lindroth, he's Norwegian. The stupid kid showed me the ticket. I knew the license number. I drive a lot for Jake and Mr. Pappas. I recognized the number, and I knew Mr. Pappas was in Washington."

"Roth was playing footsie with Myra Jones?" I asked for the record.

Olsen nodded. "Not really, he just wanted to, you know, Kelly? I mean, he made the pass, went to see her a couple of times. I don't know what happened, but there was a fight, I guess. Jake had used the car because he was supposed to be in Jersey."

"And when he saw that ticket, he was in trouble. The summons would come to Pappas sooner or later," I said. "And Jo-Jo had the original. If Pappas ever got wind of that ticket, he'd know who had been with Myra. I guess Roth was at Monmouth Park the day before?"

"Yeh, he was," Olsen said. "He even told Bagnio what horse he had lost on!"

Like I said, it wasn't the police who scared Roth so much, it was Pappas. That would have scared me, too. It would have been almost a death-warrant to be caught two-timing Pappas, much less killing his girl even by accident.

"How did Roth find out Jo-Jo had the ticket?" I said.

There was a long silence. The men all looked at each other. The old woman stared straight at me. Only the girl looked away. Magda Olsen, the mother, did not flinch.

"Jake Roth is our cousin. Lars works for Mr. Roth," the old woman said. "All this," and she waved her bony old hand around to indicate the whole, grotesque apartment, "is from Jake Roth. We got a duty to help Mr. Roth."

The silence got thicker. I watched the old woman. She gave me her Gibraltar face, a rock of granite.

After a while I said it. "You mean you told Roth? You told him it was Jo-Jo who had the ticket."

Swede Olsen was sweating. "I

got to tell Jake. I made Jo-Jo beat it fast, and I told Jake it was okay. I mean, only us and Jo-Jo knew, and we wouldn't tell no one, see? I told Jake I got Jo-Jo safe out of town, he don't got to worry. Jake he was grateful like, he said I was okay."

"Then you come!" Magda Olsen hissed. "You! You got to ask questions, talk to cops! You got to tell them look for Jo-Jo!"

"You got Jake worried!" Olsen snarled.

"You're not worried?" I said.

This time the silence was like thick, sour cream. A room of black, heavy yogurt. If I stood up high enough I could have walked in that silence. All eyes were on the floor except those of the girl and me. I understood, but I didn't want to.

"You mean you really thought Jake Roth would leave Jo-Jo alone?" I said. "You really thought that? Even without the ticket Jo-Jo saw the car!"

"Jake Roth is family," Magda Olsen said.

"A fifty-fifty chance at best," I said. "You give him the ticket, and it's still fifty-fifty he kills Jo-Jo!"

For the first time the young girl, the daughter, spoke. She was pretty, Jo-Jo's sister, and her voice was small, light.

"They don't give him the ticket. Jo-Jo got the ticket," the young girl said.

I guess my mouth hung open.

"Jo-Jo went away. By himself," the girl said. "He wouldn't give the old man the ticket, and he went away."

"Shut up!" Magda Olsen said to her daughter. And she looked at me. "Mr. Roth he says okay. Even without the ticket! He trusts us. Then you! That stupid dirt-pig Vitanza! You start asking questions."

"Sand-hog," I said, but I got her message. Maybe she was right. Maybe Jake Roth would have trusted the Olsens, even Jo-Jo as long as Jo-Jo never came back. Maybe I did put the boy's neck in the noose, it happens that way when you start stirring up the muddy water in the detective business. But I *had* asked the questions, and the water *had* been stirred.

"Then?" I said. "After I started? You could have told the police, even Pappas. They would have stopped Roth. He's only a cousin and a killer."

Magda Olsen sat as stiff as steel. He voice was old and clear and steady.

"Lars is an old man. We live good. We got five kids. We got a lot to do for five kids. All our life Lars works like a pig on the docks. I work, sweat. We live like animals, now we live good. Lars asks Mr. Roth be a good cousin, get him good work with Mr. Pappas. Roth gets Lars good work.

"Mr. Pappas he is good to us because Roth tells him to be good. In one day for Mr. Pappas Lars

he makes more money than two months on the docks! He is too old to go back to the docks! We got five kids, and we only got one Jake Roth!"

What do you say? You feel sick, yes, but what do you say? Do you tell them that no human being risks a child to help Jake Roth? Sure, that's true. Do you say that Lars Olsen and his worn-out old woman should work to death if they must to save their boy? I'm not so sure how true that is. How far is a father responsible for saving his son? How much must a father and mother endure for the mistakes of a child?

It is easy to feel sick when you are not asked to give up all that you want, no matter how rotten it may be. And what about the other four kids? Eh? Do you sacrifice one boy to give four better lives? Lars Olsen, back on the docks at his age, could do nothing for his children. Are you so sure? I'm not. But I made it easy on myself. My duty was to my client.

"You can go to the police now," I said.

"With what, a story? Jo-Jo has the ticket," Magda Olsen said. The old woman had made her decision.

I nodded. It was too late anyway. Roth would have his hired hands searching all over by now. Roth had had a man killed, the police would not take him quickly. But the old women did not rely on me.

"No," Magda Olsen said. "No!"

"Jo-Jo, he'll be okay," Swede Olsen said, but he did not believe it now.

"You don't know where he is?" I said.

"No," the old woman said.

"I do," the young girl said.

She was sitting up straight now, and all eyes turned toward her. A small, pretty young girl. I guessed that she was very close to her brother Jo-Jo.

"He wrote me a card," the girl said.

She handed me the postcard. It was from Daytona Beach, and that fitted. They have a big raceway, speedway for racing cars, at Daytona Beach. The card was unsigned. It said nothing that would show it was from Jo-Jo. Just a few cheery words about the fine weather, the fine racing cars, and a fine job he had selling programs. It could have been from anyone, but the girl knew who it was from.

"I got it yesterday," the girl said. "They didn't tell me about Mr. Roth. I knew Jo-Jo had some trouble, but they didn't tell me."

"We don't want to worry the kids," Swede Olsen explained.

But I was watching the girl. She was telling me something. I felt hollow all the way to my toes because I guessed what it was. I felt like a man on a roller coaster heading far down.

"Roth was here?" I said. "He saw the card?"

"Uncle Jake, we call him Uncle Jake, was here this morning," the girl said. "I didn't tell him, I know Jo-Jo is hiding. But he . . ."

"But he saw the card? He read it?" I said.

"I think so. He was in my room. It was on the table," the girl said.

The boys, who had never spoken at all, sat and looked at the floor. The Olsen family had discipline. It did not come from Swede. The big old man blustered.

"Jo-Jo'll be okay. Jake he won't hurt my Jo-Jo," Olsen said. "Jake is okay. Jake is a good man."

He was trying to convince himself still. He was trying to convince his other sons. He was saying he was, after all, a good father and a big man.

The old women did not bother. She knew. She knew the truth, and she faced it.

I left them sitting there. The old woman got up and went to prepare dinner. She had decided about her life and where her duty lay. I left and begun to move in high. I had to if I was to help decide about Jo-Jo's life. I took a taxi to Idlewild.

Daytonna Beach was hot, and loud, and crowded in the night. There was action at the raceway, and I went straight there from my jet. The only lead I had was that he was selling programs, and I figured that Roth and his men had about two hours on me.

I gave myself that much break because of Schmidt and the jet schedules. Even though Roth had seen the postcard this morning, he apparently hadn't tumbled right away. Otherwise he would not have worked over Schmidt. I guessed that Roth had not known about Jo-Jo's interest in racing, or had forgotten it, and had not thought of it until his boys questioned Schmidt.

Jake Roth was not noted for his brains, that was pretty clear from his play with Myra Jones. I hoped I was right. If I was, the best flight out of New York after the death of Schmidt was only two hours before my jet. Even if I was right, two hours was a long time. It only takes seconds to kill a man.

At the raceway I found that it was closed for the night. That was strike one. I searched around until I found the office. There was light in the office. My first base hit. I went into the office, the door was not locked. The man behind the desk looked up annoyed.

"Yes?" he snapped.

I showed him my credentials. He was only mildly impressed. He looked at my missing arm.

"Lost it on Iwo-Jima," I told him. "The state don't hold it against me. I'm a real detective."

"Private," he said. "I don't have to tell you anything."

"Unless you want to save the life of one of your program boys," I said.

"Them? Between you and me, mister, they ain't worth saving.

Punks, all of them. They takes the job so they can watch the races. Race nuts, all of them. Half the time I finds them up looking at the races instead of selling."

The man was small and red. He had a pet peeve. It was racing and the younger generation. I could see that he hated racing, and hated children. That didn't leave him much to like in his world.

"Talk to me, and I'll take one off your hands," I said. "The name is Olsen. Jo-Jo Olsen. Tall, blond, not bad looking I hear. No telling what he was wearing, and no marks on him. He likes motors. Been here maybe three weeks to a month."

"You just described half of them," the man said. "What the hell's so important about this Olsen anyway?"

It's strange how they always tell you but don't actually get around to saying it. The man had just told me I was still running second.

"Someone else was here?" I said.

"All night I get nuts," the man said.

"How many of them? I mean, how many who asked about Olsen?"

"Two," he said.

"Tell me about them?" I said.

He described the two who had beaten Petey Vitanza. I was running a bad second.

"What did you tell them?" I said.

"What I'm telling you. Listen, so I don't have to say it again. I got no Olsen, the description fits about ten of the punks. I can give you a list, the rest is up to you."

"How long have they got on me?" I asked.

The man looked at the clock on the wall. "Maybe an hour and forty minutes."

They had taken a slower taxi from the airport. I was gaining. I almost laughed at myself. But instead I took the list the man wrote down. He picked the names from a paysheet, and stared up at the hot ceiling as he recalled what his various boys looked like. In the end the list contained eight names.

"I gave them other two ten names, but I figured since that two of them been around town for over two months," the man said.

"Eight is enough," I said.

I looked at the eight names. Somehow I had to cut down the hour and forty minutes lead. It could be the first name or the last. If it was the first name, Jo-Jo Olsen could be already dead. I read the names: *Diego Juarez, George Hanner, Max Jones, Ted John, Andy Di Sica, Dan Black, Mario Tucci, Tom Addams.*

I looked at the names, and you could take your choice. It could be any of them, or none. In a way I prayed it was none, at least the killers wouldn't find him. I could take them from the front, and hope to be faster than the two hoods, or take them from the back and hope Jo-Jo was one at the end.

It was bad either way. If I took it from the front, and Jo-Jo was

Tom Addams, then I lost a good chance to beat them to him. If I took it from the back, and Jo-Jo was *Diego Juarez*, then I lost any chance of reaching him second but maybe in time.

If I started at random, it was pure chance. It was pure chance most of the way: I didn't know the town, the addresses meant nothing so I couldn't map the best route. What I needed was a short cut—some way to go straight to Jo-Jo Olsen. I needed to crack the alias right here and now.

I ruled out *Diego Juarez* with a sigh of relief—too unusual for a tall blond boy, it had to be a real name, it would have drawn attention. I ruled out *Max Jones* and *Ted John* for the opposite reason—too common as aliases. Jo-Jo was a smart boy, Petey Vitanza said. *George* Hanner could be, it sounded a little like *Honda* which was the name of a motorcycle. *Andy Di Sica* and *Mario Tucci* were both good bets—Jo-Jo grew up with a lot of Italians, and he dreamed of Ferrari in Italy. *Tom Addams* was far out, but it sounded a little phony, and Addams is an historical name.

That left *Dan Black*, and I had it!!

I remembered what Packy Wilson had told me about Jo-Jo and the Vikings. I remembered what the experts said about an alias always being connected to a man. I hoped they were right, and that I knew enough. *Dan Black*. The name of a great Viking King, the first of the Norwegian Kings, and one of the names Packy Wilson had mentioned, was—Halfdan The Black! *Dan Black*.

"Call the police," I said to the small man behind the desk, "and get them out to Dan Black's room. What is the address, a motel?"

The man looked at the address and nodded. "A cheap motel about two miles from here. How do I know you . . ."

"Just call them, and tell them to make it quick. My name is Patrick Kelly, from New York, take my license number."

He took my license number, and I was gone. I was probably in the taxi and half way to the motel before the guy made up his mind he better call the police after all. It didn't matter. What I needed now was luck, not police.

So many cases, so many things in life, turn on luck, fortune, chance. I needed the luck that they had not reached Dan Black yet. I needed the luck that Dan Black was Jo-Jo. I needed luck to go against those two hoodlums, amateurs or not. I needed the luck that Jo-Jo was home. And I would need luck to hold on before the police did arrive.

I got some of the luck right away. The luck I didn't have was something I had not thought about. Jo-Jo Olsen was Dan Black, all right. And he was there. He was in the third cabin of the very cheap motel. The motel had shacks not cabins,

the john was outside in a big central building with the showers, and the driveway was dirt.

I was the first one there, because all was quiet and yet normal, and Jo-Jo opened the door. That was all good luck. The bad luck was in his hand. A large .45 automatic aimed at my heart.

It had not occurred to me that Jo-Jo Olsen, alias Dan Black, might not want to be rescued.

He was tall, blond and good-looking. He was neat and clean and there was a bright look in his eyes. But the automatic was neither neat nor clean-looking, and he did not want help.

"Who asked you, Kelly? Yeh, I know you. Who asked you to butt-in? Who asked Pete?"

I didn't answer because I had no answer. Who had asked me and Petey Vitanza?

"How did you find me so easy?" Jo-Jo asked.

He was seated on the single brass bed in the room. The room was as cheap as the motel itself. The walls were paper thin. I could hear every sound outside, every car on the street. I was listening. I expected company any minute.

"Dan Black," I said. "Halfdan The Black. You got a yen for Vikings and history."

I told him what Packy Wilson had told me, and about what the experts say. He seemed interested. I told him about the two boys Roth had sent after him, and about Schmidt being dead, and Petey beaten.

"Roth wouldn't do that," the boy said. "He's my father's cousin."

"You don't believe that," I said. "Roth would kill his mother if he had to."

"I left town. Dad told him we wouldn't talk," Jo-Jo said.

Then I heard his voice clear. Like his father, Swede Olsen, he was talking to himself. Only in his case there was a difference. He wasn't really trying to convince himself that Jake Roth would lay off him, he was telling himself that it did not matter. He was telling himself that this was the way it had to be. I had to be sure.

"All you have to do is talk, and you're safe as a church," I said. "If the cops don't protect you, Andy Pappas will. Talk, and Roth is through, and you don't have a worry. Nobody is going to back a beaten Jake Roth against a live Andy Pappas."

"I'll be okay anyway," Jo-Jo said.

"To protect Jake Roth?" I said. "You're a good kid, you've got ambitions, dreams. And you'll risk your life to save a known killer, a punk?"

"We don't rat," Jo-Jo said, and it sounded dirty when he said it. It is dirty, that code of the underworld.

"But not for Jake Roth," I said. "It's for your father. You want Roth to still do them favors, the

favors they live on, your father and mother."

Jo-Jo looked at me steadily. "I owe them that. Dad can't go back to the docks. I can take care of myself."

"He'll be back on the docks anyway when I tell the police what I know," I said.

"You won't tell," Jo-Jo said, the automatic coming up.

"You'll kill me?" I said. "You'll commit murder to save Jake Roth?"

The tall, blond boy flushed, shouted. "NO! Not for Roth, for my family! They depend on him. I owe them. I . . ."

I lighted a cigarette. When I had it going I leaned back in my sagging old chair. I listened all the time. They would be here sooner or later, and the boy did not have to kill me. He just had to leave me for them.

"What about yourself?" I said. "What about what you owe yourself? You really think your father and mother thought you'd be safe?"

"They did! They do," Jo-Jo cried out, the pistol up again.

"No," I said. "Maybe at first they could fool themselves, but they can't even do that now. If I hadn't chased them down, they'd be sitting up there doing nothing while Roth's boys gun you. They're worrying about themselves!"

"They don't know," Jo-Jo said. "They believe Roth. And so do I."

"Then why did you keep the ticket?" I said.

The automatic wavered in his hand. It was a good hand, strong and clean. His face reddened again, and then became calm. Very calm and set as he looked at me.

"That ticket is insurance," I went on. "You're a good kid, but even good kids learn that kind of play in our neighborhood, right? You've got it stashed, probably. Addressed envelope and all that? You never trusted Roth from the start."

"So?" he said.

"So you knew your folks didn't either, not deep down. They just *wanted* to trust Roth. They wanted to believe it was okay so they could go on living their nice life in comfort. But deep down they knew Roth as well as you do. They tossed you to the wolves, kid."

"They're old," he said. "I owe them."

He was a really nice kid, it was written all over him. A kid with big dreams of a big world. But he was caught. It's always harder for the really good ones. He wanted no part of his father's world, but he had a sense of duty, of responsibility to his father and mother. He knew what his parents were, but he had a code of his own, and he was good enough to stick to it.

He might have made it, keeping his code and still staying alive, if I hadn't come along. I queered the deal. I had them all looking for him. Sooner or later even Pappas would hear about it and begin to

wonder. Roth knew that, and so did I. I had ruined his chance, it was up to me to save him.

"How much?" I said. "You owe them, sure, but how much do you owe them, Jo-Jo? You've got a duty to them, sure, but how about your duty to yourself? That's the hard one, Jo-Jo. You got a duty to stay alive."

"It won't come to that," Jo-Jo said, almost whispered, and even he didn't believe it because he added, "I'll keep ahead of them."

I nodded. "All right, let's say you can, and that nobody tells about you. What then, kid? What about all you want to do? What about your dreams? You want to be a race driver, a Viking with cars!"

Jo-Jo's eyes glowed there in the shabby room. I was still listening to the sounds outside. There could not be much more time.

"I'll do it, too!" Jo-Jo said eagerly. "I get the diploma from automotive, and with my record driving, I'll get with Ferrari!"

I hit him with it. "What record? What diploma? You'll never get back to school, and you ain't Jo-Jo Olsen anymore, you're Dan Black. You'll never be Jo-Jo Olsen. You'll be on the run all your life!"

I could see him wince, blink, and I did not let up. In a way I was battling for my own life. If I didn't convince him, there was no telling what would happen when the two bully boys arrived on the scene.

"You got three choices, Jo-Jo, and only three," I said. "You can come back with me, give that ticket to the cops, and let Roth take what's coming to him. Then you can go ahead and live your own life.

"You can try to keep a jump ahead of Roth and his men all your life, and maybe make it. You'll live in shacks like this, you'll never be Jo-Jo Olsen again, and you'll have no past and no future. You'll never be able to set-up a record because you'll be changing your name too often.

"Or you can try to talk to Roth and join him. You can convince Roth you want to play his side of the street and that you're a safe risk. I doubt if he'd go for it, but he might. Maybe you could kill me for openers so Roth knows he's got a hold on you."

I threw in that last one as a shocker. Even if he killed me, I doubted that Roth would trust him. Once Jo-Jo was a full-fledged criminal, it would be too easy for him to get in good with Pappas by telling. But he wasn't dumb, he thought of that. In fact, he was ahead of me.

"There's a fourth way, Mr. Kelly," Jo-Jo said. "I could just go to Mr. Pappas and tell him without telling the police. That should put me in good with him and maybe save my father's job."

I nodded. "Sure, it might even work. But that would be the same as throwing in with Roth. You'd

be an accessory to what happened to Roth. You'd be withholding evidence, and that's a crime. Besides, kid, you thought of that from the start, didn't you? That was why you ran and didn't tell your father. You don't want any part of that life or of Pappas."

The boy sat there silent. I had not told him anything he had not thought himself. It was like a psychiatrist. I just made him face it more. His whole world was rising up on him like a tidal wave in a typhoon. He hated his father's way of life, hated what his father had become, wanted to be free and alone, and yet he loved his father.

"Be a real man, Jo-Jo," I said. "Be man enough to take your own dreams, your own way. You want a certain life, you want to do certain things. That's the hardest road, kid. It's easy to do what will please everyone else. It's hard to take your own dream and follow it out of sight over the horizon like the old Vikings did."

Jo-Jo smiled and looked up. It was not a smile of happiness or triumph or any of that. It was a smile of simple recognition.

"They did, didn't they," he said. "My father even lets them call him *Swede* when he takes their favors."

"He lost it somewhere, Jo-Jo," I said. "You've got a chance. It's rough to accept the responsibility of your own dreams, but those old Vikings had to leave the old folks and the weak behind, too. I guess you have to hurt people to be honest with yourself."

"I guess you do," Jo-Jo said.

And that was all. After that it was, as the Limeys say, a piece of cake.

Even if the two bully boys had been pros they would not have had much chance. They expected to find one unsuspecting boy in that motel, and they found two ready-and-waiting men. Two well-armed men waiting for them like bearded Vikings in a cave. The two hoods walked out singing.

The police arrived and we all went down to Headquarters in Daytona Beach. We slept a nice night in the comfort of strong cell bars in case Jake Roth had any ideas of a last-gasp attempt to silence all of us. He didn't try, and the next day we all flew North with lots of friendly guards around.

Gazzo welcomed us with open arms and a secure paddy wagon. Jo-Jo turned over the parking ticket, and the Captain had him locked up safely until Roth was accounted for. Gazzo called in Andy Pappas to identify the license number on the ticket. Pappas looked at it for a long time.

"Yeh, it's the number of my small convertible, a black Mercury. I don't use it much, Captain, I got a lot of cars. I keep the Mercury out in Jersey at my shore place, all the boys use it sometimes," Pappas

said very quietly. He looked at Gazzo. "You say Jake used it?"

"It figures that way, Pappas," Gazzo said. "Kelly tells me Bagnio knows that Jake had a losing ticket on a certain horse at Monmouth the day before Myra was killed. You know we found a ticket like that in her place."

Pappas nodded. "Jake always had a temper. Stupid, too. You say the ticket shows the car was on Water Street at five o'clock that day?"

"It does, and Jake hired some boys to find the Olsen kid."

Pappas stood up. "Is that it, Captain?"

"That's it for now. We'll want you again when we pick up Jake Roth," Gazzo said.

Pappas didn't even smile, he was that sad. He looked at Jo-Jo, and them at me, and I almost felt sorry for him. I could see he was thinking about Myra Jones, and all at once he was like just another middle-aged man who had lost his woman through a stupid accident and the anger of another man. Only he was Andy Pappas, not just another man, and he had some pain coming.

"Thanks, Patrick," Pappas said. "You did a good job. I'll send you a check. The kid who got beat, too."

"Petey thanks you," I said. "I don't. No checks for me from you, Andy. I made the choice a long time ago."

"Suit yourself, Patrick," Pappas said. He had begun to pull on those white kids gloves he affects now. But his mind wasn't on the gloves.

"Leave Roth to us, Pappas," Gazzo said.

"Sure," Pappas said. As he went out Andy Pappas was smoothing his hand over his suit jacket at the spot where he used to carry his gun.

The two amateur hoodlums Roth had hired to find Jo-Jo sang like *heldentenors* in the last act of *Siegfried*. They told all there was to tell about how Jake Roth had hired them to find Jo-Jo, get the ticket, and kill him. The beating of Petey Vitanza, and the death of old man Schmidt, were just steps down the road to Jo-Jo.

"We never wanted to kill the old man," one of them explained, as if he thought that made it okay, and we could all kiss and make up. "He just kicked-off on us, you know? Jeez, Roth was gonna give us good spots in the organization. Man, that was real opportunity!"

"Book them," Gazzo said.

Both men were indicted on various counts of assault, and one good count of Murder-Second. The DA could have gone for Murder-One, and probably gotten it, but juries are chancy with real guilty ones, and trials cost the state money. The two bums would plead guilty to the lessers counts, all of them, and that would put them away forever.

Jake Roth vanished. When Gazzo and his men went to pick up the tall, skinny killer, Roth was long gone

with two of Pappas's lesser men who had always been friends of Roth. Gazzo got a city-wide search going. Then the hunt went state-wide, and, after a time, it got on a national hookup. But Jake Roth kept out of sight and running all the rest of the summer and into the fall.

They were laying odds on Roth in the neighborhood. Joe thought Roth should surrender to the police.

"That ticket and the stub on the Monmouth nag ain't enough to make the Jones killing stick," Joe said. "Besides, it was an accident. Manslaughter-Second at the worst."

"Even the Schmidt killing could be beat with a good shyster," Packy Wilson said. We were in *Packy's Pub* as usual, with the Irish tasting better now that the leaves were beginning to fall if you could find a tree in the district. I had told Packy how he had saved us all with his story on Norwegian history. He was so pleased he was still setting up the drinks for me.

"None of it's enough for the cops to really nail Roth," Joe said.

"It never was," I said, "but it's enough for Pappas. It was always Pappas. If Myra hadn't been Pappas's girl, Roth would have walked in on Gazzo and taken a short one-to-five."

"He'd be smarter to confess to Murder-Two and take twenty-to-life," Packy Wilson said.

"He'd live a week," I said. "In jail Pappas would get him in a week. He'd be a sitting duck."

They both kind of studied their glasses. I tasted the fine Paddy's Irish, and thought about the simple and happy men who had distilled it in the old country and had never heard of Jake Roth or Andy Pappas.

"All Roth's got is a choice of how to die," I said. "He can confess to Murder-One and take the chair. He can let the cops get him and sit in jail waiting for Pappas to give the word. Or he can run and try to stay a jump ahead of everyone."

In the end it was the police who got Roth. On a cold day in October he was cornered in a loft in Duluth. He tried to shoot his way out and was nailed. He had lost fifteen pounds and was all alone when he died. Nobody felt sorry for him.

If this was an uplifting story, I'd probably tell you that Jo-Jo Olsen's decision to accept his duty to himself, his dreams of being a modern Viking, had worked out best for everyone in the end. But it didn't. With Roth gone, and with Pappas knowing that Olsen had tried to help Roth, Olsen is out.

Sometimes, when I've been up all night, I go past the docks and I see Swede Olsen standing in the shape-up. He's old, and Pappas is down on him, so he doesn't get much work even when he goes out and stands there every day waiting to be picked out of the shape. He doesn't drink in the expensive places any more, he drinks in the cheap waterfront saloons. He's drinking a lot, the last I saw.

Jo-Jo has gone. He never went home. Old Magda Olsen spit on him at the police station. As she said, and meant, they had five kids but only one Jake Roth to make life sweet. After all, Magda Olsen is descended from Vikings, too.

I don't know what happened to Jo-Jo. But I know he'll do something. He finished his schooling, and Petey tells me he's riding his motorcycle on dirt tracks out west. I look for Jo-Jo's name in the papers all the time. Someday I know I'll see it. Maybe even as a member of the Ferrari team, or driving some Limey car to victory at Le Mans. Like I said before, it's all in the background, the air a man breathes, and Jo-Jo goes all the way back to the Vikings. That was what made him run in the first place, and that was what made him come back to finish Jake Roth. His sense of what a man has to do.

Jake Roth didn't have that, and it cost him. Andy Pappas doesn't have it either. Maybe we'll even get Pappas some day.