

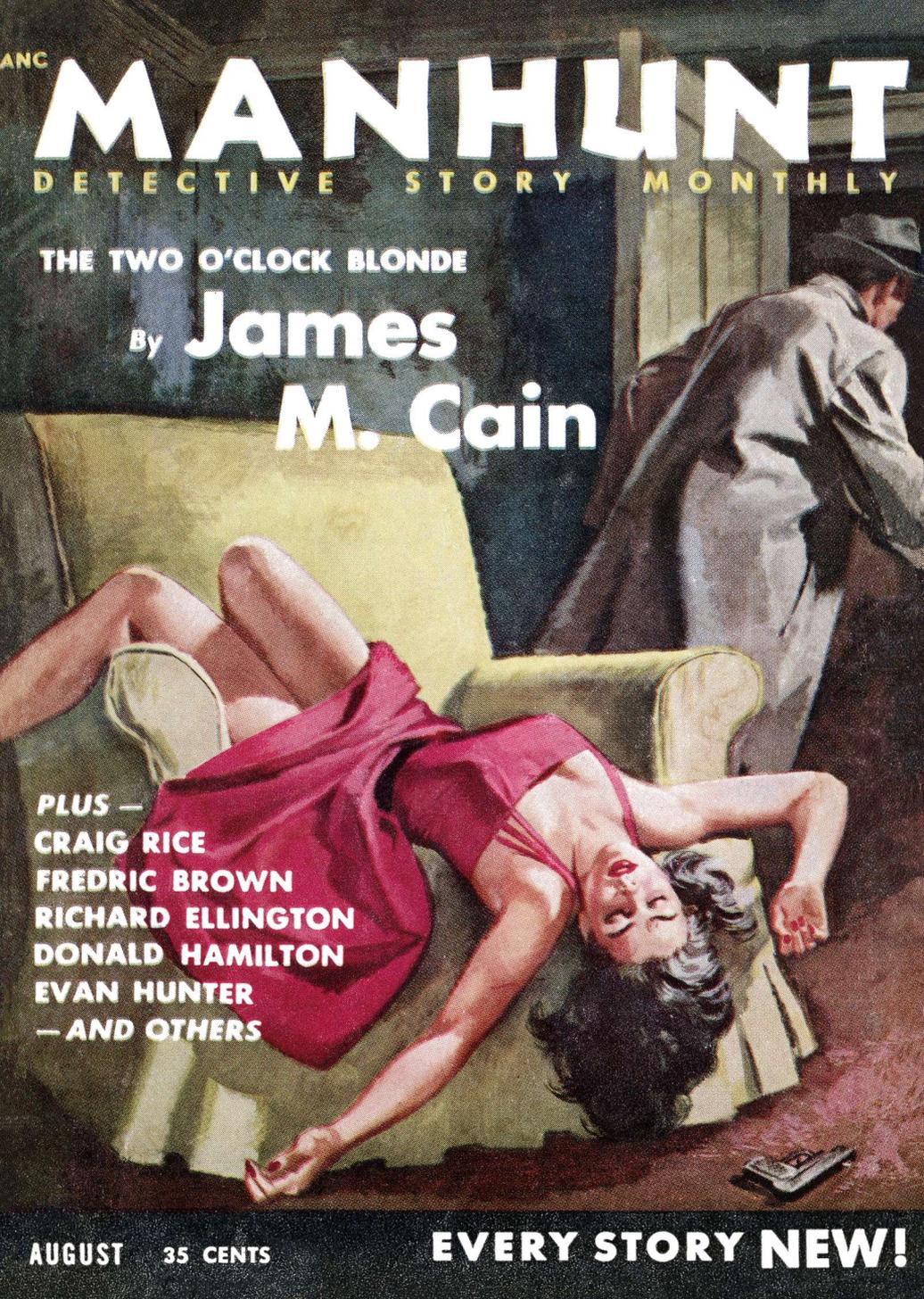
ANC

MANHUNT

DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

THE TWO O'CLOCK BLONDE

By **James
M. Cain**

A dramatic illustration for a detective magazine cover. In the foreground, a woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a vibrant red, sleeveless dress, lies on her back on a yellow upholstered chair. Her eyes are closed, and her expression is one of unconsciousness or death. Her right hand is extended towards the floor, where a small, dark object, possibly a gun or a key, lies. In the background, a man wearing a light-colored trench coat and a fedora hat is seen from the side, walking away from the viewer. The setting appears to be an interior room with dark, textured walls. The overall mood is mysterious and noir.

**PLUS —
CRAIG RICE
FREDRIC BROWN
RICHARD ELLINGTON
DONALD HAMILTON
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— AND OTHERS**

AUGUST 35 CENTS

EVERY STORY NEW!

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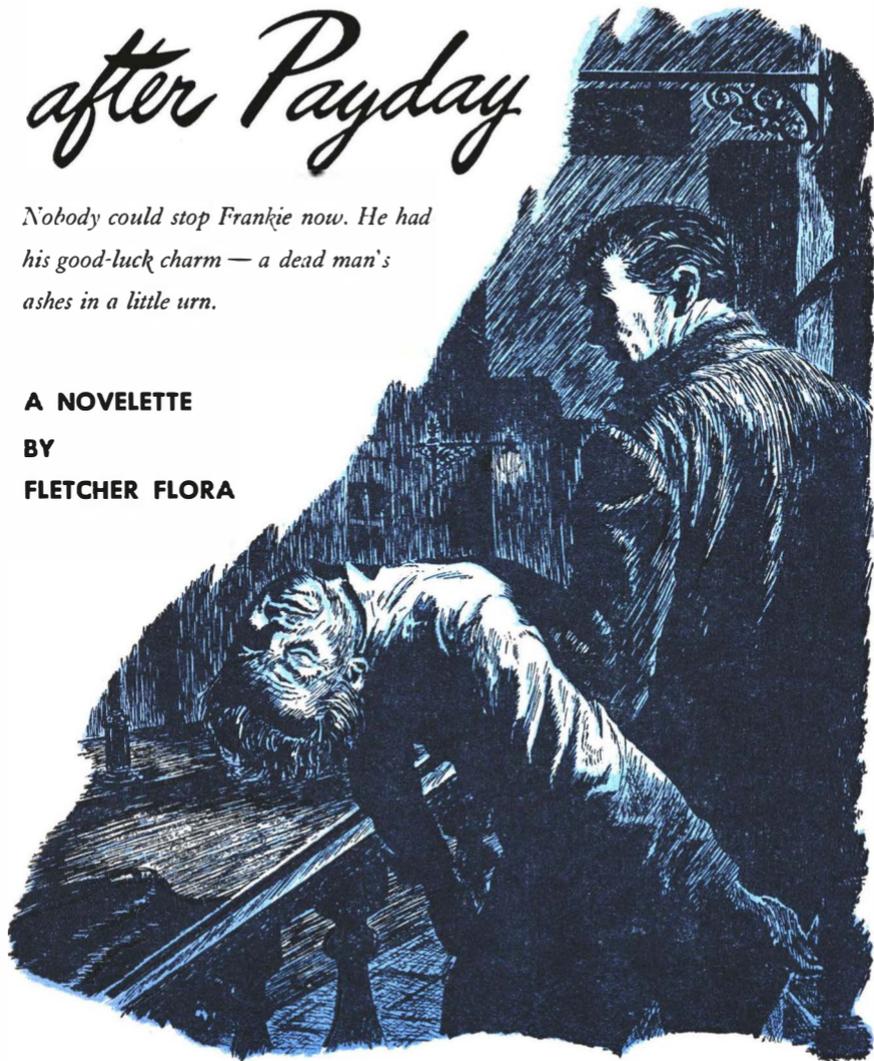
The Collector comes after Payday

*Nobody could stop Frankie now. He had
his good-luck charm — a dead man's
ashes in a little urn.*

A NOVELETTE

BY

FLETCHER FLORA



FRANKIE looked through a lot of bars before he found the old man. He was sitting in a booth in a joint on lower Market Street with a dame Frankie didn't know. They were both sitting on the same side of the booth, and Frankie could see that their thighs were plastered together like a couple of strips of Scotch tape.

"Come on home, Pop," Frankie said. "You come on home."

The woman looked up at him, and her lips twisted in a scarlet sneer. The scarlet was smeared on the lips, as if she'd been doing a lot of kissing, and the lips had a kind of bruised and swollen look, as if the kisses had been pretty enthusiastic.

"Go to hell away, sonny," she said.

She lifted her martini glass by its thin stem and tilted it against her mouth. Frankie reached across the booth in front of the old man and slapped the glass out of her hand. It shivered with a thin, musical sound against the wall, and gin and vermouth splashed down between the full, alert breasts that were half out of her low-cut dress. The olive bounced on the table and rolled off.

The woman raised up as far as she could in the cramped booth, her eyes hot and smoky with gin and rage.

"You little son of a bitch," she said softly.

Frankie grabbed her by a wrist and twisted the skin around on the bone.

"Leave Pop alone," he said. "You

quit acting like a tramp and leave him alone."

Then the old man hacked down on Frankie's arm with the horny edge of his hand. It was like getting hit with a dull hatchet. Frankie's fingers went numb, dropping away from the woman's wrist, and he swung sideways with his left hand at the old man's face. The old man caught the fist in a big palm and gave Frankie a hard shove backward.

"Blow, sonny," he said.

For a guy not young at all, he was plenty tough. His eyes were like two yellow agates, and his mouth was a thin, cruel trap under a bold nose. From the way his body behaved, it was obvious that he still had good muscular coordination. He was poised, balanced like a trained fighter.

Frankie saw everything in a kind of pink, billowing mist. He moved back up to the booth with his fists clenched, and in spite of everything he could do, tears of fury and frustration spilled out of his eyes and streaked his cheeks.

"You get the hell out of this," he said. "You ought to be ashamed, drinking and playing around this way."

The old man slipped out of the booth, quick as a snake, and chopped Frankie in the mouth with a short right that traveled straight as a piston. Frankie hit the floor and rolled over, spitting a tooth and blood. He was crazy. Getting up, he staggered back at the old man, curs-

ing and sobbing and swinging like a girl. This time the old man set him up with a left jab and threw a bomb. Frankie went over backward like a post, his head smacking with a wet rotten sound.

No one bothered about him. Except to laugh, that is. Lying there on the floor, he could hear the laughter rise and diminish and rise again. It was the final and utter degradation of a guy who'd never had much dignity to start with. Rolling over and struggling up to his hands and knees, he was violently sick, his stomach contracting and expanding in harsh spasms. After a long time, he got the rest of the way to his feet in slow, agonizing stages. His chin and shirt front were foul with blood and spittle.

In the booth, ignoring him, the old man and the woman were in a hot clinch, their mouths adhering in mutual suction. The lecherous old man's right hand was busy, and Frankie saw through his private red fog the quivering reaction of the woman's straining body. Turning away, Frankie went out. The floor kept tilting up under his feet and then dropping suddenly away. All around him, he could hear the ribald laughter.

2.

It was six blocks to the place where he'd parked his old Plymouth. He walked slowly along the littered, narrow street, hugging the dark buildings, the night air a knife in his

lungs. Now and then he stopped to lean against solid brick until the erratic pavement leveled off and held still. Once, at the mouth of an alley, he was sick again, bringing up a thin, bitter fluid into his mouth.

It took him almost an hour to get back to the shabby walkup apartment that was the best a guy with no luck could manage. In the bathroom, he splashed cold water on his face, gasping with pain. The smoky mirror above the lavatory distorted his face, exaggerating the ugliness of smashed, swollen lips drawn back from bloody gums. He patted his face dry with a towel and poured himself a double shot in the living room. He tossed the whisky far back into his mouth beyond his raw lips, gagging and choking from the sudden fiery wash in his throat.

Dropping into a chair, he began to think. Not with any conscious direction. His mind functioned, with everything coming now to a bad end, in a kind of numb and lucid detachment. Suddenly, he was strangely indifferent. Nothing had happened, after all, that couldn't have been anticipated by a guy with no luck whatever.

It was funny, the way he was no longer very concerned about anything. Sitting there in the drab living room in the dull immunity to shame that comes from the ultimate humiliation, he found his mind working itself back at random to the early days at home with the old man. Back to the days when his mother,

a beaten nonentity, had been alive. Not a lovable character, the old man. Not easy on wife or kid. A harsh meter of stern discipline for all delinquencies but his own. A master of the deferred payment technique. In the old days, when Frankie was a kid at home, wrongdoing had never been met with swift and unconsidered punishment that would have been as quickly forgotten. The old man had remarked and remembered. Later, often after Frankie had completely forgotten the adolescent evil he'd committed, there was sure to be something that he wanted very much to do. Then the old man would look at him with skimmed milk eyes and say, "No. Have you forgotten the offense for which you haven't paid? For that, you cannot do this thing."

Wait till it really hurts. That had been the old man's way.

Remembering, Frankie laughed softly, air hissing with no inflection of humor through the hole where his lost tooth had been. No luck. Never any luck. He'd even been a loser in drawing an old man — a bastard with a memory like an elephant and a perverted set of values.

The laughter hurt Frankie's mangled lips, and he cut it off, sitting slumped in the chair with his eyes in a dead focus on the floor. It was really very strange, the way he felt. Not tired. Not sleepy. Not much of anything. Just sort of released and out of it, like a religious queer staring at his belly button.

He was still sitting there at three o'clock in the morning when the old man came in. He was sloppy drunk, and the lines of his face had blurred, letting his features run together in a kind of soft smear. His eyes were rheumy infections in the smear, and his mouth still wore enough of the cheap lipstick to give him the appearance of wearing a grotesque clown's mask. He stood, swaying, almost helpless, with his legs spread wide and his hands on his hips in a posture of defiance, and Frankie looked back at him from his chair. It made him sick to see the old man so ugly, satiety in his flaccid face and the nauseous perfume of juniper berries like a fog around him.

The old man spit and laughed hoarsely. The saliva landed on the toe of Frankie's shoe, a milky blob. Without moving, Frankie watched the old man weave into the bedroom with erratic manipulation of legs and hips.

Frankie kept on sitting in the chair for perhaps five minutes longer, then he sighed and got up and walked into the bedroom after the old man. The old man was standing in the middle of the room in his underwear. His legs were corded with swollen blue veins that bulged the fish-belly skin. On the right thigh there was an angry red spot that would probably blacken. When he saw Frankie watching him, his rheumy eyes went hot with scorn.

"My son," he said. "My precious son, Frankie."

Frankie didn't answer. As he moved toward the old man slowly, smiling faintly, the pain of the smile on his mangled lips was a pale reflection of the dull pain in his heart. He had almost closed the distance between them before the old man's gin-soaked brain understood that Frankie was going to kill him. And he was too drunk now to defend himself, even against Frankie. The scorn faded from his eyes and terror flooded in, cold and incredulous.

"No, Frankie," he whispered. "For God's sake, no."

Frankie still didn't say anything, and the old man tried to back away, but by that time it was too late, and Frankie's thumbs were buried in his throat. His tongue came out, his legs beat in a hellish threshing, and his fists battered wildly at Frankie's face. But it did no good, for Frankie was feeling very strong. He was feeling stronger than he had ever felt in his life before. And good, too. A powerful, surging sense of well-being. A wild, singing exhilaration that increased in ratio to the pressure of his grip.

3.

The old man had been dead for minutes when Frankie finally let him go. He slipped down to the floor in a limp huddle of old flesh and fabric, and Frankie stood looking down at him, the narcotic-like pleasure draining out of him and leaving him again with that odd, incongruous feeling of detachment.

He realized, of course, that the end was his as much as the old man's. It was the end for both of them. Recalling the .38 revolver on a shelf in the closet, he considered for a moment the idea of suicide, but not very seriously. Not that he was repelled by the thought of death. It was just that he didn't quite have the guts.

He supposed that he should call the police, and he went so far as to turn away toward the living room and the telephone. Then he stopped, struck by an idea that captured his fancy. He saw himself walking into the precinct station with the old man's body in his arms. He heard himself saying quietly, "This is my father. I've just killed him." Drab little Frankie, no-luck Frankie, having in the end his moment of dramatic ascendancy. It was a prospect that fed an old and functional hunger of his soul, and he turned back, looking at the body on the floor. Smiling dreamily with his thick lips, he felt within himself a rebirth of that singing exhilaration.

At the last moment, he found in himself a sick horror that made it impossible for him to bear excessive contact with the dead flesh, so he dressed the body, struggling with uncooperative arms and legs. After that, it was so easy. It was so crazy easy. If he'd given a damn, if he'd really been trying to get away with it, he could never have pulled it off in a million years.

With the old man dead in his

arms, he walked out of the apartment and down the stairs and across the walk to the Plymouth at the curb. He opened the front door and put him in the seat and closed the door again. Then, standing there beside the car, he looked around and saw that there was no one in sight. So far as he knew, not a soul had seen him.

It was then that the enormity of the thing struck him, and he began to laugh softly, hysteria threading the laughter. No-luck Frankie doing a thing like that. No-luck Frankie himself just walking out of an apartment house with a corpse in his arms and not a damned soul the wiser. You couldn't get life any crazier than that. He kept on laughing, clutching the handle of the car door with one hand, his body shaking and his lips cracking open again to let a thin red line trace its way down his chin.

After a while, he choked off the laughter on a series of throaty little gasps that tore painfully at his throat. Lighting a cigarette, he went around the car and got in beside the old man on the driver's side.

He drove at a moderate rate of speed, savoring morbidly the approach to his big scene. Now, in the process of execution, the drama of it gained even more in its appeal to him. It gave him a kind of satisfaction he had never known.

He was driving east on Mason Street. The side streets on the south descended to their intersections on

forty-five degree grades. Possessing the right-of-way, he crossed the intersections without looking, absorbed in his thoughts. For that reason, he neither saw nor heard the transport van until it was too late. At the last instant, he heard the shrill screaming of rubber on concrete and looked up and right to see the tremendous steel monster roaring down upon him.

His own scream cut across the complaint of giant tires, and he hurled himself away reflexively, striking the door with a shoulder and clawing at the handle. The door burst open at the precise instant of impact, and he was catapulted through the air like a flapping doll. Striking the pavement, he rolled over and over, protecting his head with his arms instinctively. The overwhelming crash of the Plymouth crumpling under the van was modified in his ears by the fading of consciousness.

On his back, he lay quietly and was aware of smaller sounds — distant screams, pounding feet, horrified voices, and, after a bit, the far away whine of sirens growing steadily nearer and louder.

Someone knelt beside him, felt his pulse, said in manifest incredulity, "This guy's hardly scratched. It's a God-damned miracle."

A voice, more distant, rising on the threat of hysteria, "Christ! This one's hamburger. Nothing but hamburger."

And he continued to lie there in

the screaming night with the laughter coming back and the wild wonder growing. What was it? What in God's name was it? A guy who'd started and ended with a sour bastard of an old man and never any luck between. A guy who'd had it all, and most of it bad. A guy like that getting, all of a sudden, two fantastic breaks you wouldn't have believed could happen. Walking out of a house with a body in his arms, scot-free and away. Surviving with no more than a few bruises a smash-up that should have smeared him for keeps. Maybe it was because he'd quit caring. Maybe the tide turns when you no longer give a damn.

Then, in a sudden comprehensive flash, the full significance of the situation struck him. Hamburger, someone had said. Nothing but hamburger. Thanks to the cock-eyed collaboration of the gods and a truck driver, *he had disposed of the old man in a manner above suspicion*. He lay on the pavement with the wonder of it still growing and growing, and his insides shook with delirious internal laughter.

4.

In time, he rode a litter to an ambulance, and the ambulance to a hospital. He slept like a child in anti-septic cleanliness between cool sheets, and in the morning he had pictures taken of his head. Twenty-four hours later he was told that there was no concussion, and released. With the most sympathetic coopera-

tion of officials, he collected the old man at the morgue and transferred him to a crematory.

When he left the crematory, he took the old man with him in an urn. In the apartment, he set the urn on a table in the living room and stood looking at it. He had developed for the old man, since the smash-up, a feeling of warm affection. In his heart there was no hard feeling, no lingering animosity. He found his parent in his present state, a handful of ashes, considerably more lovable than he had ever found him before. Besides, he had brought Frankie luck. In the end, in shame and violence and blood, he had brought him the luck he had never had.

Putting the old man away on a shelf in the closet, Frankie checked his finances and found that he could assemble forty dollars. He fingered the green stuff and considered possibilities. Eagerness to ride his luck had assumed the force of compulsion. In the saddle, he left the apartment and went over to Nick Loemke's bar on Market Street.

He found Nick in a lull, polishing glass behind the mahogany. Nick examined him sleepily and made a swipe at the bar with his towel.

"What's on your mind, Frankie?"

"Double shot of rye," Frankie said.

His lips and gums were still a little raw, so he took it easy with the rye, tossing it in short swallows on the back of his tongue.

"Where's Joe Tonty anchored this week?" he asked.

"What the hell do you care, Frankie? You can't afford to operate in that class."

"You never know. You never know until you try."

Frankie finished his rye and spun the glass off his fingertips across the bar. It hit the trough on the inside edge and hopped up into the air. Nick had to grab it in a hurry to keep it from going off onto the floor. He glared at Frankie and doused the glass in the antiseptic solution under the bar.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Frankie? You lost your marbles?"

"Okay, okay," Frankie said. "I ask for information and you give me lip. You going to tell me where Tonty's anchored, or aren't you?"

Nick shrugged "All right, sucker. It's your lettuce. Over on Third Street. Upstairs over the old Bonfile garage."

Frankie dropped a skin on the bar and went out. Between Third and Fourth, he navigated a narrow, cluttered alley to the rear of the Bonfile garage and climbed a flight of iron, exterior stairs to a plank door that was locked. He pounded on the door with the meaty heel of his fist and got the response of a crack with an eye and a voice behind it.

The voice said, "Hello, Frankie. What the hell you doing here?"

"This where Tonty's anchored?"

"That's right."

"Then what the hell you think I'm doing here? You want me to spell it out for you?"

The crack widened to reveal a flat face split in a grin between thick ears. "My, my. We're riding high tonight, ain't we?"

"You want my money or not?"

The crack spread still wider, and the grinning gorilla shuffled back out of it. "Sure, Frankie, sure. Every little bit helps."

Frankie went in past the gorilla and down the long cement-floored room to the craps table. It was still early, and the big stuff wasn't moving yet. Just right for forty bucks. Or thirty-nine, deducting a double shot.

Frankie got his belly against the edge of the table and laid a fast side bet that the point would come.

It came.

He laid three more in a hurry, betting the accumulation and mixing them pro and con without thinking much about it.

The points came or not, just as Frankie bet them.

When the dice came around to him, he was fat, and he laid the bundle. He tossed a seven, made his point twice, and tossed another seven, letting the bundle grow. Then, playing a hunch without benefit of thought, he drew most of the bundle off the table.

He crapped out and passed the dice.

Across the table, Joe Tonty's face

was a slab of gray rock. His eyes flicked over Frankie, and his shoulders twitched in a shrug.

"Your luck's running, Frankie. You better ride it."

"Sure," Frankie said. "I'll ride."

It kept running for two hours, and Frankie rode it all the way. When he finally had a sudden flat feeling, a kind of interior collapse, he pulled out. Not that he felt his luck had quit running for keeps. Just resting. Just taking a breather. He descended the iron steps into the alley and crossed over to Market for a night-cap at Nick's. A little later, in the living room of the apartment, he counted eight grand. It was hard to believe, little Frankie with eight big grand all at once and all his own. Not even any withholding tax.

He was shaken again by the silent delirium that was becoming an integral element of his chronic mood, and he went over to the closet and opened the door, looking up at the old man in his urn.

"Thanks, Pop," he said. "Thanks."

5.

He slept soundly and got up about noon. After a hearty lunch, he went out to the track with the eight grand in his pocket. He was in time for the second race, and he checked the entries. But he didn't feel anything, so he let it go.

Checking the entries in the third, he still didn't get any nudge. Something seemed to be getting in the way, coming between him and his

luck. Maybe, he realized suddenly, it was the warm pressure of a long flank against his.

He turned, looking into brown eyes that were as warm as the touch of flank. Under the eyes there was a flash of white in a margin of red, and above them, a heavy sheen of pale yellow with streaks of off-white running through it. At first, Frankie thought she'd just been sloppy with a dye job, but then he saw that the two-toned effect was natural.

"Crowded, isn't it?" she said.

Frankie grinned. "I like crowds."

He was trying to think of what the hair reminded him of when he got the nudge. His eyes popped down to the program in his hands and back up to the dame. Inside, he'd gone breathless and tense, the way a guy does when he's on the verge of something big.

"What's your name, baby?"

The red and white smile flashed again. "Call me Taffy. Because of my hair, you see."

He saw, all right. He saw a hell of a lot more than she thought he did. He saw number four in the third, and the name was Taffy Candy. One would bring ten if Taffy won, and even Frankie, who was no mental giant, could add another cipher to eight thousand and read the result.

Don't give yourself time to think, that was the trick. If you start thinking, you start figuring odds and consequences, and you're a dead duck. He stood up and slapped the program against his leg.

“Hold a spot for me, baby. If I’m on the beam, it’ll be a big day for you and me and a horse.”

He hit the window just before closing time and laid the eight grand on Taffy’s nose. At the rail of the track, he watched the horses run, and he wasn’t surprised, not even excited, when Taffy came in by the nose that had his eight grand on it. It was astonishing how quickly he was becoming accustomed to good fortune. He was already anticipating the breaks as if he’d had them forever. As if they were a natural right.

Like that girl in the stands, for instance. The girl who called herself Taffy. Standing there by the rail, he thought with glandular stirrings of the warm pressure of flank, the strangely alluring two-toned pastel hair, the brown eyes and scarlet smile. A few days ago, he wouldn’t have given himself a chance with a dame like that. He’d have taken it out in thinking. But now it was different. Luck and a few grand made a hell of a difference. The difference between thinking and acting.

With eight times ten in his pocket, he went back to the stands. Climbing up to her level with his eyes full of nylon, he grinned and said, “We all came in, baby, you and me and the horse. Let’s move out of here.”

She strained a mocking look through incredible lashes. “I’ve already got a date, honey. I’m supposed to meet a guy here.”

“To hell with him.”

Her eyebrows arched their plucked backs, and a practiced tease showed through the lashes. “What makes you think I’d just walk off with you, mister?”

Frankie dug into his pocket for enough green to make an impression. The bills were crisp. They made small ticking sounds when he flipped them with a thumb nail.

“This, maybe,” he said.

She eyed the persuasion and stood up. “That’s good thinking, honey,” she said.

6.

A long time and a lot of places later, Frankie awoke to the gray light that filtered into his shabby apartment. It was depressing, he thought, to awake in a dump like this. It was something that had to be changed.

“Look, baby,” he said. “Today we shop for another place. A big place uptown. Carpets up to your knees, foam rubber stuff, the works. How about it, baby?”

Beside him, Taffy pressed closer, her lips moving against his naked shoulder with a sleepy animal purr of contentment.

So that day they rented the uptown place, and moved in, and a couple months later Frankie bought the Circle Club.

The club was a nice little spot tucked into a so-so block just outside the perimeter of the big-time glitter area. It was a good location for a brisk trade with the right guy

handling it. The current owner was being pressed for the payment of debts by parties whodidn't like waiting, and Frankie bought him out for a song.

It was a swell break. Just one more in a long line. Frankie shot a wad on fancy trimmings, and booked a combination that could really jump. With the combo there was a sleek canary who had something for the eyes as well as the ears. The food and the liquor were fair, which is all anyone expects in a night spot, and up to the time of Linda Lee, business was good.

After Linda Lee, business was more than good. It was booming. The word always goes out on a gal like Linda. The guys come in with their dames, and after they've had the quota of looking that the tariff buys, they go someplace and turn off the lights and pretend that the dames are Linda.

Linda Lee wasn't her real name, of course, but it suited her looks and her business. Ostensibly, the business was dancing. Actually, it was taking off her clothes. In Linda's case, that was sufficient. As for the looks, they were Linda's, and they were something. Dusky skin and eyes on the slant. Black hair with blue highlights, soft and shining, brushing her shoulders and slashing across her forehead in bangs above perfect unplucked brows. A lithe, vibrant body with an upswept effect that a guy couldn't believe from seeing and so had to keep coming back for

another look to convince himself.

She sent Frankie. At first, the day she came into his office at the Circle Club looking for a job, he didn't see anything but a looker in a town that was littered with them. That was when she still had her clothes on.

He rocked back in his swivel and stared across his desk at her through the thin, lifting smoke from his cigarette.

"You a dancer, you say?"

"Yes."

"A good one?"

"Not very."

That surprised Frankie. He took his cigarette out of his mouth and let his eyes make a brief tour of her points of interest.

"No? What else you got that a guy would pay to see?"

She showed him what she had. Frankie sat there watching her emerge slowly from her clothes, and the small office got steadily smaller, so hot that it was almost suffocating. Frankie's knitted tie was hemp instead of silk, and the knot was a hangman's knot, cutting deeply into his throat until he was breathing in labored gasps. The palms of his hands dripped salty water. His whole body was wet with sweat.

When he was able to speak, he said, "Who the hell's going to care about the dancing? Can you start tonight?"

She could and did. And so did Frankie. For a guy with a temperature as high as his, he played it pretty cool. He kept the pressure on her, all

right, but he didn't force it. Not that he was too good for it. It just wasn't practical. The threat of being fired doesn't mean much to a gal with a dozen other places to go. By the time Frankie was desperate enough for threats, he was having to raise her pay every second week to hang on to her.

She liked him, though. He knew damned well she liked him. He could tell by the way the heat came up in her slanted eyes when she looked at him. He could tell by the way her hands sometimes reached out for him, touching him lightly, straying with brief abandon. But she was like mercury. He couldn't hold her when he reached back.

7.

The night he decided to try mink, he came into the club late, just as Linda was moving onto the small circular floor in a blue spot. He stood for a minute against the wall, holding the long cardboard box under his arm, watching the emerging dusky body, his pulse matching the tropical tempo of drums in the darkness. Before the act was over, he moved on around the edge of the floor and back to the door of Linda's room.

Inside, he lay the box on the dressing table and sat down. Waiting, he could hear faintly the crescendo of drums and muted brass that indicated Linda's exit. The sound of her footsteps in the hall was lost in the surge of applause that

continued long after she had left the floor.

She closed the door behind her and stood leaning against it, head back and eyes shining, her breasts rising and falling in deep, rhythmic breathing. Light and shadow stressed the convexities and hollows of her body.

"Hello, Frankie," she said. "Nice surprise."

He stood up, pulses hammering. "Nicer than you think, baby. I've brought you something."

She saw the box behind him on the dressing table and moved toward it, flat muscles rippling with silken smoothness beneath dusky skin. Her exclamation was like a delighted child's.

"Tell me what it is."

"Open it, baby."

Her fingers worked deftly at the knot of the cord, lifted the top of the box away. Without speaking, she shook out the luxurious fur coat, slipped into it and hugged it around her body. She stood entranced, her back to Frankie, looking at her reflection in the dim depths of the mirror.

Closing in behind her, he took her shoulders in his hands. Capturing the hands in hers, she pulled them around her body and under the coat. Her head fell back onto his shoulder. Her breath sighed through parted lips. He could feel in his hands the vibrations of her shivering flesh.

She said sleepily, "You're a sweet guy, Frankie. A lucky guy, too."

You're going places. Too bad I can't go along."

"Why not, baby? Why not go along?"

Her head rolled on his shoulder, her lips burning his neck. "Look, Frankie. When I go for a ride, I go first-class. No cheap tourist accommodations for Linda."

"I don't get you, baby. You call mink cheap?"

"It's not the mink. It's being second. It's the idea of taking what's left over."

"You mean Taffy?"

She closed her eyes and said nothing, and Frankie laughed softly. "Taffy's expendable, baby. Strictly expendable."

"Just like that? Maybe she won't let go."

"How the hell can she help it?"

"She's legal. That always helps."

"Married? You think Taffy and I are married?" He laughed again, his shoulders shaking with it. "Taffy and I are temporary, baby. I never figured it any other way. Nothing on paper. All off the record. We last just as long as I want us to."

She twisted against him, her arms coming up around his neck. Her breath was in his mouth.

"How long, Frankie? How long do you want?"

His hand moved down the soft curve of her spine, drawing her in. He said hoarsely, "As far as Taffy's concerned, I quit wanting when I saw you. Tonight I'll make it official."

She put her mouth over his, and he felt the hot, flicking of her tongue. Then she pushed away violently, staggering back against the dressing table. The mink hung open from her shoulders.

"Afterward, Frankie," she whispered. "Afterward."

He stood there blind, everything dissolved in shimmering waves of heat. At last, sight returning, he laughed shakily and moved to the door. Hand on the knob, he looked back at her.

"Like you say, baby — afterward."

8.

He went out into the hall and through the rear door into the alley. There was a small area back there in which he kept his convertible Caddy tucked away. Long, sleek, ice-blue and glittering chrome. A long way from the old Plymouth.

Behind the wheel, sending the big machine singing through the streets, he felt the tremendous uplift that comes to a man who approaches a crisis with assurance of triumph. His emotional drive was in harmony with the leashed power of the Caddy's throbbing engine. Wearing his new personality, he could hardly remember the old Frankie. It was impossible to believe that he had once, not long ago, been driven by shame to a longing for death. Life was good. All it required was luck and guts. With luck and guts, a guy could do anything. A guy could live forever.

At the uptown apartment house, he ascended in the swift, whispering elevator and let himself into his living room with the key he carried. The living room itself was dark, but light sliced into the darkness from the partially open door of the bedroom. Silently, he crossed the carpet that wasn't actually quite up to his knees and pushed the bedroom door all the way open.

Taffy was reading in bed. Her sheer nylon gown kept nothing hidden, but what it showed was nothing Frankie hadn't seen before, and he was tired of it. He stood for a moment looking at her, wondering what would be the best way to do it. The direct way, he decided. The tough way. Get it over with, and to hell with it.

From the bed, Taffy said, "Hi, honey. You're early tonight."

Without answering, Frankie walked over to the closet and slammed back one of the sliding panels. He dragged a cowhide overnight bag off a shelf and carried it to the bed. Snapping the locks, he spread the bag open.

Taffy sat up straighter against her silk pillows, two small spots of color burning suddenly over her cheek bones. "What's up, Frankie? You going someplace?"

He went to a chest of drawers, returned with pajamas and a clean shirt. "That ought to be obvious. As a matter of fact, I'm going to a hotel."

"Why, Frankie? What's the idea?"

He looked down at her, feeling the strong emotional drive. "The idea is that we're through, baby. Finished. I'm moving out."

Her breath whistled in a sharp, sucking inhalation, and she swung out of bed in a fragile nylon mist. Her hands clutched at him.

"No, Frankie! Not like this. Not after all the luck I've brought you."

He laughed brutally, remembering the old man. "It wasn't you who brought me luck, baby. It was someone else. That's something you'll never know anything about."

He turned, heading for the chest again, and she grabbed his arm, jerking. He spun with the force of the jerk, smashing his backhand across her mouth. She staggered off until the underside of her knees caught on the bed and held her steady. A bright drop of blood formed on her lower lip and dropped onto her chin. A whimper of pain crawled out of her throat.

"Why, Frankie? Just tell me why."

He shrugged. "A guy grows. A guy goes on to something better. That's just the way it is, baby."

"It's more than that. It's a lot bigger than that. You think I've been two-timing you, Frankie?"

He repeated his brutal laugh. "Two-timing me? I'll tell you something, baby. I wouldn't give a damn if you were sleeping with every punk in town. That's how much I care." He paused, savoring sadism, finding it pleasant. "You want it

straight, baby? It's just that I'm sick of you. I'm sick to my guts with the sight of you. That clear enough?"

She came back to him, slowly, lifting her arms like a supplicant. He waited until she was close enough, then he hit her across the mouth again.

Turning his back, he returned to the chest and got the rest of the articles he needed. Just a few things. Enough for the night and tomorrow. In the morning he'd send someone around to clean things out.

At the bed, he tossed the stuff into the overnight bag and snapped it shut.

Over his shoulder, he said, "The rent's paid to the end of the month. After that, you better look for another place to live."

She didn't respond, and remembering his tooth brush, he went into the bathroom for it. When he came out, she was standing there with a .38 in her hand. It was the same .38

he'd once considered killing himself with. That had been the old Frankie, of course.

Not the new Frankie. Death was no consideration in the life of the new Frankie.

"You rotten son of a bitch," she said.

He laughed aloud and started for her, and he just couldn't believe it when the slug slammed into his shoulder.

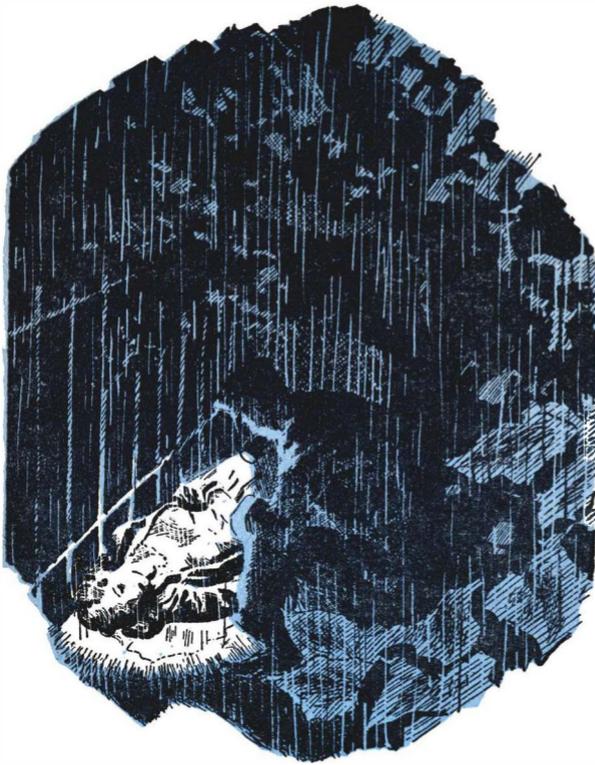
He looked down in amazement at the place where the crimson began to seep, and his incredulous eyes raised just in time to receive the second slug squarely between them.

And, like the night the old man died, it was funny. In the last split second of sight, it wasn't Taffy standing there with the gun at all. It was the old man again.

The old man with a memory like an elephant.

The old man who always waited until it really hurt.





Still Life

Hannigan walked in and showed the lab technician a photo of a room with an open window. "I want to look through that window," he said.

BY
EVAN HUNTER

IT WAS two in the morning, raining to beat all hell outside, and it felt good to be sitting opposite Johnny Knowles sipping hot coffee. Johnny had his jacket off, with his sleeves rolled up and the .38 Police Special hanging in its shoulder clip. He had a deck of cards spread in front of him at the table, and he was looking for a black queen to put on his king of diamonds.

I was sitting there looking past

Johnny at the rain streaming down the barred window. It had been a dull night, and I was half-dozing, the hot steam from the coffee cup halting my head. When the phone began ringing, Johnny looked up from his Solitaire.

"I'll get it," I said.

I put down the cup, swung my legs out from under the table and picked up the receiver.

"Hannigan," I said.

Johnny watched me as I listened. "Yep," I said. "I've got it, Barney. Right away."

I hung up and Johnny looked at me quizzically.

"Young girl," I said. "Gun Hill Road and Bronxwood Avenue. Looks bad, Johnny."

Johnny stood up quickly and began shrugging into his jacket.

"Some guy found her lying on the sidewalk, and he called in. Barney took it."

"Hurt bad?" Johnny asked.

"The guy who called in thinks she's dead."

We checked out a car and headed for Gun Hill Road. Johnny was quiet as he drove, and I listened to the swick-swack of the windshield wipers, staring through the rain-streaked glass at the glistening wet asphalt outside. When we turned off White Plains Avenue, Johnny said, "Hell of a night."

"Yeah."

He drove past the Catholic church, past the ball field belonging to the high school, and then slowed down as we cruised up to the school itself.

"There he is," Johnny said.

He motioned with his head, and I saw a thin man standing on the sidewalk, flagging us down. He stood hunched against the rain, his fedora pulled down over his ears. Johnny pulled up alongside him, and I opened the door on my side. A sheet of rain washed into the car, and the guy stuck in his head.

"Right around the corner," he said.

"Get in," I told him. I moved over to make room, and he squeezed onto the seat, bringing the clinging wetness of the rain with him. Johnny turned the corner, and the old man pointed through the windshield. "There," he said. "Right there."

We pulled the car over to the curb, and Johnny got out from behind the wheel before the man next to me had moved. The man shrugged, sighed, and stepped out into the rain. I followed close behind him.

The girl was sprawled against the iron bar fence that surrounded the school. She'd been wearing a raincoat, but it had been forcibly ripped down the front, pulling all the buttons loose. Her blouse had been torn down the center, her bra cruelly ripped from her breasts. Johnny played his flash over her, and we saw the ugly welts covering her wet skin. Her skirt and underclothing had been shredded, too, and she lay grotesque in death, her legs twisted at a curious widespread angle.

"Better get a blanket, Mike," Johnny said.

I nodded and walked to the car. I took a blanket from the back, and when I walked over to the girl again, Johnny was getting the man's name and address.

"The ambulance should be along soon," I said.

"Yeah." Johnny closed his pad, took the blanket and draped it over

the girl. The rain thudded at it, turning it into a sodden, black mass on the pavement.

"How'd you find her?" I asked the man.

"I been workin' the four to twelve at my plant," he said, "out on Long Island. I usually get home about this time when I got that shift. I live right off Bronxwood, get off the train at Gun Hill."

"You were walking home when you found the girl?"

"Yes, sir."

"What'd you do then?"

"I walked clear back to White Plains Avenue, found an open candy store and called you fellows. Then I came back to wait for you."

"What'd you tell the man who answered the phone?"

"All about the girl. That I'd found her. That's all."

"Did you say she was dead?"

"Well, yes. Yes, I did." He stared down at the girl. "My guess is she was raped." He looked at me for confirmation, but I said nothing.

"I think you can go home now, sir," Johnny said. "Thanks a lot for reporting this. We'll call you if you're needed."

"Glad to help," the old man said. He nodded at us briefly, and then glanced down at the girl under the blanket again. He shook his head, and started off down Bronxwood Avenue. We watched him go, the rain slicing at the pavement around us. Johnny looked off down the street, watching for the ambulance.

"Might be rape at that," he said.

I pulled my collar up against the rain. "Yeah."

We got the autopsy report at six that morning. We'd already found a wallet in the dead girl's coat pocket, asking anyone to call a Mrs. Iris Ferroni in case of accident. We'd called Mrs. Ferroni, assuming her to be the girl's mother, and she'd identified the body as that of her daughter, Jean Ferroni. She'd almost collapsed after that, and we were holding off questioning her until she pulled herself together.

Johnny brought the report in and put it next to my coffee cup on the table.

I scanned it quickly, my eyes skimming to the 'Cause of death:' space. In neat typescript, I read: *Sharp instrument entering heart from below left breast.*

I flipped the page and looked at the attached detailed report. The girl had been raped, all right, consecutively, brutally.

I turned back to the first page and looked at it once more. My eyes lingered on one item.

Burial Permit No. 63-7501-h

"Now she's just a number," I said. "Sixteen year old kid with a grave-number."

"She was seventeen," Johnny said.

"That makes a big difference."

"I think we can talk to her mother now," Johnny said.

I rubbed my forehead and said, "Sure. Why don't you bring her in?"

Johnny nodded and went out, to return in a few minutes with a small, dark woman in a plain black coat. The woman's eyes were red, and her lip trembled with her grief. She still looked dazed from the shock of having seen her daughter with the life torn from her.

"This is Detective-Sergeant Hanigan," Johnny said, "and I'm his partner, Detective-Sergeant Knowles. We'd like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

Mrs. Ferroni nodded, but said nothing.

"What time did your daughter leave the house last night, Mrs. Ferroni?" I asked.

The woman sighed and touched her forehead. "Eight o'clock, I think," she said. There was the faintest trace of an accent on her voice.

"Did she leave with anyone?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A boy. He takes her out sometimes. Ricky. Ricky Tocca."

"Do you know the boy well?"

"He's from the neighborhood. He's a good boy."

"Did they say where they were going?"

"To a movie. I think they go up to Mount Vernon a lot. That's where they were going."

"Does this Tocca have a car?"

"Yes."

"Would you know the year and make, Mrs. Ferroni?"

"A Plymouth," she said. "Or a

Chevvy, I think. I don't know. It's a new car." She paused and bit her lip. "He wouldn't hurt my daughter. He's a nice boy."

"We're not saying he would," Johnny said gently. "We're just trying to get some sort of a lead, Mrs. Ferroni."

"I understand."

"They left the house at eight, you say?"

"About that time."

"What time does your daughter usually come home?"

"One, two. On weekends. During the week . . . well, I like her to come home early . . ."

"But she didn't, is that it?"

"You know how it is with a young girl. They think they know everything. She stayed out late every night. I told her to be careful . . . I *told* her . . . I *told* her . . ."

She bit her lip, and I expected tears again, but there were none. Johnny cleared his throat, and asked, "Weren't you worried when she didn't show up this morning? I mean, we didn't call you until about four a.m."

Mrs. Ferroni shook her head. "She comes in very late sometimes. I worry . . . but she always comes home. This time . . ."

There was a strained, painful silence. "I think you can go now, Mrs. Ferroni," I said. "We'll have one of our men drive you home. Thank you very much."

"You'll . . . you'll find who did it, won't you?" she asked.

"We'll sure as hell try," I told her.

We picked up Richard Tocca, age twenty, as he was leaving for work the next morning. He stepped out of a two-story frame on Burke Avenue, looked up at the overcast sky, and then began walking quickly to a blue Nash parked at the curb. Johnny collared him as he was opening the door on the driver's side.

"Richard Tocca?" he asked.

The kid looked up suspiciously. "Yeah." He looked at Johnny's fist tightened in his coat sleeve and said, "What is this?"

I pulled up and flashed my buzzer. "Police officers, Tocca. Mind answering a few questions?"

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"What did I do?"

"Routine," Johnny said. "Come on over to our car, won't you?"

"All right," Tocca said. He glanced at his watch. "I hope this doesn't take long. I got to be at work at nine."

"It may not take long," I said.

We walked over to the car and I held the door for him. He climbed in, and Johnny and I sat on either side of him. He was a thin-faced kid with straight blond hair and pale blue eyes. Clear complexioned, clean shaven. Slightly protruding teeth. Dressed neatly and conservatively for a kid his age.

"Now what's this all about?" he asked.

"You date Jean Ferroni last night?" Johnny asked.

"Yes. Jesus, don't tell me she's in some kind of trouble."

"What time'd you pick her up?"

"About eight-fifteen, I guess. Listen, is she . . ."

"Where'd you go?"

"Well, that's just it. We were supposed to have a date, and she told me it was off, just like that. She made me drive her to Gun Hill and then she got out of the car. If she's in any trouble, I didn't have anything to do with it."

"She's in big trouble," Johnny said. "The biggest trouble."

"Yeah, well, I didn't have . . ."

"She's dead," I said.

The kid stopped talking, and his jaw hung slack for a minute. He blinked his eyes rapidly two or three times and then said, "Jesus. Jesus."

"You date her often, Ricky?"

"Huh?" He still seemed shocked, which was just what we wanted.

"Yeah, yeah, pretty often."

"How often?"

"Two, three times a week. No, less."

"When'd you see her last?"

"Last night."

"Before that."

"Last . . . Wednesday, I guess it was. Yeah."

"Why'd you date her?"

"I don't know. Why do you date girls?"

"We don't care why you date girls! Why'd you date this girl? Why'd you date Jean Ferroni?"

"I don't know. You know, she's . . . she was a nice kid. That's all."

"You serious about her?" Johnny snapped.

"Well . . ."

"You bedding with her?"

"What?"

"You heard me!"

"No. *No*. I mean . . . well no, I wasn't."

"Yes or no, goddamnit!"

"No."

"Then why'd you date her? You planning on marrying her?"

"No."

"What time did you pick her up last night?"

"Eight-fifteen. I told you . . ."

"Where'd you drop her off?"

"Gun Hill and White Plains."

"What time was this?"

"About eight-thirty."

"Why'd you date her so much?"

"I heard she was . . . hell, I don't like to say this. I mean, the girl's dead . . ."

"You heard what?"

"I heard she was . . . hot stuff."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Around. You know how the word spreads."

"Who'd you hear it from?"

"Just around, that's all."

"And you believed it?"

"Well, yeah. You see, I . . ." He stopped short, catching himself and his tongue.

"You what?"

"Nothing."

"Look, sonny," Johnny said. "The girl was raped and stabbed. That's murder. We'll get the truth if we have to beat it out of you!"

"I'm telling the truth!"

"But not all of it. Come on, sonny, give."

"All right, all right." He fell into a surly silence, and Johnny and I waited. Finally, "I saw pictures."

"What kind of pictures?"

"You know. Pictures. Her. And a guy. You know."

"You mean pornographic pictures?"

"Yeah."

"Then say what you mean. Where'd you see these pictures?"

"A guy had them."

"Have *you* got any?"

"No."

"We can get a search warrant. We can take you with us and slap you in the cooler and . . ."

"I got one," the kid admitted. "Just one."

"Let's see it."

He fished into his wallet and said, "I feel awful funny about this. You know, Jean is dead and all."

"Let's see the picture."

He handed a worn photograph to Johnny, and Johnny studied it briefly and passed it to me. It was Jean Ferroni, all right, and I couldn't very much blame the Tocca kid for his assumption about her.

"Know the guy in this picture?" I asked.

"No."

"Never seen him around?"

"No."

"All right, kid," Johnny said. "Go to work. And keep your nose clean because we may be back."

Richard Tocca looked at the picture in my hand longingly, reluctant to leave it. He glanced up at me hopefully, saw my eyes, and changed his mind about the question he was ready to ask. I got out of the car to let him out, and he walked to his Nash without looking back at us. The questioning had taken exactly seven minutes.

Johnny started the car, threw it into gear.

"Want me to drive?" I asked.

"No, that's okay."

"This puts a different light on it, huh?"

Johnny nodded. "I'm sleepy as hell," he said.

We drove back to the precinct, checked out, and then walked to the subway together.

"This may be a tough one," he said.

"May be?"

Johnny yawned.

We staked out every candy store and ice cream parlor in the Gun Hill Road to 219th Street area, figuring we might pick up someone passing the pornos there. We also set up four policewomen in apartments, thinking there was an off chance someone might contact them for lewd posing. The policewomen circulated at the local dances, visited the local bars, bowling alleys, movies. We didn't get a rumble.

The Skipper kept us on the case, but it seemed to have bogged down temporarily.

We'd already gone over the dead girl's belongings at her home. She'd had an address book, but we'd checked on everyone in it, and they were all apparently only casual acquaintances—with a few high school chums tossed in for flavoring. We'd checked the wallet the girl was carrying on the night of her murder. Aside from the In-Case-Of card, a social security card, and some pictures taken outside the high school with her girl friends, there was nothing.

Most of her high school friends said, under questioning, that Jean Ferroni didn't hang around with them much anymore. They said she'd gone snooty and was circulating with an older crowd. None of them knew who the people in the older crowd were.

Her teachers at school insisted she was a nice girl, a little subdued and quiet in class, but intelligent enough. Several of them complained that she'd been delinquent in homework assignments. None of them knew anything about her outside life.

We got our first real break when Mrs. Ferroni showed up with the key. She placed it on the desk in front of Johnny and said, "I was cleaning out her things. I found this. It doesn't fit any of the doors in the house. I don't know what it's for."

"Maybe her gym locker at school," I said.

"No. She had a combination lock.

I remember she had to buy one when she first started high school.”

Johnny took the key, looked at it, and passed it to me. “Post office box?” he asked.

“Maybe.” I turned the key over in my hands. The numerals 894 were stamped into its head.

“Thanks, Mrs. Ferroni,” Johnny said. “We’ll look into it right away.”

We started at the Williamsbridge Post Office right on Gun Hill Road. The mailmen were very cooperative, but the fact remained it wasn’t a key to any of their boxes. In fact, it didn’t look like a post office key at all. We tried the Wakefield Branch, up the line a bit, and got the same answer.

We started on the banks then.

Luckily, we hit it on the first try. The bank was on 220th Street, and the manager was cordial and helpful. He took one look at the key and said, “Yes, that’s one of ours.”

“Who owns the box?” we asked.

He looked at the key again. “Safety deposit 894. Just a moment, and I’ll have that checked.”

We stood on either side of his polished desk while he picked up a phone, asked for a Miss Delaney, and then questioned her about the key. “Yes,” he said. “I see. Yes. Thank you.” He cradled the phone, put the key on the desk and said, “Jo Ann Ferris. Does that help you, gentlemen?”

“Jo Ann Ferris,” Johnny said. “Jean Ferroni. That’s close enough.” He looked directly at the manager.

“We’ll be back in a little while with a court order to open that box. We’ll ask for you.”

“Certainly,” the manager said, nodding gravely.

In a little over two hours, we were back, and we followed the manager past the barred gate at the rear of the bank, stepped into the vault, and walked back to the rows of safety deposit boxes. “894,” he said. “Yes, here it is.”

He opened the box, pulled out a slab and rested the box on it. Johnny lifted the lid.

“Anything?” I asked.

He pulled out what looked like several rolled sheets of stiff white paper. They were secured with rubber bands, and Johnny slid the bands off quickly. When he unrolled them, they turned out to be eight by ten glossy prints. I took one of the prints and looked at Jean Ferroni’s contorted body. Beside me, the manager’s mouth fell open and he began sputtering wildly.

“Well,” I said, “this gives us something.”

“We’ll just take the contents of this box,” Johnny said to the manager. “Make out a receipt for it, will you, Mike?”

I made out the receipt and we took the bundle of pornographic photos back to the lab with us. Whatever else Jean Ferroni had done, she had certainly posed in a variety of compromising positions. She’d owned a ripe, young body,

and the pictures left nothing whatever to the imagination. But we weren't looking for kicks. We were looking for clues.

Dave Alger, one of the lab men, didn't hold out much hope.

"Nothing," he said. "What did you expect? Ordinary print paper. You can get the same stuff in any home developing kit."

"What about fingerprints?"

"The girl's mostly. A few others, but all smeared. You want me to track down the rubber bands?"

"Comedian," Johnny said.

"You guys expect miracles, that's all. You forget this is science and not witchcraft."

I was looking at the pictures spread out on the lab counter. They were all apparently taken in the same room, on the same bed. The bed had brass posts and railings at the head and foot. Behind the bed was an open window, with a murky city display of buildings outside. The pictures had evidently been taken at night, and probably recently because the window was wide open. Alongside the window on the wall was a picture of an Indian sitting on a black horse. A wide strip of wallpaper had been torn almost from ceiling to floor, leaving a white path on the wall. The room did not have the feel of a private apartment. It looked like any third-rate hotel. I kept looking at the pictures and at the open window with the buildings beyond.

"Hey!" I said loudly.

". . . you think all we do is wave a rattle and shake some feathers and wham! we got your goddamned murderer. Well, it ain't that simple. We put in a lot of time on . . ."

"Shut the hell up, Dave!"

Dave sank into a frowning silence. I lifted one of the pictures and said, "Blow this one up, will you?"

"Why? You looking for tattoo marks?"

"No. I want to look through that window."

Dave suddenly brightened. "How big you want it, Mike?"

"Big enough to read those neon signs across the street."

"Can do," he said.

He scooped up all the pictures and ran off, his heels clicking against the asphalt tile floor.

"Think we got something?" Johnny asked.

"Maybe. We sure as hell can't lose anything."

"Besides, you'll have something to hang over your couch," Johnny cracked.

"Another comedian," I said, but I was beginning to feel better already. I smoked three cigarettes down to butts, and then Dave came back.

"One Rheingold beer ad," he said.

"Yeah?"

"And one Hotel Mason. That help?"

I didn't answer. I was busy racing Johnny to the door.

The Hotel Mason was a dingy, grey-faced building on West Forty-Seventh. We weren't interested in it. We were interested in the building directly across the way, an equally dingy, grey-faced edifice that claimed the fancy title of *Al-listair Arms*.

We walked directly to the desk and flashed our buzzers, and the desk clerk looked hastily to the elevator bank.

"Relax, Buster," Johnny said.

He pulled one of the pictures from under his jacket. The lab had whitened out the figures of Jean Ferroni and her male companion, leaving only the bed, the picture on the wall, and the open window. Johnny showed the picture to the desk clerk.

"What room is this?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Look hard!"

"I tell you I don't know. Maybe one of the bellhops." He pounded a bell on the desk, and an old man in a bellhop's rig hobbled over. Johnny showed him the picture and repeated his question.

"Damned if I know," the old man said. "All these rooms look alike." He stared at the picture again, shaking his head. Then his eyes narrowed and he bent closer and looked harder. "Oh," he said, "that's 305. That picture of the Injun and the ripped wallpaper there. Yep, that's 305." He paused. "Why?"

I turned. "Who's in 305?"

The desk clerk made a show of looking at the register. "Mr. Adams. Harley Adams."

"Let's go, Johnny," I said.

We started up the steps, and I saw Johnny's hand flick to his shoulder holster. When it came out from under his coat, it was holding a cocked .38. I took out my own gun and we padded up noiselessly.

We stopped outside room 305, flattening ourselves against the walls on either side of the door.

Johnny reached out and rapped the butt of his gun against the door.

"Who is it?" a voice asked.

"Open up!"

"Who is it?"

"Police officers. Open up!"

"Wha . . ."

There was a short silence inside, and then we heard the frantic slap of leather on the floor.

"Hit it, Johnny," I shouted.

Johnny backed off against the opposite wall, put the sole of his shoe against it, and shoved off toward the door. His shoulder hit the wood, and the door splintered inward.

Adams was in his undershirt and trousers, and he had one leg over the windowsill, heading for the fire escape, when we came in. I swung my .38 in his direction and yelled, "You better hold it, Adams."

He looked at the gun, and then slowly lowered his leg to the floor.

"Sure," he said. "I wasn't going anywhere."

We found piles of pictures in the

room, all bundled neatly. Some of them were of Jean Ferroni. But there were other girls and other men. We found an expensive camera in the closet, and a darkroom setup in the bathroom. We also found a switch knife with a six-inch blade in the top drawer of his dresser.

"I don't know anything about it," Adams insisted.

He kept insisting that for a long time, even after we showed him the pictures we'd taken from Jean Ferroni's safety deposit box. He kept insisting until we told him his knife would go down to the lab and they'd sure as hell find *some* trace of the dead girl on it, no matter how careful he'd been. We were stretching the truth a little, because a knife can be washed as clean as anything else. But Adams took the hook and told us everything.

He'd given the kid a come-on, getting her to pose alone at first, in the nude. From there, it had been simple to get her to pose for the big stuff, the stuff that paid off.

"She was getting classy," Adams said. "A cheap tramp like that getting classy. Wanted a percentage of the net. I gave her a percentage, all right. I arranged a nice little party right in my hotel room. Six guys.

They fixed her good, one after the other. Then I drove her up to her own neighborhood and left her the way you found her — so it would look like a rape kill."

He paused and shifted in his chair, making himself comfortable.

"Imagine that broad," he continued. "Wanting to share. Wanting to share with me. I showed her."

"You showed her, all right," Johnny said tightly.

That was when I swung out with my closed fist, catching Adams on the side of his jaw. He fell backward, knocking the chair over, sprawling onto the floor.

He scrambled to his feet, crouched low and said, "Hey, what the hell? Are you crazy?"

I didn't answer him. I left the interrogation room, walking past the patrolman at the door. Johnny caught up with me in the corridor, clamped his hand onto my shoulder.

"Why'd you hit him, Mike?" he asked.

"I wanted to. I just wanted to."

Johnny's eyes met mine for a moment, held them. His hand tightened on my shoulder, and his head nodded almost imperceptibly.

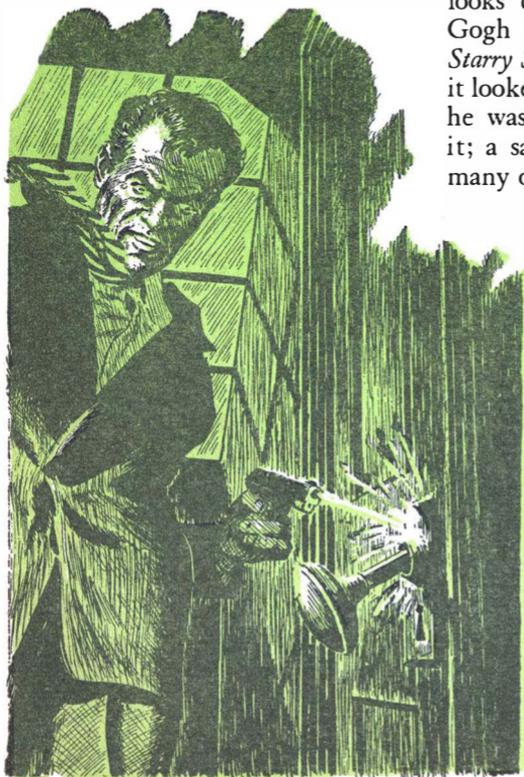
We walked down the corridor together, our heels clicking noisily on the hard floor.



The Little Lamb

SHE DIDN'T come home for supper and by eight o'clock I found some ham in the icebox and made myself a sandwich. I wasn't worried, but I was getting restless. I kept walking to the window and looking down the hill toward town, but I

couldn't see her coming. It was a moonlit evening, very bright and clear. The lights of the town were nice and the curve of the hills beyond, black against blue under a yellow gibbous moon. I thought I'd like to paint it, but not the moon; you put a moon in a picture and it looks corny, it looks pretty. Van Gogh did it in his picture *The Starry Sky* and it didn't look pretty; it looked frightening, but then again he was a little crazy when he did it; a sane man couldn't have done many of the things Van Gogh did.



He wandered aimlessly through town, looking for his wife, and at first he wasn't worried. But then he began to think about Hans Wagner.

BY
FREDRIC BROWN

I hadn't cleaned my palette so I picked it up and tried to work a little more on the painting I'd started the day before. It was just blocked in thus far and I started to mix a green to fill in an area but it wouldn't come right and I realized I'd have to wait till daylight to get it right. Evenings, without natural light, I can work on line or I can mold in finishing strokes, but when color's the thing, you've got to have daylight. I cleaned my messed-up palette for a fresh start in the morning and I cleaned my brushes and it was getting close to nine o'clock and still she hadn't come.

No, there wasn't anything to worry about. She was with friends somewhere and she was all right. My studio is almost a mile from town, up in the hills, and there wasn't any way she could let me know because there's no phone. Probably she was having a drink with the gang at the Waverly Inn and there was no reason she'd think I'd worry about her. Neither of us lived by the clock; that was understood between us. She'd be home soon.

There was half of a jug of wine left and I poured myself a drink and sipped it, looking out the window toward town. I turned off the light behind me so I could better watch out the window at the bright night. A mile away, in the valley, I could see the lights of the Waverly Inn. Garish bright, like the loud juke box that kept me from going there

often. Strangely, Lamb never minded the juke box, although she liked good music, too.

Other lights dotted here and there. Small farms, a few other studios. Hans Wagner's place a quarter of a mile down the slope from mine. Big, with a skylight; I envied him that skylight. But not his strictly academic style. He'd never paint anything quite as good as a color photograph; in fact, he saw things as a camera sees them and painted them without filtering them through the catalyst of the mind. A wonderful draughtsman, never more. But his stuff sold; he could afford a skylight.

I sipped the last of my glass of wine, and there was a tight knot in the middle of my stomach. I didn't know why. Often Lamb had been later than this, much later. There wasn't any real reason to worry.

I put my glass down on the window sill and opened the door. But before I went out I turned the lights back on. A beacon for Lamb, if I should miss her. And if she should look up the hill toward home and the lights were out, she might think I wasn't there and stay longer, wherever she was. She'd know I wouldn't turn in before she got home, no matter how late it was.

Quit being a fool, I told myself; it isn't late yet. It's early, just past nine o'clock.

I walked down the hill toward town and the knot in my stomach got tighter and I swore at myself

because there was no reason for it. The line of the hills beyond town rose higher as I descended, pointing up the stars. It's difficult to make stars that look like stars. You'd have to make pinholes in the canvas and put a light behind it. I laughed at the idea — but why not? Except that it isn't done and what did I care about that. But I thought a while and I saw why it wasn't done. It would be childish, immature.

I was about to pass Hans Wagner's place, and I slowed my steps thinking that just possibly Lamb might be there. Hans lived alone there and Lamb wouldn't, of course, be there unless a crowd had gone to Hans's from the Inn or somewhere. I stopped to listen and there wasn't a sound, so the crowd wasn't there. I went on.

The road branched; there were several ways from here and I might miss her. I took the shortest route, the one she'd be most likely to take if she came directly home from town. It went past Carter Brent's place, but that was dark. There was a light on at Sylvia's place, though, and guitar music. I knocked on the door and while I was waiting I realized that it was the phonograph and not a live guitarist. It was Segovia playing Bach, the Chaconne from the D Minor Partita, one of my favorites. Very beautiful, very fine-boned and delicate, like Lamb.

Sylvia came to the door and answered my question. No, she hadn't seen Lamb. And no, she hadn't been

at the Inn, or anywhere. She'd been home all afternoon and evening, but did I want to drop in for a drink? I was tempted — more by Segovia than by the drink — but I thanked her and went on.

I should have turned around and gone back home instead, because for no reason I was getting into one of my black moods. I was illogically annoyed because I didn't know where Lamb was; if I found her now I'd probably quarrel with her, and I hate quarreling. Not that we do, often. We're each pretty tolerant and understanding — of little things, at least. And Lamb's not having come home yet was still a little thing.

But I could hear the blaring juke box when I was still a long way from the Inn and it didn't lighten my mood any. I could see in the window now and Lamb wasn't there, not at the bar. But there were still the booths, and besides, someone might know where she was. There were two couples at the bar. I knew them; Charlie and Eve Chandler and Dick Bristow with a girl from Los Angeles whom I'd met but whose name I couldn't remember. And one fellow, stag, who looked as though he was trying to look like a movie scout from Hollywood. Maybe he really was one.

I went in and, thank God, the juke box stopped just as I went through the door. I went over to the bar, glancing at the line of booths; Lamb wasn't there.

I said, "Hi," to the four of them that I knew, and to the stag if he wanted to take it to cover him, and to Harry, behind the bar. I asked Harry, "Has Lamb been here?"

"Nope, haven't seen her, Wayne. Not since six; that's when I came on. Want a drink?"

I didn't, particularly, but I didn't want it to look as though I'd come solely for Lamb, so I ordered one.

"How's the painting coming?" Charlie Chandler asked me.

He didn't mean any particular painting and he wouldn't have known anything about it if he had. Charlie runs the local bookstore and — amazingly — he can tell the difference between Thomas Wolfe and a comic book, but he couldn't tell the difference between an El Greco and an Al Capp. Don't misunderstand me on that; I like Al Capp.

So I said, "Fine," as one always says to a meaningless question, and took a swallow of the drink that Harry had put in front of me. I paid for it and wondered how long I'd have to stay in order to make it not too obvious that I'd come only to look for Lamb.

For some reason conversation died. If anybody had been talking to anybody before I came in, he wasn't now. I glanced at Eve and she was making wet circles on the mahogany of the bar with the bottom of a martini goblet. The olive stirred restlessly in the bottom and I knew suddenly that was the color,

the exact color, I'd wanted to mix an hour or two ago just before I'd decided not to try to paint. The color of an olive moist with gin and vermouth. Just right for the main sweep of the biggest hill, shading darker to the right, lighter to the left. I stared at the color and memorized it so I'd have it tomorrow. Maybe I'd even try it tonight when I got back home; I had it now, daylight or no. It was right; it was the color that had to be there. I felt good; the black mood that had threatened to come on was gone.

But where was Lamb? If she wasn't home yet when I got back, would I be able to paint? Or would I start worrying about her, without reason? Would I get that tightness in the pit of my stomach?

I saw that my glass was empty. I'd drunk too fast. Now I might as well have another one, or it would be too obvious why I'd come. And I didn't want people — not even people like these — to think I was jealous of Lamb and worried about her. Lamb and I trusted one another implicitly. I was curious as to where she was and I wanted her back, but that was all. I wasn't suspicious of where she might be. They wouldn't realize that.

I said, "Harry, give me a martini." I'd had so few drinks that it wouldn't hurt me to mix them, and I wanted to study that color, intimately and at close hand. It was going to be the central color motif; everything would revolve around it.

Harry handed me the martini. It tasted good. I swished around the olive and it wasn't quite the color I wanted, a little too much in the brown, but I still had the idea. And I still wanted to work on it tonight, if I could find Lamb. If she was there, I could work; I could get the planes of color in, and tomorrow I could mold them, shade them.

But unless I'd missed her, unless she was already home or on her way there, it wasn't too good a chance. We knew dozens of people; I couldn't try every place she might possibly be. But there was one other fairly good chance, Mike's Club, a mile down the road, out of town on the other side. She'd hardly have gone there unless she was with someone who had a car, but that could have happened. I could phone there and find out.

I finished my martini and nibbled the olive and then turned around to walk over to the phone booth. The wavy-haired man who looked as though he might be from Hollywood was just walking back toward the bar from the juke box and it was making preliminary scratching noises. He'd dropped a coin into it and it started to play something loud and brassy. A polka, and a particularly noisy and obnoxious one. I felt like hitting him one in the nose, but I couldn't even catch his eye as he strolled back and took his stool again at the bar. And anyway, he wouldn't have known what I was hitting him for. But

the phone booth was just past the juke box and I wouldn't hear a word, or be heard, if I phoned Mike's.

A record takes about three minutes, and I stood one minute of it and that was enough. I wanted to make that call and get out of there, so I walked toward the booth and I reached around the juke box and pulled the plug out of the wall. Quietly, not violently at all. But the sudden silence was violent, so violent that I could hear, as though she'd screamed them, the last few words of what Eve Chandler had been saying to Charlic Chandler. Her voice pitched barely to carry above the din of brass—but she might as well have used a public address system once I'd pulled the juke box's plug.

“. . . may be at Hans's." Bitten off suddenly, if she'd intended to say more.

Her eyes met mine and hers looked frightened.

I looked back at Eve Chandler. I didn't pay any attention to Golden Boy from Hollywood; if he wanted to make anything of the fact that I'd ruined his nickel, that was his business and he could start it. I went into the phone booth and pulled the door shut. If that juke box started again before I'd finished my call, it would be my business, and I could start it. The juke box didn't start again.

I gave the number of Mike's and when someone answered, I asked, "Is Lamb there?"

“Who did you say, Mr.?”

I said patiently, “This is Wayne Gray. Is Lambeth Gray there?”

“Oh.” I recognized it now as Mike’s voice. “Didn’t get you at first. No, Mr. Gray, your wife hasn’t been here.”

I thanked him and hung up. When I went out of the booth, the Chandlers were gone. I heard a car starting outside.

I waved to Harry and went outside. The tail light of the Chandlers’ car was heading up the hill. In the direction they’d have gone if they were heading for Hans Wagner’s studio — to warn Lamb that I’d heard something I shouldn’t have heard, and that I might come there.

But it was too ridiculous to consider. Whatever gave Eve Chandler the wild idea that Lamb might be with Hans, it was wrong. Lamb wouldn’t do anything like that. Eve had probably seen her having a drink or so with Hans somewhere, sometime, and had got the thing wrong. Dead wrong. If nothing else, Lamb would have better taste than that. Hans was handsome, and he was a ladies’ man, which I’m not, but he’s stupid and he can’t paint. Lamb wouldn’t fall for a stuffed shirt like Hans Wagner.

But I might as well go home, now, I decided. Unless I wanted to give people the impression that I was canvassing the town for my wife, I couldn’t very well look any farther or ask any more people if they’d seen her. And although I don’t

care what people think about me either personally or as a painter, I wouldn’t want them to think I had any wrong ideas about Lamb.

I walked off in the wake of the Chandlers’ car, through the bright moonlight. I came in sight of Hans’s place again, and the Chandlers’ car wasn’t parked there; if they’d stopped, they’d gone right on. But, of course, they would have, under those circumstances. They wouldn’t have wanted me to see that they were parked there; it would have looked bad.

The lights were on there, but I walked on past, up the hill toward my own place. Maybe Lamb was home by now; I hoped so. At any rate, I wasn’t going to stop at Hans’s. Whether the Chandlers had or not.

Lamb wasn’t in sight along the road between Hans’s place and mine. But she could have made it before I got that far, even if — well, even if she’d been there. If the Chandlers had stopped to warn her.

Three quarters of a mile from the Inn to Hans’s. Only one quarter of a mile from Hans’s place to mine. And Lamb could have run; I had only walked.

Past Hans’s place, a beautiful studio with that skylight I envied him. Not the place, not the fancy furnishings, just that wonderful skylight. Oh, yes, you can get wonderful light outdoors, but there’s wind and dust just at the wrong time. And when, mostly, you paint out of your head instead of some-

thing you're looking at, there's no advantage to being outdoors at all. I don't have to look at a hill while I'm painting it. I've seen a hill.

The light was on at my place, up ahead. But I'd left it on, so that didn't prove Lamb was home. I plodded toward it, getting a little winded by the uphill climb, and I realized I'd been walking too fast. I turned around to look back and there was that composition again, with the gibbous moon a little higher, a little brighter. It had lightened the black of the near hills and the far ones were blacker. I thought, I can do that. Gray on black and black on gray. And, so it wouldn't be a monochrome, the yellow lights. Like the lights at Hans's place. Yellow lights like Hans's yellow hair. Tall, Nordic-Teutonic type, handsome. Nice planes in his face. Yes, I could see why women liked him. Women, but not Lamb.

I had my breath back and started climbing again. I called out Lamb's name when I got near the door, but she didn't answer. I went inside, but she wasn't there.

The place was very empty. I poured myself a glass of the wine and went over to look at the picture I'd blocked out. It was all wrong; it didn't mean anything. The lines were nice but they didn't mean anything at all. I'd have to scrape the canvas and start over. Well, I'd done that before. It's the only way you get anything, to be ruthless

when something's wrong. But I couldn't start it tonight.

The tin clock said it was a quarter to eleven, but that wasn't late. But I didn't want to think so I decided to read a while. Some poetry, possibly. I went over to the bookcase. I saw Blake and that made me think of one of his simplest and best poems, *The Lamb*. It had always made me think of Lamb — "Little lamb, who made thee?" It had always given me, personally, a funny twist to the line, a connotation that Blake, of course, hadn't intended. But I didn't want to read Blake tonight. T. S. Eliot: "Midnight shakes the memory as a madman shakes a dead geranium." But it wasn't midnight yet, and I wasn't in the mood for Eliot. Not even Prufrock: "Let us go then, you and I, where the evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table —" He could do things with words that I'd have liked to do with pigments, but they aren't the same things, the same medium. Painting and poetry are as different as eating and sleeping. But both fields can be, and are, so wide. Painters can differ as greatly as Bonnard and Braque, yet both be great. Poets as great as Eliot and Blake. "Little lamb, who —" I didn't want to read.

And enough of thinking. I opened the trunk and got my forty-five calibre automatic. The clip was full; I jacked a cartridge into the chamber and put the safety catch on. I put

it into my pocket and went outside. I closed the door behind me and started down the hill toward Hans Wagner's studio.

I wondered, had the Chandlers stopped there to warn them? Then either Lamb would have hurried home — or, possibly, she might have gone on with the Chandlers, to their place. She could have figured that to be less obvious than rushing home. So, even if she wasn't there, it would prove nothing. If she was, it would show that the Chandlers hadn't stopped there.

I walked down the road and I tried to look at the crouching black beast of the hills, the yellow of the lights. But they added up to nothing, they meant nothing. Unfeeling, unfeeling-to-feel, like a patient etherized upon a table. Damn Eliot, I thought; the man saw too deeply. The useless striving of the wasteland for something a man can touch but never have, the shaking of a dead geranium. As a madman. Little Lamb. Her dark hair and her darker eyes in the whiteness of her face. And the slender, beautiful whiteness of her body. The softness of her voice and the touch of her hands running through my hair. And Hans Wagner's hair, yellow as that mocking moon.

I knocked on the door. Not loudly, not softly, just a knock.

Was it too long before Hans came?

Did he look frightened? I didn't know. The planes of his face were

nice, but what was in them I didn't know. I can see the lines and the planes of faces, but I can't read them. Nor voices. He said, "Hi, Wayne. Come in."

I went inside. Lamb wasn't there, not in the big room, the studio. There were other rooms, of course; a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom. I wanted to go look in all of them right away, but that would have been crude. I wouldn't leave until I'd looked in each.

I said, "Getting a little worried about Lamb; she's seldom out alone this late. Have you seen her?"

He shook his blond, handsome head.

"Thought she might have dropped in on her way home," I said casually. I smiled at him. "Maybe I was just getting lonesome and restless. How about dropping back with me for a drink? I've got only wine, but there's plenty of that."

Of course he had to say, "Why not have a drink here?" He said it. He even asked me what I wanted, and I said a martini because he'd have to go out into the kitchen to make that and it would give me a chance to look around.

He said, "Okay, Wayne, I'll have one too. Excuse me a moment."

He went out into the kitchen. I took a quick look into the bathroom and then went into the bedroom and took a good look, even under the bed. Lamb wasn't there. Then I went into the kitchen and said, "Forgot to tell you, make mine

light. I might want to paint a bit after I get home."

"Sure," he said.

Lamb wasn't in the kitchen. Nor had she left after I'd knocked or come in; I remember Hans's kitchen door; it's pretty noisy and I hadn't heard it. And it's the only door aside from the front one.

I'd been foolish.

Unless, of course, Lamb had been here and had gone away with the Chandlers when they'd dropped by to warn them, if they'd dropped by.

I went back into the big studio with the skylight and wandered around for a minute looking at the things on the walls. They made me want to puke so I sat down and waited. I'd stay at least a few minutes to make it look all right.

He gave me mine and I thanked him. I sipped it while he waited patronizingly. Not that I minded that. He made money and I didn't. But I thought worse of him than he could possibly think of me.

"How's your work going, Wayne?"

"Fine," I said. I sipped my drink. He'd taken me at my word and made it weak, mostly vermouth. It tasted lousy that way. But the olive in it looked darker, more the color I'd had in mind. Maybe, just maybe, with the picture built around that color, it would work out.

"Nice place Hans," I said. "That skylight. I wish I had one."

He shrugged. "You don't work from models anyway, do you? And outdoors is outdoors."

I said, "Outdoors is in your mind. There isn't any difference." And then I wondered why I was talking to somebody who wouldn't know what I was talking about. I wandered over to the window — the one that faced toward my studio — and looked out of it. I hoped I'd see Lamb on the way there, but I didn't. She wasn't here. Where was she? Even if she'd been here and left when I'd knocked, she'd have been on the way now. I'd have seen her.

I turned. "Were the Chandlers here tonight?" I asked him.

"The Chandlers? No; haven't seen them for a couple of days." He'd finished his drink. He asked, "Have another?"

I started to say no. I didn't. My eyes happened, just happened, to light on a closet door. I'd seen inside it once; it wasn't deep, but it was deep enough for a man to stand inside it. Or a woman.

I said, "Thanks, Hans. Yes."

I walked over and handed him my glass. With it and his he went out into the kitchen. I walked quietly over to the closet door and tried it.

It was locked.

And there wasn't a key in the door. That didn't make sense. Why would anyone keep a closet locked when he always locked all the outer doors and windows when he left?

Little lamb, who made thee?

Hans came out of the kitchen, two martinis in his hands. He saw my hand on the knob of the closet.

For a moment he stood very still

and then his hands began to tremble; the martinis, his and mine, slopped over the rims and made little droplets falling to the floor.

I asked him, pleasantly, "Hans, do you keep your closet locked?"

"Is it locked? No, I don't, ordinarily." And then he realized he hadn't quite said it right and he said, more fearlessly, "What's the matter with you, Wayne?"

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing at all." I took the forty-five out of my pocket. He was far enough away so that, big as he was, he couldn't think about trying to jump me.

I smiled at him, instead. "How's about letting me have the key?"

More martini glistened on the tiles. These tall, big, handsome blonds, they haven't guts; he was scared stiff. He tried to make his voice normal. "I don't know where it is. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "But stay where you are. Don't move, Hans."

He didn't. The glasses shook, but the olives stayed in them. Barely. I watched him, but I put the muzzle of the big forty-five against the keyhole. I slanted it away from the center of the door so I wouldn't kill anybody who was hiding inside. I did that out of the corner of my eye, watching Hans Wagner.

I pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot even in that big studio, was deafening, but I didn't take my eyes off Hans. I may have blinked.

I stepped back as the closet door swung slowly open. I lined the muz-

zle of the forty-five against Hans's heart. I kept it there as the door of the closet swung slowly toward me.

An olive hit the tiles with a sound that wouldn't have been audible, ordinarily. I watched Hans while I looked into the closet as the door swung fully open.

Lamb was there. Naked.

I shot Hans and my hand was steady, so one shot was enough. He fell with his hand moving toward his heart but not having time to get there. His head hit the tiles with a crunching sound. The sound was the sound of death.

I put the gun back into my pocket and my hand was trembling now.

Hans's easel was near me, his palette knife lying on the ledge.

I took the palette knife in my hand and cut my Lamb, my naked Lamb, out of her frame. I rolled her up and held her tightly; no one would ever see her thus. We left together and, hand in hand, started up the hill toward home. I looked at her in the bright moonlight. I laughed and she laughed, but her laughter was like silver cymbals and my laughter was like dead petals shaken from a madman's geranium.

Her hand slipped out of mine and she danced, a white, slim wraith.

Back over her shoulder her laughter tinkled and she said, "Remember, darling? Remember that you killed me when I told you about Hans and me? Don't you remember killing me this afternoon? Don't you darling? Don't you remember?"

The homicide cop was pleased when Liddell agreed to turn over the killer, but he had one added request. He hoped the killer would still be breathing when Liddell turned him over . . .

A Johnny Liddell Story
BY FRANK KANE

THE MAN lay on his back, one arm extended, the other folded across his belly. He stared unblinkingly at the clouded sky above with unseeing eyes. A dark hole in his face was diagonally above the ragged exit on the other side of the jaw where the slug had torn away a piece on its way out.

Johnny Liddell stared at the dead man, swore under his breath. He leaned down, flipped open the man's jacket, nodded at the .38 nestling in its shoulder holster. "Didn't even get a chance to go for his gun." He looked up at the man standing alongside the body. "When'd it happen, Murph?"

The other man shrugged. He shifted a toothpick from one corner



Slay Belle

of his mouth to the other. "We got the call at about 11:20." He lifted his wrist, flicked back his sleeve, squinted at the dial of his wrist watch in the half-light. "Say about twenty minutes ago. Man on the beat found him just like that." He pulled the

toothpick from between his teeth, studied the shredded end. "I knew he was one of your boys, so I had the sergeant call you." His eyes rolled from the toothpick to Liddell's face. "Thought maybe you could tell us what he's been working on."

Liddell considered the question, shook his head. "Nothing but routine, far's I know." He jabbed his finger at the gun in the dead man's holster. "You think if he'd been on a job that anybody could get near enough to burn him down that way — without him going for his gun?"

Murphy returned the toothpick between his teeth, crushed it mercilessly. "Does sound funny," he conceded. He rolled the toothpick between thumb and forefinger. "Then you've got no idea of why he was hit or by whom?"

"Not right now."

Somewhere a siren reached for a high note, held it for a moment, died away to a deep-throated moan. A pair of twin red headlights swung onto the street two blocks away, raced toward where they stood.

"Don't try anything foolish, Liddell. Don't forget that license comes up for renewal every so often."

"I don't know what you mean, Murph."

Murphy snorted. "I mean keep your nose out of police business. Sure, I know he was one of your boys and you're pretty steamed up because he stopped one. But don't forget that when he got himself killed that made it police business."

Liddell watched as the ambulance skidded to a stop at the curb. "Like you said, Murph. He was one of my boys. That makes it my business."

The homicide man sighed. "Don't say I didn't warn you. The inspector's on the warpath these days, Johnny. Get in his way and he'll stamp you flat. So help me, if he catches you messing with this one on your own, he'll slap you in the hoosegow for obstructing justice."

"Obstructing justice? Me?" Liddell shook his head. "The thought never entered my head. Take my word for it, Murph. If I catch the guy who did this before you do, I'll turn him over to you."

"Do that. And while you're doing it, do both of us a favor. Turn him over to us while he's still breathing."

Johnny Liddell dropped the cab in front of a brownstone building nestled anonymously in a row of similar brownstone buildings in the Village. He climbed the four stone steps from the street level, gave no sign that he had seen the big black sedan that had pulled up to the curb a few houses below him, cut its lights, and turned off its motor.

Liddell walked through the dimly lit hallway to the rear first floor apartment, knocked. A red headed girl wearing a blue-silk hostess gown that clung to her body opened the door. Her eyes widened as she recognized Liddell.

"Hello, Pinky," Liddell said. "Mind if I come in?"

The redhead shook her head, stepped aside, watched Liddell as he walked through the door into a cozily furnished living-room. She jabbed at her hair with the tips of her fingers, smoothed the silk of the gown over her thighs with the flat of her hand.

"This is a bit of a surprise," she told him as she followed him into the living room. Her copper-colored hair was piled on top of her head, and her face looked as though it had been freshly scrubbed. She wore no make-up except a smear of lipstick.

Liddell tossed his hat at the couch, turned to face her. "Sorry to bust in on you this way, Pinky, but I had no choice."

"Trouble?"

"Plenty. Lew Robins was gunned out an hour ago."

"Lew? Dead?" Disbelief clouded her green eyes, her color faded. "I can't believe it. Who did it?"

Liddell shook his head. "The police have no idea. That assignment he was out on tonight. What do you know about it?"

The blonde licked at her full lips with the tip of a pink tongue. "It couldn't have been that. It was strictly a routine bodyguard job. I — I think I need a drink. Can you use one?"

Liddell nodded, dropped down onto the couch. He watched as the redhead walked toward the kitchen. Her round hips worked smooth and easy under the thin fabric of the gown. When she returned a few sec-

onds later with a bottle and glasses, the effect was as satisfying from the front as it had been from the rear.

She set the glasses down on a small table in front of the couch, tilted the bottle over each. She handed one to Liddell, took a deep swallow out of hers.

"Fill me in on the job Robins was doing, Pink."

The redhead nodded, took another fast drink out of her glass, set it down. "She came into the office about four. The client, I mean. Asked to see you."

Liddell dug two cigarettes out of his jacket pocket, lit them, passed one to the girl. She took a deep drag, let the smoke drift from between her lips.

"You weren't in, so I sent her in to see Lew. She stayed about fifteen minutes, and they left together. As they were going out, he gave me the word that he had recorded the whole thing. I went inside and transcribed the record. The whole thing's in the folder in your top drawer."

"What was she after?"

"A bodyguard. Just for a couple of days, until she could get out of town. Some guy was bothering her." She studied him over the rim of her glass. "What about her? Was she there when Lew — died?"

Liddell shrugged. "No sign of her. About this guy — the one that was bothering her — she give a name?"

Pinky wrinkled up her brow in concentration, shook her head. "Not that I remember. Just that some

character wouldn't let her alone. Kept calling her, bothering her in the street and following her every place she went. She didn't want us to do anything — just keep him away." She shrugged. "She sounded like a crackpot, but she paid in advance, so Lew didn't argue."

Liddell nodded, smoked for a minute. "What'd you say her name was?"

"Ryder. Iris Ryder." She watched with troubled eyes as Liddell got up, paced the room. "We've got an address on her if that'll help."

"Only as a last resort," he said. "I don't want to tip Murphy off to what Lew was working on. I want a few minutes alone with the guy that killed Lew before the cops get him."

The phone in the small entrance hall started to jangle. Liddell stopped pacing, glowered at it. The redhead looked puzzled, walked out to answer it. In a moment she was back.

"That was the night watchman at the office. He says there's a woman there, trying to get in to see us. Said it was a matter of life and death. From the way he described her, it's the Ryder girl."

"You told him to keep her there?"

The redhead nodded. "He's letting her wait in our office. I told him you'd be right over."

"Good." Liddell stubbed his cigarette out, grabbed up his hat. "There a back way out of this place? Murphy put a tail on me to keep me out of trouble. I don't want him getting under my feet."

"Think of my reputation." The redhead pouted. "He'll be reporting in that you spent the night here."

"I'll take a rain check on it. How about that back way?"

Pinky shrugged. "You can go out through the back yard. There's an alleyway leads through to the next street. Will I be hearing from you?"

"Probably. Depends on how much help the girl can give me."

Iris Ryder was curled up in the big armchair in his office when he arrived. She started, jumped to her feet as he walked in, studied him with wide, frightened eyes.

"You're Liddell?" She was about 25, beginning to show signs of wear. A fine network of lines was beginning to appear under her eyes, and the corners of her full lips had begun to droop. Her hair was blonde, tousled. Her make-up stood out in garish patches against the pallor of her face. She clutched a full coat around her.

"I'm Liddell." He motioned her to her chair, walked around the desk, dropped into his desk chair. "You were with Lew Robins when he was killed?"

The blonde nodded. "Duke did it. Duke Simms. Then he pushed me into a car —" She shook her head, covered her eyes with her hand. "I — I managed to get away from him, got down here somehow. I need help, Liddell. I need help badly."

Liddell reached into his bottom drawer, came up with a bottle, two

paper cups. He filled them, passed one to the blonde. She drained it with a gulp, coughed. Liddell waited until she had dropped back into her chair.

"Tell me about this Duke Simms."

The blonde looked up, licked at her lips. "He's a fellow I played around with some. Met him in a little spot on 52nd Street. He played in the band there, and I was singing with the band — before I got a break and went out on my own." She looked down at her cup, found it empty, held it out for a refill. "Just for the kicks, I started with him. I guess it was crazy. Everybody said it was. But I thought I could turn it on or off whenever I liked. I was wrong." She took a deep slug out of her cup, set it down on the edge of the desk. "When I tried to end it, Duke went crazy. Said he'd never let me go, that he'd kill me. I thought he was just talking, but I decided not to take any unnecessary chances, so I came here to get a bodyguard."

Liddell leaned back in his chair, pinched his nostrils between thumb and forefinger. "Tell me about tonight."

The blonde picked up her cup, drained it, crumpled the cup in her hand. "Lew and I dropped by a couple of places, had a couple of drinks. We were on our way to my place when Duke came up, and grabbed me. When Lew tried to break it up, Duke shot him." She rubbed the side of her arms with the

flat of her hands. "He took me up to a dirty little flat in Harlem . . ." She stood up suddenly, and opened her coat.

She was completely naked under it. The tired lines in her face had no counterpart in her body. Her breasts were firm, pink tipped, her waist trim and narrow. Her legs were long and tapering; her stomach flat and firm. Her breasts and hips were covered with ugly discolored bruises.

"I managed to get away when he went down for a bottle of liquor, and came right here." She leaned over the desk. "I'm afraid to go to the police, Liddell. You've got to help me."

"Where is Duke's place?"

The girl caught her full upper lip between her teeth. "On 114th Street." She gave him a number. "What are you going to do?"

Liddell pulled himself out of his chair, walked over to a cabinet in the corner. He opened it with a small key from his ring, selected a bone-handled .45 and a shoulder harness. He slipped out of his jacket, shrugged into the harness, clipped the .45 in its holster, covered it with his jacket. "First, I'm going to make sure you're in a safe place. Then, I'm going to have a little talk with Duke Simms — before the police get to him."

There was life along 114th Street, even at 2 a.m. A few drunks, white and black, staggered along the street or sat on the steps of the soot-stained

brick buildings, heads sunk between their knees. A yellow faced girl in a bright red dress perked up as Liddell swung into the street, sidled up to him. She whispered to him suggestively, tugged at his sleeve. Liddell shook his head.

The girl lost interest, fell behind.

The number he was looking for was almost in the middle of the block. He walked up the three steps that led to a foul-smelling vestibule. He waited until his eyes had become adjusted to the darkness, then felt his way cautiously to the stairs. Slowly, he climbed to the second floor, paused at the head of the stairs and listened. There was no sound but the steady breathing of a sleeping house.

Liddell walked softly to the front apartment, put his ear against the door, heard nothing. He tugged the .45 from its shoulder holster, tried the knob. It was locked. He fished a thin strip of celluloid from his pocket, slipped it into the crack of the door, manipulated it. After a second he was rewarded by a soft click.

He caught the knob, turned it softly, pushed the door open. For seconds he stood outside the opened door. Finally, he stepped in, kicked the door shut with his heel. He stood fanning the room with his .45, straining his ears for some sound or indication of life. The apartment seemed to be empty.

He crossed the living room to where the bedroom door stood open.

He slid in, gun ready, and felt along the wall for the light switch.

Duke Simms was big and fat. His eyes were almost lost behind discolored mounds of flesh; his jowls hung flabbily. His skin was dark, his hair kinky and a gold tooth glistened between his half-parted purple colored lips. A bullet had ripped through the side of his head, spilled a red cascade down over his jowls onto his naked chest. It was already beginning to congeal.

Liddell frowned, looked around. A pile of woman's clothing lay on a chair, a neatly-folded slip on top. Drawers were pulled out, evidence of a hasty search. Liddell walked over, pulled upon the closet door. It was almost empty except for a collection of plaited whips and reeds. He kicked the door shut, looked around. The dead man's half-closed eyes seemed to follow him.

There was a screech of tires from below, the sound of a car door being opened and slammed. Liddell snapped off the light and crossed to the window. Down below was the familiar green and white of a police squad car. Two uniformed policemen were piling out of the car, sprinting for the front steps. Liddell dropped the corner of the shade, headed for the hall door.

As he closed the door behind him he could hear the heavy steps of the cops on the staircase below. He melted into the shadows, started up the stairs to the floor above, two steps at a time.

Behind him he could hear the running steps of the cops, the opening and slamming of doors. Liddell cleared the third floor landing just as the cops started banging on the door he had just left. He headed for the rear of the landing where a short stair led to a door that opened on the roof. He tugged at it until he could feel the perspiration dripping from his forehead. Finally, he risked striking a match, shielded it with his cupped hand. There was no lock left in the door — it had been nailed shut.

Liddell wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He felt his way back toward the stair-well, tested each step as he started down. He was halfway down when the door below burst open. Flashlights split the darkness of the lower hall, and there was a clatter of heels as the policemen headed out of the apartment.

Liddell froze against the wall, worked his way up to the third floor, out of range of the prying flashlights. He could hear the whispered conference of the policemen on the second floor, realized they were preparing to make a floor to floor search of the building.

He swore under his breath, estimated his chances of making a run for it, trying to take them by surprise, realized he was cornered.

He heard the scrape of the door first, then the hiss.

"This way," a low voice with a soft Spanish accent ordered.

He squinted against the wall of darkness in the hall, could see the dim pale oval of a face up front. He felt his way along the wall, slid through the door.

"Get off your clothes, quick."

Liddell asked no questions, ripped off his coat and shirt, wrapped his shoulder holster in them, bundled them into a chair. He kicked off his shoes as he crossed the room to the bedroom beyond, tore off his pants, jumped into the bed. In a moment, bare warm flesh squeezed against him.

The girl reached up, mussed his hair, smeared sticky lips across his face and mouth. Liddell took a deep breath, tried to still the pounding of his heart.

There were heavy footsteps in the hall, then a pounding on the door.

"Open up!" a heavy voice commanded.

The girl slipped out of bed, covered her nakedness with a kimono, padded out to the door. Liddell could hear her open the door, her shrill voice arguing, the heavier voices of the police. Footsteps clattered across the living room floor, the two cops entered, guns in hand.

"You have no right to break into my house," the girl shrieked at them.

The cops ignored her. "Who's this?" One of them directed the beam of his flashlight at Liddell.

"Mi pichonsita. I'm his sweetheart," she snapped.

"Shake the rest of the place down, Jake." the heavier cop told

his partner. "I'll see the guy." He walked over, pulled the covers back from Liddell, snickered. "How long you been here, fellow?"

"A couple of hours. I —"

"See anything of a guy running around here?"

Liddell shook his head.

The cop turned, looked at the girl appreciatively. She made no attempt to pull the kimono closed. She was small and dark. Her breasts were full.

"You want to watch these hot peppers, mister," the cop told Liddell. "You could get burned."

The girl shrieked at him in Spanish, flung up her skirt, wiggled her hips and made an obscene gesture with a closed fist.

The cop grinned at her. "If I wasn't getting so old . . ."

The other cop returned from a check of the other rooms, shook his head. "Not here, Ed. We better be getting downstairs. Homicide'll be here and there'd be hell if no one was keeping him company."

The heavier cop nodded, looked at the girl. "He ain't likely to go wandering off or get lonely."

They stamped across the floor, slammed the hall door behind them. Liddell could hear their feet going down the stairs, the slam of the apartment door below.

The girl walked over to the bed, snapped on a bed lamp. She stood hands on hips, studied Liddell, seemed to like what she saw.

"Wassa matter, chu-chi? You kill somebody?"

Liddell shook his head. "They've got me mixed up with some one else." He got his first good look at the girl, realized she couldn't have been much over eighteen. "I'd better get going."

The girl's marble-like eyes widened incredulously. "Go? You think I no good?" She stood up. "You stay with Rosa." She rolled her eyes. "Que lindo tu eres. Much fun."

"I'll bet you are," Liddell said, grinning.

The girl slipped the kimono back from her shoulders, stood in front of him tantalizingly. "You stay, chu-chi." She walked to the bed, her breasts swaying, trembling. She slid under the cover, rubbed against him. "You stay."

Liddell sighed, debated the urgency of leaving, lost the decision. "Don't make it any tougher than it is, baby." He swung his legs out of the bed, walked over to where his clothes lay, started dressing. "I've got to keep moving tonight. Maybe I'll be back, huh?"

The girl pouted, stuck her tongue out at him, expressed some doubts as to his masculinity in a rapid flood of Spanish.

He pulled out a roll of bills, peeled off two tens, held them up. "Just to show you how much I like you."

The pout disappeared in a yelp of joy, and the girl was out of the bed in a bound. She grabbed the bills, locked her arms around his neck, smeared him some more with her sticky lipstick.

Liddell finally broke her hold, held her at arm's length. "How am I going to get out of here without using that front door?"

The girl shrugged. "The police — they know you're here. They'll let you pass."

Liddell nodded. "Those two might — but there'll be others coming. Others that I'd just as soon not run into."

Rosa kissed the two bills, folded them lovingly. "I'll show you a way." She pulled a skirt and blouse from the closet, started getting into them. "I'll go with you, show you the way down the fire escape through the back yard." She snapped her fingers. "They'll never catch you."

Johnny Liddell let himself into his apartment with his key. The blonde, Iris Ryder, came out of the bedroom swathed in one of his wool bathrobes. She stared at him wide-eyed, wrinkled her nose.

Liddell tossed his hat at a chair, walked past her, helped himself to a cigarette. "No calls?"

The blonde shook her head. "No calls." She sniffed, looked around. "What's that smell?"

Liddell grunted, blew a double stream of smoke through his nostrils. "What's it smell like?"

The blonde shrugged. "To tell you the truth, it smells like a cut-rate Sadie Thompson."

"Cut rate, hell. She cost me twenty bucks."

The blonde frowned, walked over,

sniffed at him. "It *is* you. What'd you do, fall into a gallon of fifty cent passion water?" She held her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Penetrating, isn't it?"

"That's not what the taxi driver said, but it amounts to the same thing. I can't get the damn smell out of my nostrils." He took another deep drag on his cigarette. "Aren't you going to ask me about your playmate Simms?"

The blonde looked at Liddell. "I figured you'd tell me what happened if you wanted me to know."

"He's dead."

Iris tried to swallow a clenched fist. "You shouldn't have done it, Liddell. I didn't ask you to kill him. I just wanted you to make him leave me alone."

Liddell took a last deep drag on the cigarette, stubbed it out in an ashtray. "He was already dead when I got there. Shot through the head just like Lew. Probably the same gun."

"Did — did you notify the police?"

"They already knew. Almost walked in on me." He took off his jacket, tossed it across a chair, wrinkled his nose at the smell. "That's how I got smelling like this. I lit out of Simms' apartment and hid in a little tamale's bed. She happened to be in it at the time."

"Then the cops don't know you were there?" The blonde licked her lip nervously. "Wouldn't it have been better if you stayed, and —"

Liddell loosened his tie. "Murphy would have been sure I burned the guy down. He would have tied Simms to Lew and put two and two together to get six, and the best I could have gotten out of it was to lose my license." And then he stepped suddenly over to her, his fingers biting deep in her arm.

"You killed Simms, didn't you?" he said.

The girl stared at him, shock in her eyes. She shook her head, mutely.

"You killed him because he had something on you, didn't you?" Liddell said. He shook her violently. "What was it?"

The blonde licked her lips with a pink tongue, breathed heavily. "You're crazy! I was afraid of him. That's why I wanted a bodyguard to—"

"You're a liar. You didn't want a bodyguard. You planned to kill Simms and wanted to set it up so that if you got caught it'd look like self defense. Simms didn't kill Lew Robins. You did."

"No. It wasn't me. It was . . ."

Liddell let go of her wrists, caught her across the side of the face with the palm of his hand knocked her back on the couch. She lay there panting, watching him from under heavy lids.

"It had to be you. Lew Robins was an old hand at this racket. Nobody could get close enough to him to put a hole in his head without him going for his gun. No one except

a client who'd spent the whole evening getting his guard down."

"Why should I?" she said. "Why should I kill him?"

"You look like a drug addict to me . . . and your career as a singer wouldn't flourish one damn bit if *that* became public. My guess is that Simms got hold of some evidence on your addiction and was blackmailing you . . . so you decided to kill him." Liddell walked over to the desk against the window and poured himself a drink.

"You can't prove a bit of it," the blonde sat up, eyed him defiantly. "I'll deny every bit of it. Nobody saw me up there tonight, but they can find someone that can place you there. You can't prove your man was anywhere near me when he was shot. I'll prove he dropped me off at home an hour before and that he was on his way to take care of Simms for me." She grinned. "He and Simms got into a fight, Simms killed him. When I told you about Simms killing Lew Robins, you went crazy up there and killed him." She got up from the couch, stood facing him, "Whose story do you think they're going to believe?"

"Yours."

She grinned almost triumphantly. "Sure they are. Now what are you going to do about it, Liddell?" She walked close to him. "I don't have to mention anything about your being up there, you know. The police could never prove a thing."

She ran her tongue over her lips

until they glistened softly. "I had to get rid of Simms. He was bleeding me white." She shrugged. "It was too bad about the other one, but he was part of the plan. Now I'm free." She slid her arms around his neck, pressed against him, her full breasts against his bare chest. She stood on tiptoe, covered his mouth with hers. He could feel her teeth sinking into his lower lip, her nails clawing into his shoulders.

He reached up, caught her by the back of her hair, pulled her face away. She moaned softly, her eyes half closed. "How long do you think it would be before you got tired of me and decided I had to go?" he growled.

The blonde smiled lazily. "Never." She pushed him down on the couch. "Let me get you a drink, you'll feel better."

She walked over to the desk, spilled some bourbon into a glass, brought it to him. As he raised the glass to his lips, she reached back, tugged his .45 from its holster. He drained the glass, set it down, turned to look into the muzzle of his own gun.

"That was a short romance," he grunted.

"I'm sorry, too, Liddell. But your suicide will wrap things up perfectly." Her finger whitened on the trigger. "It would have been easier all around if the cops had caught you at Simms' place. But this'll have to do. So long, sucker."

Liddell moved fast for a man his size.

He reached up, caught the girl's wrist, twisted it. The roar of the .45 sounded like a cannon in the confined space of the room. The blonde moaned, staggered back.

There was an ugly hole in the whiteness of her bare belly where the slug had gone in. A stream of blood flowed out, she went to her knees. The gun clattered to the floor as she clasped both hands over the wound in a futile effort to stem the flow, toppled over on her back. Her eyes were already glazed as Liddell walked over, looked down at her.

"I promised Murph I'd turn you over to him. But he wanted you while you could still breathe." The girl shuddered once, her eyes went blank, her jaw sagged. Liddell reached over, felt for her pulse, shrugged.

"Well, he can't have everything," he said.



The Crime of My Wife



She was a dumb broad, so I gave it to her straight. You know what I really am?" I told her. "I'm a crook."

BY ROBERT TURNER

SHE CAME OUT of the shower drying herself with one towel, and wearing another one twisted around her head like a turban. She finished the drying process with a sweet little rhumba movement. She had everything it needed. So many moving parts. I sprawled on the bed in my shorts, watching her, trying to get interested.

I blew a smoke ring at the ceiling. "You're wasting your time," I told her. "Get some clothes on."

She gasped. "Well! You've got a nerve."

"Sure. And you've got a beautiful body. That makes a perfect combination." I dragged deep on the cigarette. "We'll make a lot of money."

"What?" she said, "What kind of

talk is that? What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. It's just that the honeymoon is over, literally, figuratively, and every possible way. Now we go to work. That's all. It's simple."

A dozen different reactions played across her face. She put her hands on her hips. "Are you trying to say you're tired of me already, Earl? After being married only a month? Is that it? Be honest, Earl."

"That's a very funny line," I said.

"Me, honest. Honest Earl Gorman, they call me. Except I never did an honest thing in my life. I wouldn't know how."

She dropped the towel and walked toward the bed. She moved fluidly, with just the right amount of undulation. With her green eyes and long, live coppery hair and all that lovely, flawless white flesh, she made a production out of that little walk.

She leaned over me, cupped my face in her hands. She smelled clean and nice after the shower. Two silvery drops of water glistened in the deep cleavage that made her such an eyeful in a low-necked gown. She was really temptation in that position, and she knew it. The old college try.

"Earl!" Her fingers were cool and gentle on my face. "Maybe you're mad about something. What is it? What have I done?"

I said: "Straighten up before all that weight makes you stoop-shouldered. You haven't done anything. It's just that I'm anxious to go to

work and make some money. Nothing else interests me right now. So skip the amorous bride act and listen to what I've got to say."

She straightened as abruptly as though somebody behind her had played a sneaky trick. Her sensually lovely little face was a study. "You mean we — we're broke? You want to go back to New York and —"

"I'm not broke," I stopped her. "Not quite. I've still got a grand. And I'm not going to New York. That stuff about being an account exec with a big ad agency was a lot of snow. I'm going to work right here in Sea City. Right in this hotel. So are you."

She reached up and unwrapped the towel turban from about her head. She got her hands under the thick cascade of shining reddish hair that tumbled about her shoulders and fluffed it out. That long, beautiful hair of hers still got me. Watching her toy with it like that almost weakened me. "Earl," she said. "Please talk sense. I swear I don't know what's happened to you this morning."

"All right, Norma. Listen carefully. You know what I really am?" I didn't wait for her to shake her head. I gave it to her straight. "I'm a confidence man — a crook, to be more blunt. I don't work for a living and never have. Not the way you think. I've got a racket, a good, workable racket that's fairly safe and always pays off."

"You?" She looked almost stupid

with surprise. "What — what kind of a racket, Earl?"

I grinned. "Not what you think. No bang-bang stuff. Look. When I met you a couple of months ago, I needed a new partner. The one I'd worked with for years got smart and decided she didn't need me any more. That was rough. She was real good at this trick. When I spotted you, with that sweet and innocent look and the most beautiful body ever put on a woman, I got a notion that although I usually team up with an experienced gal, maybe I could train you, teach you all the angles. Then something screwy happened."

I got up from the bed, twisted one fist into the palm of the other hand. "You crossed me up. Your heels were too square. You couldn't be pushed over. I'd never run into that before. It got me a little crazy." I shook my head, impatiently. "You know what happened, then. I flipped all the way and married you. I forgot all about what I'd originally planned for you. Until now."

She looked puzzled but not displeased. What I was telling her shocked and hurt but at the same time it was balm for her little ego. I had to do something about that.

"Then I found out what a stupe I really was," I said, quickly. "I learned why I couldn't break you down before, that it wasn't my fault. It was because you're cold turkey, that's why, because there's something wrong with you. You're a statue, a beautiful, warm-fleshed

statue without a touch of life, an ounce of red blood in you."

"Earl, stop!" Her face twisted. "I know I — Earl, I'm sorry, but I — I can't help the way I am."

"You're going to help it. You're going to work for me. Starting tonight. I have a sucker all picked out, such an easy touch you can't possibly louse it up. He'll be a good start for you."

She stood staring at me, wide-eyed, uncomprehending. I went on "This guy gave you the big eye in the lobby the other day. His blood pressure went up, just looking at you. He's a guest here and he hangs out in the bar downstairs, every night. His name is Gibney, Fred Gibney. I've checked him solid and he's our boy. He's married, has a couple of kids and a big, profitable business back in Dubuque. He's loaded with cash. He's also about fifty and ready for a frolic, so you won't have any trouble getting him up here. You'll have him frothing at the mouth inside of ten minutes. Okay, you bring him here and get him in what they call a compromising position, and I get pictures of it. With those pictures we put the bite on him. That's all there is to it. This Gibney ought to be good for ten grand."

She looked sick. Her beautiful, slanting green eyes seemed to go way back in her head. Her mouth worked awhile before she got anything out. "Earl," she said, finally. "You mean you want me to — you actually expect me to — me and this

man, this total stranger — to bring him up here and —”

“You’ve got it,” I stopped her. “You picked it up real fast.”

She backed to a chair, reached down and grabbed up her negligee. She put it on and hugged it about herself, indignantly. “You’re out of your mind,” she said. Her voice grew shrill. “Earl, I’m your wife. If you think for one minute I’m going to —”

There was a lot of it. She stormed and whined and pleaded. I went in and took a shower and the roaring water helped drown out the sound of her voice. When I came out, she’d run out of words and tears. She just sat on the edge of the bed, her face in her hands.

“Look, Norma,” I said. “Your little Erie, Pennsylvania soul is shocked, I know, but it’ll recover. Be smart, be practical. Look at it this way. Five years from now you’ll decide to experiment a little anyhow. So now you just take a running start and we both pick up some big money.”

She looked up at me. Her face was all crumpled from crying. “Earl,” she said. “I — I don’t care what you say, I just couldn’t. I can’t. I —”

There’d been enough of this. I walked over and put my hand on her. My fingers dug in. I kept increasing the pressure. Pain tore at her face and she started to scream. I slapped the sound out of her before it broke. My fingers continued to dig into her flesh until she was

ready to drop. Then I flung her back onto the bed.

“Listen to me. I’m going out. When I come back you’re going to be ready to cooperate. If you don’t, there’ll be another treatment. A real big one. And then I’ll walk out of this hotel and leave you stuck with the five hundred buck tab we’ve run up. So you see, you’re going to work with me because you have no other choice. Think about that.”

I turned and walked out of the room. I spent the afternoon at the race track and had dinner out. It was after eight o’clock when I got back. I took one look at Norma and knew she was ready. She tried to pout and be sullen, but she was so damned relieved to see me back it didn’t last long.

I’d brought a bottle of Scotch with me. I poured a drink and said: “Get out your black dress. It’s perfect for this.”

She didn’t answer. I turned to her and she said in a small voice: “Earl, I — I might make a mess of things, get us into trouble. I won’t know how to act.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll tell you.” I stopped suddenly as a new thought occurred to me, and grinned to myself. “Norma,” I went on, “you don’t know what this means to me. After this, we’ll go away somewhere and I’ll use the dough to invest in a business. I was figuring we’d maybe do it two or three times, get a real stake. But just thinkin’ about you

and — and some other guy has been drivin' me nuts. So this'll be it. I promise you." I knew that would get her.

She changed into the black dress, then, and from the neck down she was perfect. It was black jersey. It had a high neck and long, slit sleeves. It sheathed her hips and was loose and shimmering across the pointed jut of her breasts. It gave her that kind of subdued sexiness that is the most provocative kind. But, crazily, probably subconsciously figuring she was going to do something trampy, so she ought to look the part in some way, she'd smeared on makeup like a Cat Alley gang job.

I shoved her toward the bathroom and said: "Get some of that paint off." When she came out again, she was just right. I gave her the pitch, then. I described Gibney so she couldn't miss him. I said: "Go down to the cocktail lounge. Don't sit too near him. Work on him through the bar mirror. You can figure how to do it. Kind of scared, nervous, not used to that sort of thing, but you're fascinated by him, see. When he makes the play, don't be over-eager, but don't scare him off, either. Then after awhile, tell him all the noise and talk in there is giving you a headache. Say something about a bottle of Scotch in your room, a nightcap, that kind of thing. When you see you've got him nailed, just before you come up, excuse yourself and give me a ring. That'll give me time to hide. Okay?"

She looked at me a long time, without answering. Her eyes went all over my face. She said, softly: "And you're such a nice, clean-cut looking guy, Earl. You — why, you look as though you never had a wrong thought, even. It's hard to believe."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. Next thing, she'd break into a hymn. "You just don't make any mistakes. Hear?"

She nodded. "After — when I get up here — what happens then? What will you do, Earl?"

"Nothing, at first. I'll be hiding in the closet." I walked over to the closet, got out the camera. "Remember, once, you asked me what kind of a camera this was? Well, it's a special kind. You use special films. It takes pictures in the dark. And I'll be nervous in that damn' closet, so don't waste any time. Not too much talk."

Her voice got very small. She was picking at the fingernails of one hand with the other. They were nicely shaped nails, not too damn long and coated with natural polish. But the clicking noise they made now annoyed me. "How — how far do you want me to go, Earl?"

I said quickly: "You leave that up to me. You just keep going until I bust in. You understand? For a big job like this one, we've really got to have the guy hooked. We can't have it so that he can alibi out by saying he was giving you a Finnish massage or something. It's got to be the McCoy, this picture, and he's got to know it."

"Suppose — Earl, suppose he gets rough?"

I put my hand into my pocket, grabbed the .32. "He won't get rough. Now shut up and get going."

She made a last-minute play to talk me out of it, but I didn't even let her get started. She went out. I started in on the bottle of Scotch I'd had sent up. I had to get primed a little. I have more than my share of brass but a trick like this takes all there is in the world. You think it's easy? Try it some time.

An hour went by. I'd checked the camera a dozen times. I'd checked the .32. I'd walked holes in the rug. You couldn't tell about the time. It could take anywhere from fifteen minutes to a couple of hours. Norma had been gone just about seventy-five minutes when the phone jingled. I snatched it up. She sounded scared. She said:

"Earl, we can't. I — I'm frightened. He — he's such a big guy, so much older than I am. Earl, please!"

I squeezed the phone hard. "Shut up and get up here," I told her. "Take too long on this phone and he'll get suspicious. Now get up here with him. There's nothing to worry about."

I hung up before she could answer. I emptied the cigarette butts out of the ash tray. I clicked off the light and fumbled my way into the closet, pulled the door shut, and waited. Sweat soaked my shirt. Finally I heard a key grating in the lock. The light switch clicked on.

It was a crazy thing, but something happened to me at this part of it. I got to feeling as though I was swelling up all over, as though I was going to explode. Blood beat in my ears, so hard I couldn't hear what was being said out there. There was just the low hum of their voices and occasional laughter. It went on and on. Finally the light went off in the room. The darkness seemed to roll over me in sweet, sticky waves and I felt like I was suffocating, a heavy suffocation. It was crazy. I trembled so my knees almost wouldn't hold me.

Then, as the sound and the fury out there increased, after the room had been dark quite awhile, I remembered what I was really here for. I counted to a hundred, to be on the safe side, and then eased the door slowly open. The room was black. I couldn't see anything. I aimed the camera. They couldn't have heard the click of the shutter. I didn't even hear it myself, the racket they were making. When I'd shot the whole roll, I eased the door shut again and waited.

This was the worst part. It seemed an eternity before the light clicked on again, out there. There was mumbling. I heard Norma say: "Please don't. And don't talk. Just go. Please, please go!"

Gibney said something else and in a few moments he went into the bathroom. He came out and spoke again, but Norma kept telling him to go, her voice rising a little, hys-

terically. He got out of the room. I gave him plenty of chance to get away from the door, and then I eased out of the closet. I was excited as hell. I could hardly wait until morning to get the roll developed at the camera shop I'd found that'd handle this kind of a job for fifty bucks.

Norma wasn't looking at me. She was staring up at the ceiling. She just lay there limply, and her pretty face looked funny, sort of blank. I tried to think of something to say, but couldn't. I walked over to the dresser, reached for the three-quarters full bottle of Scotch.

"Get away from that bottle!"

* I turned and watched her get off the bed, walk toward me. She still wasn't looking at me. She was looking at the bottle. She took it out of my hand. "You're not touching this." Some of her hair was hanging half down over one eye. "I'm going to need every drop. Every damned drop. You aren't getting any of it."

"Oh, cut it out, Norma," I told her. "For Christ's sake, you'd think something terrible had happened. Cut the melodramatics, will you?"

She said: "I'm having a lot of firsts with you, Earl." She was breathing heavily. "There was the big first, the night we were married. You know about that. Remember how surprised you were? A little while ago there was another. Now there's going to be a third. I'm going to get good and drunk for the first time in my life."

I blew out breath, exasperatedly.

Then I shrugged. "Help yourself. What good is it going to do?"

"We'll see," she said.

I sat down on a chair and watched her pour a husky shot and drink it. She put another one right on top of it. She turned to me, but she still didn't look at me. She looked past me. "What's next, Earl? When do you get the money? How do you know he'll pay off?"

I grinned. "He'll pay. I'll see him with the pictures tomorrow. Ten grand to a guy like Gibney, isn't much. Not against a lot of hometown disgrace, losing his wife, his family, maybe even his business. Tomorrow he'll be full of remorse and regret. He'll be worried before I even get to him. He'll be all softened up."

She said. "I suppose you're right."

I watched her take two more drinks before I said: "Why don't you quit that, Norma, and get to bed?"

"I'm not sleepy," she said. "I'm thinking. I'm thinking."

Maybe she wasn't tired, but I was. There was a sort of reaction and I was exhausted. In a few minutes I got undressed and crawled under the sheet. The last thing I saw, before sleep swirled over me, was Norma standing by the window, holding a water tumbler half full of whiskey. It didn't bother me much. When she got loaded, she'd pass out, and that would be that. It wasn't.

The sound of breaking glass brought me awake. I was lying on my side. My mind was still sleep-fogged. Somebody touched my shoulder and

I rolled over onto my back, looked up. It was Norma. She was bending over me. Her eyes were puffy, and she was swaying. She almost fell on top of me. She was drunk as a brewery fly. And then she brought her right hand up and I saw what had made the sound of crashing glass. In her hand she held the jagged, broken neck of the empty Scotch bottle.

"You handsome bastard!" she said, thickly. Her hair fell down around her face. She jammed the needle-pointed, razor-edged jags of the broken bottle down full into my face, twisted them, raking me from forehead to chin. She did it three times before I could stop her. She moved back away from the bed, laughing in drunken softness. I got off the bed and hit her. She staggered against the wall, slid down it. She sat there, the crazy, controlled laughter still coming out of her. She said:

"Go ahead, have me arrested. Go ahead, you handsome bastard. Go ahead. I dare you."

I felt nothing in my face, now. It had just gone numb. I watched blood drip to the floor, then turned toward the mirror. For the first time, I realized I was seeing out of only one eye.

The room twisted three times, slowly, then righted itself.

"You tell the police about me, and I'll tell 'em about you too,

Earl," Norma said. She giggled. "You don't dare, do you? I guess you wonder what happened, Earl? It was—funny. Funny. If you hadn't made me do that, tonight, I'd probably have gone on forever, happily married to you. I—I'd never have known what it—what I was really like, that it wasn't me, Earl, it was you. The drunker I got, the clearer the whole thing got."

I looked at her. Her eyes were all dark and excited, in a way I'd never seen them before. Sickly, I remembered what she'd said about Gibney being "another first" with her.

"But I'm not mad at you any more, Earl," she said. "I was before, crazy mad, thinking how everything's going to be changed for me now. Maybe, from now on, I'll get some fun out of life."

I tried to move toward her. My fists doubled up. But all the strength seemed to have run out of my legs. I watched her walk toward the dresser and pick up the camera.

"I'll need some money to get a new start, Earl," she said. "Better take that film you shot tonight. Maybe Mr. Gibney'll want to stake me a little. You won't need it in the hospital, anyhow, will you, Earl?"

She took her suitcase out of the closet as I fell back on the bed. Warm, shimmering, sticky blackness began to roll over me just as the unbearable pain in my face started.



Portrait of a Killer

No. 3 — Robert W. Buchanan, M.D.

BY DAN SONTUP

HE COULD have gotten away with murder. His victim was dead and buried, the police didn't suspect a thing, the death certificate had been properly signed by a respectable physician, and no one — except the killer — knew that a murder had been committed.

But Dr. Buchanan just couldn't keep his mouth shut.

He didn't brag about his crime, as many men have been known to do. Instead, he worried about it — and he just had to talk to someone to reassure himself that he was in the clear. The trouble was, he talked too much.

It all began with whiskey. The doctor liked his daily bottle. He liked it so much that he didn't spill a drop when his wife divorced him — after putting up with his drinking and chasing around for as long as she could stand it. He kept right on guzzling away and chasing after the young women in Greenwich Village, where he lived.

He was a bum — but a bum who liked fancy clothes. He owed money, though, and what little he did get from his practise as a doctor went down his throat in the form of stiff shots of whiskey. So, it wasn't long

before the doctor's wardrobe began to fall apart at the seams. He looked at his worn and stained clothes, and the sight of them forced him to reach for forgetfulness in another drink — and then another one after that. This, of course, used up more of his money, and his clothes began to look worse — and the whole cycle kept on going.

Finally, the doctor got himself some new clothes — but at a price. He had to marry a widow who was well past the age of the women the doctor usually chased. And, to make it worse, she was fat, coarse, loud, and generally a pretty repulsive person to the doctor. But she had money — and he needed new clothes.

So they were married. But they didn't live happily ever afterward. In fact, the doctor's new bride didn't live very long at all.

He put up with her for a while. His brand new wardrobe helped him bear the sight and sound of her, but then even fancy clothes couldn't shake off the misery he was going through. He tried staying out at night, but his wife controlled the money and so controlled the doctor. Of course, he kept on drinking, but even that didn't help much now.

Then the doctor decided he'd had enough. He wanted the money — naturally — but he didn't want his wife. It was as simple as that.

The doctor's task was made even easier by the fact that he was mentioned in his wife's will — mentioned to the extent that he got all her money and possessions when she died. The next step was to eliminate his wife, but the big question there was "how?"

The doctor decided on poison.

He knew a lot about poisons, being a doctor. He had even claimed once that he could mix poisons together so that no traces could be found. He set about mixing his poisons, and the doctor was soon ready to feed them to his loving wife.

He did that — and, once again, he was without a wife.

The morning after the killing — which the doctor who had signed the death certificate said was due to stomach trouble — Dr. Buchanan went to a bartender friend to borrow money for the funeral.

Soon, the will was probated, the doctor paid off his debts, his wardrobe increased, and the doctor was all set to enjoy life.

But a big change came over him.

He began to worry about his crime. It had been perfect, but he just wasn't sure of himself. He knew that he had mentioned poisons to the bartender friend. Dr. Buchanan kept thinking about this until, in desperation, he decided to pump the bartender for some information. He

very pointedly asked the bartender if he thought the police or anyone else would think that he (the doctor) had murdered his wife. Even with a lead like this, though, the bartender didn't suspect a thing. He merely told the doctor that no one would think such a thing.

But this didn't satisfy the dapper little doctor. He took to visiting his wife's grave at night to see if anyone had been trying to dig up the body. He was caught doing this by a watchman, but the doctor bluffed his way out of it.

Then he began to get suspicious of the watchman. He didn't see the watchman again, but he was sure someone was following him. Who else could it be but the police?

After spending some time glancing over his shoulder every time he was out, the doctor took the bull by the horns and stormed into police headquarters and demanded to know why he, a respectable citizen, was being followed.

The police, of course, told him he wasn't being shadowed — but the damage was done. The doctor's actions were suspicious enough to make the police really put a tail on him. After that, it was just a matter of time and ordinary police routine.

His wife's body was exhumed, traces of poisons were found after a very careful autopsy, and the doctor was convicted and executed for the crime that no one had known about.

He literally worried himself into the electric chair.

The End of Fear

*Death followed Mari — right up to Malone's office.
Then it began to follow Malone.*

A John J. Malone Novelette

BY CRAIG RICE



FEAR followed her like a little black cat, padding along behind her, ready to pounce and spring, all claws out, set to strike at any moment. She pushed it aside as she would have pushed away a shadow, pulling the furs a little closer around her throat, puffing so nervously at a cigarette that it be-

came a flaming torch between her chilled fingers.

Was anybody looking at her?

Yes. Everyone was. She could feel the impact of their eyes. Casual strangers, people going home from the movies, from the corner drug-store, from the liquor store. Their eyes were burning holes in her

cheaply carried poise just as her cigarette had burned a hole in the brown blanket she'd thrown away so casually on the beach.

People were looking at her and she was trying to look right back at them, trying to tell them with her eyes; I'm not afraid of *you!*

She found a phone booth at last, fumbled through her coin-purse for a nickel and said to herself as she dialed the number: Things are getting pretty tough, when I have to pay out good money to call a cop.

In a quiet, controlled voice she said, "Police Department?" She paused to catch her breath. "I want to report a body on the beach. Near the foot of Colorado Avenue."

She hung up fast. And the little black cat began to follow her again.

She stopped for a moment at the top of the stairs leading down from the overpass to the beach. There were lights on the beach now where there had been no lights before. Yellow lights, like cats' eyes. Little cats, black cats in the dark.

They would find him any minute now.

She realized suddenly it might be wise to wash the wet sand and blood from her hands and forearms. It was a quick trip down the stairs and up the ocean walk to the little bar where she was known as Mrs. Gabrielle. No time to smile at the bartender now. She paused at the cigarette machine, went on to the room marked HERS and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Not too bad," she told herself. Then all at once it was behind her again, the little black cat whose name was fear.

The scratch on her face wasn't going to show too much. She powdered over it as well as she could, braced herself for the walk through the crowded bar, told herself: *I've made it this far, I'll make it the rest of the way.*

The doorknob was cold and wet in her hands. She clenched it and whispered through her teeth, "Please, in return for all the nickels I ever put in the collection plate in Sunday School, *get me out of this.*" It was a prayer.

She walked through the smoky, crowded bar as calmly and as proudly as the Queen Mary cutting her way through the waves of the Atlantic. Then, once the door was closed behind her, she ran crazily through the wet sand of the next-door parking lot.

Why was it that everything she touched was wet? Wet and sticky, like the sand under her feet right now. Fear and the wet sand were holding her back, until she could reach the ultimate safety of her little sheltered room.

She flung herself through the door and saw his huge bulk waiting, in the little modernistic tin chair in the corner.

Detective Frank Espinoza said "Okay, Mrs. Gabrielle, where is it? The gun, I mean."

Suddenly — maybe it was just

that the little cat had gone to chase someone else through the darkness of ultimate terror—fear left her like a coat; not a coat dropped carelessly on the floor, but a coat carefully placed on a hanger and hung in a closet.

She said “You’ll find it out on the sand.”

“And the briefcase?”

“You’ll find that there, too,” she told him. “Intact.”

Espinoza chuckled. He pulled himself up from his chair and said “I’ll be back, little sweetheart.” He lurched through the door into the darkness. She followed him silently.

For one moment she tried to remember some of the things people had liked about Espinoza. There weren’t enough of them to swing the balance.

Was someone following behind her? Imagination, she told herself. But she didn’t dare look around.

Perhaps the last mistake Espinoza had made in his life was being a trusting fool. At least he might have searched her for the gun. It felt like a kiss in her hand as she squeezed it.

She thought she heard another gun. No. It must have been an echo of her own.

Espinoza’s two hundred and eighty pounds hit the wet sand like a sack dropped from a balloon.

This is a time to pause, she said to herself. This is the time to think things over. No one was going to bother her for a little while, long enough to get moving, get going.

She lit a cigarette, walked into the kitchenette and poured herself a glass of water. No one lived near enough to the little beach house to have heard the shot, and the village’s quota of cops were busy two miles down the stretch of sand at the feet of Colorado Avenue, looking for the body of Jack Barrone.

She pulled the briefcase from behind the sofa, stuck it in her suitcase, piled clothes, lingerie, makeup kit, on top of it. She went through the place, carefully destroying everything that might prove she had ever been there. Then she dressed and made up carefully, slowly.

A cab? No, better do this on foot. She climbed the stairs again, but not as breathlessly now. The lights were still flashing up and down on the beach, but now she could ignore them. She walked into the bus station, bought her ticket.

There was no more fear.

But it wasn’t until the bus was an hour out of town, roaring through the darkness, that she knew for sure she was going to get away with it.

Everything about the room was brown, including its antiseptic smell, left there by the cleaning-woman who had gone an hour before.

The scrubby little man at the desk lit a new cigarette, threw the match inaccurately at the wastebasket, and said, “All right, Espinoza was killed. For my money, he should have been strangled at birth. But that’s beside the point.

We've got an all-points out for the babe, and we'll get her. And I'm going to pin one small medal on her thirty seconds before they close the door on the gas chamber."

"How about the other guy?" a lazy-eyed, husky man asked.

"Not identified yet. We got a bullet out of him, got one out of Espinoza, and dug a third out of the piling in front of her beach house. Ballistics is working on them now. They'll match."

A tall thin man in a brown suit stirred in his chair and said, "It says in the Bill of Rights, or someplace, that the babe is innocent until proven guilty. She probably had a good reason for shooting Espinoza."

The man behind the desk laughed and said, "Who didn't!" He laughed again and spat on the floor.

A fourth man, carrying a camera, said, "Okay, Andy, let's save Espinoza's personality for the obit column, and give me the straight dope on the story. Because right now I've only got until seven A.M., and tomorrow's my day off—I hope!"

"Jerry, you've got as much as we have," Detective Andy Connelly said. "The gal is named Mrs. Gabrielle, as far as we know. We have reason to believe she has more names than you can tattoo on your fat left arm, and believe it or not, the one at the top of the list is Mary Smith."

The tall, thin man blew smoke through his nose. "Of the Minnesota Smiths. Iron mines. She didn't in-

herit all the money in the world, just half of it."

"In that case, Mr. Brown," Andy said, "Why does she bother with smuggling narcotics, and shooting people?" His voice was cold. He didn't like private detectives.

"Just an impulsive child," Mr. Brown said dreamily. He didn't like cops. His face became serious. He turned to the newspaper man. "She *is* impulsive. The estate trustees hired me a few years ago to stick around her, either to keep her out of jams or get her out of them."

"You won't get her out of this one," Andy said, breathing heavily.

Mr. Brown ignored him. "She's been married to a football hero, a movie star and a millionaire. The millionaire's name was Addison. When she was of age, she changed her front name to Meri. When she divorced Addison, she went to court and had her last name changed to Adsmith. For sentimental reasons, she said. That's her legal name, Meri Adsmith. She's used the name Mrs. Gabrielle, she's used a few others, because she likes to get away from it all."

"She's certainly gotten away from it all now," the lazy-eyed man commented.

"She's made parachute jumps, danced in a Broadway show, threatened to cross the Atlantic in a row-boat, and broken the bank twice in Los Vegas. I've trailed her around the world twice, and you won't find much on her in your newspaper's

files because part of my job was keeping her out of print.”

The young reporter was making notes fast.

“Our report on her,” Andy said coldly, “is that she’s twenty-four years old, born in Duluth, Minnesota, five feet, eight inches tall, slender, blonde.”

He went on, “As far as we know, she’s killed two men, and she’s carrying a briefcase full of narcotics — at least, that’s the tip we got.” He spat on the floor. “And we don’t care how many millions she’s inherited.” His eyes were ugly. He looked at the private detective and said, “And you’d better get out of our nice clean police station. I don’t care if you’ve trailed her from Peru to the North Pole — hello?” He picked up the phone.

“Yeah,” he said, making a note. “Yeah?” Finally, “Okay, thanks.”

He gave the tall thin man a leering grin. “They just took her off a bus in Truckee, Nevada. That means we’ll have to fight out extradition. Unless you can persuade her to come back like a nice girl.”

Brown laughed. It wasn’t a nice laugh. He said, “I’ve done it before and I’ll do it again. Besides, I have a hunch you’ll never pin a thing on her.” He paused at the door to light a cigarette. “You can add this to your description. “She’s a damned poor shot, even at close range.”

He left slamming the door. There was a profane silence in the room.

“Funny thing, though, Andy,” the lazy-eyed man said. “After Espinoza and the guy on the beach were dead, after she’d left, but before we got there, someone had searched that beach house like I’ve never seen a place searched before.” He rose, yawned and stretched. “Could be, someone is a *good* shot — and not even at close range.”

The spectacular story of Meri Adsmith’s escape from the Nevada police, and her subsequent disappearance, stayed on page one. It was the story of a young, beautiful and adventurous heiress. Frank Espinoza was dead, and nobody minded too much, except the insurance company that paid off his widow. But Meri Adsmith was news.

The two deputies from whom she had escaped while being transported from one jail to another were properly embarrassed and apologetic. It was an old trick, and they shouldn’t have fallen for it. She had requested a stop at a filling station. They had waited outside for her. After a very long wait, they had knocked discreetly, then loudly, and finally broken in.

The small window had been pried open, and Meri Adsmith had vanished into the Nevada night.

Yes, she’d had a purse, money and jewelry with her. No, no briefcase. There had been no briefcase on her when she had been found on the bus in Truckee, Nevada.

"But," one of the deputies added reassuringly, "we'll pick her up fast. She can't go far in this country, on foot."

They didn't know Meri Adsmith.

Prying up the window hadn't been easy. She bitterly regretted the suitcase left in the sheriff's car, with its set of manicure tools. A nail file from her purse, and her fingernails, had to do. Getting through the window hadn't been easy, either, high up and small as it was. Landing outside, she'd fallen, skinning her knees and elbows on the coarse gravel, and had crouched there for a moment, praying the sound of her fall hadn't attracted attention.

When she felt it was safe, she ran blindly into the darkness, clutching her purse, running without sense of direction. Once she stumbled and fell, and lay still for a moment until she felt she dared go on.

There were lights now from the sheriff's car, there were voices shouting. Her escape had been discovered. It wouldn't be long before a real pursuit would begin. She had to get up and keep going.

She pulled off her high-heeled shoes and stuffed them into the side-pockets of her coat. She longed to light a cigarette, and didn't dare. She drew a long breath, and started running again.

It was rough country. Stones wounded her stocking feet, brush ripped skin from her arms. Once she threw herself on the ground; a

coyote's howl brought her to her feet again. After that, she didn't pause until she felt safe from the sheriff's car.

Now, where? She did light a cigarette then, took two puffs, and ground it out under her heel, regardless of the burn. In the distance she could see a faint light from a window; how near or how far she couldn't tell.

A half hour, an hour, two hours later, she reached the source of the light. It was getting to be hard to tell time or distance now. Cold and hunger and utter weariness were the black cats pursuing her now.

It was a little homestead shanty. She crept up to it and peered through the window. A lighted lantern, a woman washing dishes.

Time for a bold move. Let them turn her in, if luck went against her! She felt through her pocketbook. Three one hundred dollar bills, two twenties, and — praise be — a safety pin. She pinned two hundred dollar bills to the inside of her brassiere, stuffed the rest back in her purse, walked up to the pine-board door and knocked boldly.

The woman opened the door suspiciously, took a second look, and said "My laws! Come in!"

She sniffed. There was the unmistakable odor of home-made corn liquor in the place. She looked at the woman; raw-boned, razor-sharp nose, little pig eyes, thin lips. She said "I ran here — miles — do you have a drink in the house?"

"Laws, yes," the woman said. Her eyes ran quickly over Meri's clothes. Even ripped and soiled as they were, any woman could have guessed their cost. She pulled a mason jar from a shelf, poured a generous glass. "Car wreck?"

Meri shook her head, took a drink, managed not to choke on it. Almost before it was down, she could feel the warmth flowing through her veins. Take a chance, she said to herself, the worst that can happen to you is another arrest. "Sheriff after me. Walked here from filling station —" she pointed.

The woman gasped. "That would be Jansen's. You got here from there? On *foot*? Laws, my laws!" She refilled the glass.

"Please," Meri said, "Could you sell me some clothes? Stockings, a dress of some kind, a coat, anything in the way of a hat. And could I bathe? I'll pay you, and I'll leave you what I've got on." She opened her purse, pulled out the two twenties, and let the hundred dollar bill be seen.

"Laws, yes!" the woman said. She put a kettle of water on the stove. "My clothes ain't fitten for you, but we'll try 'em on." She ran an appraising eye over Meri's furs. "You wash yourself and we'll fix up them scratches. I got a bottle of Dr. Sims' Egyptian Snake Oil. Some hot food ain't gonna hurt you, either." She moved another kettle on the stove.

"And," Meri said, "is there any-

way I could get from here to a bus station? I'll pay for it —"

The woman glanced down at the purse where the hundred dollar bill was as conspicuous as a fireman's parade, and said, "My old man, Smitty, is out making a — delivery. If you don't mind riding in a pick-up truck, he'll take you clear into Reno."

It was an hour before the pickup truck clattered to a stop beside the shanty. By that time Meri had been bathed, rubbed with Dr. Sims Egyptian Snake Oil, fed with hot stew, and clothed in long cotton stockings, a knitted petticoat, a blue wool dress that reached nearly to her ankles, and an aged plaid coat. Her face was bare of makeup, and her damp hair was half hidden under a scarf.

"By the bye," the woman said, caressing the fur on the coat Meri had discarded, "my name is Violet. And if my radio weren't lying to me, your name is Adsmith." She raised a gentling hand. "Never you mind. Friends is friends." She went out into the yard.

A brief and not too noisy conference went on outside. Then the door banged open and Violet said, "This is Smitty, my old man."

Meri opened a sleepy eye and said, "Makes best corn likker this side of the Mississippi."

Smitty was an undersized, bald-headed man, with bow legs and a squint in one eye. He said "Please-da-meetcha . . . tanks-for-de-compli-

mentary. Learn-a-make-it-in-Brooklyn." He drew a breath. "Drive-ya-ta-Reno. When-eva-ya-ready."

Meri opened the other eye and said, "I take it back. He makes the best corn likker *both* sides of the Mississippi."

Smitty gulped down some stew, chased it with corn likker, and said "Le's-go."

Violet said goodbye to them at the truck. "Smitty, he'll get you there fast. But you best figger to hang on. The twenty miles fore you hit the highway is rough, and he don't figger to waste time. He don't love cops more'n you." She waved. "Good luck, and I hope they don't catch you and hang you."

The ride that followed was like something left over from an old nightmare. On the stretch of unpaved road to the highway the truck bounced, bucked, swayed, threatened to fly. On the paved road, Smitty drove as though not only the state police, but the devil himself were in pursuit.

He spoke to her once, shouting over the roar of the motor. "Getcha-nine-forty-plane." He pointed at the motor. "Hoppered-'er-up-m'self." The truck swerved. He put his hand on the wheel just in time.

Twice they were stopped. In a half-doze, Meri heard Smitty explain to state police that he was rushing his wife's sister to a hospital in Reno. Both times a light was flashed on Meri's face, both times they were waved on.

It was nine-thirty when they reached the airport. Meri shook herself to full wakefulness, and unpinned the bills from her brassiere. She had to trust someone now. She handed them to Smitty. "Please — buy my ticket for me. To Chicago." She pulled the other bill from her purse, handed it to him, and said "And thanks for the ride."

He stuffed it in his pocket, took the other two in his hand and ran for the office. Meri closed her eyes and waited. In the distance she could hear a plane's motors warning up. He came back in moments. "Here's a ticket, here's a change." He counted it out, pennies, nickles, dimes, and dollars. Seventy-one dollars and eighty-four cents. He put it in the purse her numbed hands refused to open.

A steward appeared from nowhere. Another steward was right behind him, pushing a wheel chair. "Mrs. Banning?"

Strong arms lifted her into the chair, other strong arms carried her into the plane. A pleasant-faced stewardess said, "Mrs. Banning, your brother-in-law arranged for a wheelchair at Chicago. Let me make you comfortable —"

She was cased into a reclining seat, a blanket was tucked around her. She closed her eyes gratefully. The sound of the motors readying for take-off was the most welcome thing she had ever heard.

Then the police boarded the plane. She could feel their presence

even before she heard their voices explaining to the stewardess. She knew they were walking up the aisle, looking at every passenger. She kept her eyes closed.

Their eyes looked at her and went on.

"Not on this plane," one of them said.

A moment later the motors roared and the plane moved. She thanked all the angels that Smitty was, in his way, a genius. Then she slept.

The wheelchair was waiting for her at the Chicago airport. It took her to the waiting room, through the waiting room, to a taxi. *Do you want an ambulance, Mrs. Banning?* No thanks, a taxi will do. Slower than the airport bus, but safer. Henrotin Hospital please.

Two minutes away from the airport she called to the driver, "Drop me at Marshall Field's."

Would the cabby remember her? It was another chance she had to take.

There wasn't much money left. She went into Marshall Field's basement, quickly selected a beige suit and topcoat, shoes, stockings, a hat.

A fast change in the third floor Ladies' Room. The clothes she had worn on the last lap of her journey went into the trash can.

Makeup. Her hair combed. The new clothes. She examined herself in the mirror. No, this was not the woman who had been taken off the plane in a wheelchair.

But as she stepped out on the

street she began to feel the little black cat behind her again. The little black cat whose name was fear.

"Please, Maggie," John J. Malone said. "I don't want to talk to anybody." The little lawyer looked up unhappily. "I'm a tired man."

"Just a hangover," Maggie said, with no sympathy. "And this is a client. Heaven knows we need one."

Malone groaned. "Send her in."

He looked up. She was lovely, she was beautifully dressed, and her face was white as paper.

"Mr. Malone," she said, "I think I'm in a little trouble."

He looked at her, then down at the front page of the newspaper he'd been reading.

"Miss Adsmith," he said, "you *are* in trouble."

He shoved her into a chair just before she fell.

"Mr. Malone —" she began breathlessly. Her face was now the color of the underside of an oyster.

"Sit still," he ordered her, "and don't talk." He walked to the filing cabinet, opened the drawer marked "Emergency" and pulled out a bottle of gin. After a moment of hesitation he put it back and took out the bottle of brandy he reserved for Important Occasions.

"Here," he said, handing the glass to her. He stopped himself on the verge of offering her a cigar, and lit a cigarette for her instead. Malone, he told himself, you're rattled.

"Did you?" he asked.

She shook her head. The color was coming back in her face. "I did and I didn't."

The little lawyer sighed. "First thing, I've got to hide you out." He frowned, then nodded. Helene was the answer. Yes, the lovely blonde heiress who had been involved with him on more than one murder case was exactly the right answer. He had her on the phone in a matter of minutes.

"Don't ask any questions," he told her. "Get dressed in something simple. Something you can change easily in a hurry. And how fast can you get down to my office?"

"I'm dressed in something simple right now," she said. "And you know how I drive. See you in five minutes."

Malone shuddered. He did know how Helene Justus drove.

"Anything else you want me to do?"

"Yes, he said. "Go to jail. For murder."

Helene said "Whee!" and hung up.

"And now, my dear," Malone said, in what someone had once called his best cell-side manner, "Take it easy and relax, but remember we may not have much time to talk." He refilled her glass.

She nodded. "Malone, it isn't easy to be a very rich woman, and have any fun. That's why I have used a collection of names. Because I like to go places and not be pointed out as that rich Meri Adsmith.

"I like to go to prize fights, and go salmon fishing, and go to gambling houses, and sometimes just live quietly until I get bored."

The little lawyer nodded sympathetically. She looked very much like a helpless child.

"About a month ago I rented a tiny beach house under the name of Mrs. Gabrielle. I was happy there. I could lie in the sun all day, and in the evenings I could walk up the beach to a little bar and chin with the bartender, and play the pinball machines."

She paused, frowned. "A few years ago the trustees hired a private detective to follow me around. A man named John Brown." She looked up at Malone. "It can't be his right name. There can't be anybody really named John Brown."

Malone sighed. He pointed to the telephone directory and said, "My dear child, in that directory alone there is a whole column of John Browns. Go on."

"I didn't mind him. He was very unobtrusive and never bothered me. But I always knew that wherever I went, he was always there. Then — I suddenly decided I wanted to fly down to Ensenada for a weekend. I did, and had a wonderful time.

"Coming back, I just missed the connecting plane. I decided to kill the time sitting in a bar."

"And all this time Mr. Brown was right along?" Malone asked.

She nodded. "I hardly saw him, but I knew he was there. Anyway —

I was sitting there when a stranger came up and introduced himself as Jack Barrone. He called me by my right name — Adsmith and said he'd met me in Mexico City a few years before. I didn't remember him, but you can't remember everybody you meet. We talked, and had a drink, and suddenly he asked if I would do a favor for him. Since I was flying up to Santa Monica in a few hours, would I carry a briefcase up with me — it had to be delivered as soon as possible, because it was full of important legal documents."

Malone said "How did he know you were flying up in a few hours?"

She shook her head. "It never occurred to me to wonder. I just said, 'Why sure.' He gave me the address of the — lawyer, he said — he wanted it delivered to, and it turned out to be right on my way home. I said I'd drop it off. He thanked me, gave me the briefcase, and left."

"And it never occurred to you to wonder what was in the briefcase?" Malone asked.

"No. It was just another briefcase, and it was locked. I still had time to kill, so I went to a movie, and from there to the airport. When we landed, I took a cab out to the beach. The address was about a mile from where I lived, so I dismissed the cab and started to walk home. I like to walk, and it was a lovely night."

"Never mind the weather conditions," Malone said. "Go on fast."

"I got there —" her face began to turn pale again — "no one answered the door. It was late, and I was anxious. I didn't know what to do. Then out on the sand I saw — it."

Malone refilled her glass, fast. "It?"

"The body of the man who'd given me the briefcase. Jack Barrone. He'd been shot — he was covered with wet sand and blood. I got it all over my arms." She shuddered. "I fell and scratched my face. Then I began to get panicky. I got into the light, broke open the briefcase, and saw what was in it."

She told the rest of the story slowly, carefully. "But I don't think I shot Espinoza. I shot at him, but I think I missed him. I'm a very bad shot, and it was dark. And when I think it over, I'd swear I heard another shot."

Malone scowled. "You've probably been traced. We've got to —" He broke off as the door opened and Helene came in. "Helene, this is Meri Adsmith. You've read about her in the papers. I've got to hide her for at least twenty-four hours."

Helene's eyes widened. She looked at Meri, and they grew warm. "You poor baby!"

"If there's an apartment in your hotel —"

"There is," Helene said cheerfully, "on the same floor as ours. Let me at that phone." It was a very dear friend of hers, she explained to the desk clerk, who'd

had a terrific shock and needed complete seclusion. Apartment 310? Fine. Her name? Mrs. Wiverly. She'd be there in a few minutes. Mr. Malone's secretary would bring her up the back elevator.

"Wiverly!" Malone growled. "Good Lord!"

"First thing that came into my mind," Helene said. "And now I'm going to call Dr. Quigley and have him shoot this exhausted child so full of sedatives that she won't even move for twenty-four hours."

"Helene," Malone said admiringly, "you should have been a general." He turned to Meri. "One thing more. Where is the briefcase now? And the gun?"

Wordlessly she opened her purse and took out a key. Malone examined it carefully. It was the key to a parcel locker.

"Oh lord," Malone said. "Women!"

She whispered, "Greyhound bus station. Santa Monica."

He slipped it into his pocket. "Now," he said, "you two trade coats and hats. *Maggie!*"

Maggie came in, looked confusedly from one to the other.

"Take this young lady out of here, fast. Take her by taxi to Mrs. Justus' hotel. Use the back elevator. Apartment 310. Leave word at the desk she is to receive no phone calls and no visitors except Dr. Quigley. Put her to bed and come back fast."

"Mr. Malone," Meri began, her voice shaking, "how can I—"

"No more talking," Malone said firmly. "Git!" He sat down behind his desk and mopped his brow.

"And now," Helene said, "we wait around for the cops to mistake me for Meri Adsmith and march me off to the jailhouse."

"Where," Malone said, "it will take you about five minutes to establish your identity." He pulled out a cigar and lit it.

"In the meantime," she told him, "if you don't satisfy my curiosity—"

When he had finished, adding every detail, she scowled at him. "Crazy enough to be true. But you'll never sell it to a jury. Malone, what are you going to do?"

"I wish I knew," he said. "I wish I knew." For a moment he buried his face in his hands.

"Take a drink and cheer up," Helene said. "You've never lost a client yet."

There were loud voices in the corridor, and heavy footsteps.

"Here they are," Malone said in a soft voice.

Helene pulled her chair closer to his desk. "You see, Mr. Malone, it was like this —"

The door burst open and two unnecessarily husky plain-clothes men walked in. One, the taller, said "That's her. That's her, all right."

The little lawyer looked up indignantly. "What do you mean, breaking in like this? I'm having a conference with my client."

"She may be your client," the

other said, "but she's our prisoner. Come on, Miss Adsmith, let's go."

She looked at Malone, tears beginning to form in her eyes. "But you told me there wouldn't be any trouble. You told me you'd fix everything. That it was just a matter of money."

"Don't worry, my dear," Malone said. "I'll have you out in ten minutes. Or less."

"Not on this charge, you won't," the taller detective said. "Now come along, Miss Adsmith, don't give us any trouble."

Reluctantly, she allowed herself to be led through the door.

Well, that was that, Malone reflected. But what next? He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and ran Meri Adsmith's story over in his mind. Somewhere in it was the answer, but where? If he could just put his mental finger on it —

He was still brooding about it when the phone rang. As he had expected, it was Daniel von Flanagan, the easily angered homicide officer Malone had fought both with and against in a variety of cases.

"Malone!" he roared. "What kind of a trick is this?"

"No trick," Malone said smoothly. "Mrs. Justus was in my office asking me to fix up a two dollar parking ticket for her, when your two dumb cops walk in and pick her up. I kept my mouth shut because I wanted you to find out for yourself just how dumb they were." He added, "She'll probably sue for false arrest."

Von Flanagan groaned. "She won't need to. She's shooting craps with some of the boys right now. Malone, I appeal to you. For years we've been friends. I'm trying to cooperate with California on this. I'm going to vacation there this year. Guy from out there traced her to your office, gave us the tip, and was waiting to identify her positively when Helene Justus walked in."

Malone felt an ice-cube run up and down his spine. It had been a fast job of tracing.

"Malone, for friendship's sake. Where is she?"

"Do you think I'd tell you?" Malone said.

This time the roar from the other end of the phone made the receiver tremble. "Malone, you're hiding out a murder suspect, withholding important information, obstructing justice —"

"Prove any of it," Malone said and hung up. For the first time that day he felt almost happy.

The second call came from Helene who said she was calling from the first corner drugstore she'd been able to find. "Duck soup," she said cheerfully, "and I won twenty-two dollars at dice. Malone, is it all going to be okay?"

"Yes," he said, and suddenly had the feeling that he was telling the truth.

He went back to brooding about the problem. This time it was Maggie who interrupted him.

"I'm thinking," Malone growled.

"A restful change, I imagine," Maggie snapped. "Your client is safely tucked in bed, Dr. Quigley has been in, and she'll sleep for hours. But before he got there, she made a phone call."

Malone stiffened, and said nothing.

"She called the lawyer who manages her estate. No, don't look like that. They don't want to know where she is, and they don't want anyone else to know. All they want is for you to get her out of this." Her eyes softened. "Oh, Malone, you're going to, aren't you?"

"Yes," Malone said for the second time that hour.

"She ordered them to send you a certified check by special messenger. For a retainer. A thousand dollars. It just got here, and I signed for it."

Malone caught his breath, relaxed, and said, "Praise be. Because Heaven knows we're going to need it. Maggie, cash it, get me a round trip plane ticket to Los Angeles and a reservation on the first flight available. And move fast."

Maggie said, "But what are you going to do out there?"

"I don't know yet," Malone said, "but I'll figure it out on the way."

Maggie moved fast. There was a reservation available if he hurried. Malone hurried.

"Take good care of our little client. Don't tell anybody where I've gone. I'll phone."

And even before he left the elevator, the little black cat of fear ap-

peared from nowhere. Only this time, it was trailing Malone.

Someone was following him. He didn't know it, he sensed it. More, he reasoned it. Because he had suddenly realized the one important thing in Meri Adsmith's story that told him who had murdered Frank Espinoza. And the murderer knew he knew.

Malone's little black cat was a full-grown leopard by the time he reached the airport.

He asked for a seat in the rear of the plane. The stewardess smilingly obliged. Stewardesses, waitresses, salesgirls, they always smiled at Malone. He told her that he didn't want to be disturbed with meals, with anything, he only wanted to rest. She smiled again and tucked a blanket over him.

He kept his eyes open while other passengers came on board. But how, he asked himself, can you spot a man following you, when you don't know what he looks like? He tried to size up everyone, and everyone looked like a good honest citizen. Imagination, he told himself. But he knew in his heart it wasn't imagination.

After take-off he slipped into a half-doze, sometimes sleeping, sometimes dreaming, and in the dreams the sound of the motors became the growl of the black cat of fear.

It wasn't until the landing at International Airport that he was fully awake, and then it was because the stewardess was shaking him gently.

He looked around. Everyone else had left the plane. That meant the man who had been following him had already disembarked — and would be waiting outside.

He smiled at the stewardess, said, "Thank you for a pleasant trip," and walked briskly down the runway.

It was safe here at the airport. But this was not the time to think of safety. He moved slowly, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

Was someone watching him?

He went through the airport office, paused to buy a package of cigarettes he didn't want, and looked around. No, no one paid any attention to him. But, he reminded himself, the man wouldn't pay any attention to him.

It seemed like a hundred mile walk to the cab stand.

He ducked into the first one that came along and said, in a voice loud enough to be heard half-way to San Francisco, "Beverly Hills Hotel."

Five minutes later he leaned forward and said to the driver, "Changed my mind. Got to go to Santa Monica first. Don't take a main highway."

"Mister," the driver said, "you being followed?"

"By little elves," Malone said. He added, "Don't mind me. I'm just still asleep. First stop, the bus station."

He leaned back and lit a cigar. It had rained that day, and the streets were still glistening. The neon signs

along the way reflected like Christmas tree lights. Then the cab turned off the highway and went through a succession of odd-angled corners, curves, and occasional straight stretches of half-lighted streets.

With difficulty, Malone restrained himself from looking behind him. If he was being followed, it was too late to do anything about it now.

The driver pulled up at last behind the bus station and said, "You don't hafta go in through the front door. Want I should wait?"

Malone nodded. He looked in through the wide glass doors of the rear entrance. The station was crowded with passengers. Was someone there watching for him? For a brief moment he considered asking the driver to go in with the key, then thought better of it. The crowd was his safety.

"Safety in numbers," he muttered.

"What's that you said?" the driver asked.

"I said, never play the numbers," Malone said, getting out, "You never come out ahead."

He walked into the station, opened the parcel locker, pulled out the brief-case and a grocery brown bag that felt heavy in his hand, and went back to the cab.

"Move," he said. There was sweat on his forehead, and he was breathing hard.

The cab shot down an alley into the next street.

"Police Headquarters," Malone

said, "and go like a jet-propelled rabbit."

The next street was dark, and deserted save for parked cars and unemptied garbage cans. Malone reached for a cigar and began to unwrap it, but it slipped through his fingers. He leaned down and grabbed for it, and at the same moment he heard and felt an explosion that covered him with shattered glass. The cab screamed its way around the next corner.

"I'm taking you the long way," the driver yelled to him.

Right then Malone, crouched on the floor, wouldn't mind having been taken by way of Mars.

It was a little under two minutes, however, when the cab pulled up behind the pleasant California style building that housed the police headquarters.

The driver said, "You okay, Mister?" He helped Malone out. "Somebody shot at you."

Malone nodded. He shook his head to clear it a little. "Missed. Pure accident." He looked things over. One window had been shattered, the other was intact. "Let's see if we can find the bullet."

They found it embedded in the upholstery across from the broken window. Malone slipped it in his pocket, and reached for his wallet. The meter read five-fifty. He pulled out three tens, on second thought adding one more. "Thanks for saving my life. And park here for an hour."

He picked up the briefcase and paper bag and went on into the building.

Everything about the room was still the same, including the antiseptic smell, except that there were only two men in it this time, Detective Andy Connelly and the lazy-eyed man named Johnson, when John J. Malone walked in. There was a small cut on his face from flying glass, his Finchley suit looked as though it had been slept in, which it had, and his face was pale.

He walked up to the desk, put down the briefcase and the gun, and said, "I'm John J. Malone. Chicago lawyer. Here's the stuff you've been looking for."

It was obvious that Connelly was making a great effort to keep calm as he examined the gun and the briefcase. "This must be the gun," he said at last. "Ivor-Johnson 22 — she had a permit for one like that." He opened the briefcase. Gasp. "Malone, do you have any idea how much this is worth?"

"I can guess," Malone said, taking out a cigar. "I could probably retire on it, even with my tastes."

"Now," Connelly said, "where did you find them?"

Malone told him.

Andy Connelly swore, not gently. "And where is the girl?"

"I'll tell you," Malone said, "when you arrest the real murderer — which will probably be any minute now." He finally got the cigar lit. "In the meantime —"

He told the story as Meri had told it to him, the trip to Ensenada, the stranger in the bar in San Diego, and finally, the shooting of Espinoza.

"It all checks," Connelly said. "Barrone and Espinoza were shot with the same gun. A .38. The bullet we dug out of the pilings in front of her place was from a .22. Probably this one."

Malone said, "Someone took advantage of her frequent trips, and assumed names, to smuggle narcotics. That someone saw to it that Barrone would contact her in the San Diego bar. That someone managed to get here with Barrone, probably in the chartered plane that took them over the border on occasion, because this time he wanted to get the whole load himself, and because he could frame her — and here he is now!"

There were steps on the iron stairs outside. Malone went on louder, "Espinoza was a crooked cop. Praise be there aren't many of them, but once in a while you get one."

"He was under investigation," the sleepy-eyed Johnson said, without moving a muscle. "We weed them out."

"She was stuck in San Diego for a few more hours," Malone went on, "with the briefcase. She went to a movie. When she tried to deliver the briefcase, she found Barrone — whom she'd talked to a very short time earlier in San Diego — dead as a mackerel and, from what I've

learned of him, smelling worse." He paused and relit his cigar. "You'll find that Barrone was warned he was under suspicion, and that Meri Adsmith could be talked into carrying his briefcase — oh, innocently of course. I think you'll find the private plane took both Barrone and his partner to Clover Field, where a car would take them to the beach. At the beach, he shot Barrone — not only for the contents of the briefcase, but to frame Meri Adsmith for the murder. He was tired of playing guardian to a scatterbrained heiress. If he got her free, he could blackmail her for life. If he didn't, he still had a small fortune for himself.

"He probably planned to shoot Espinoza. Must have. Because he was waiting behind her beach house when she returned. But she's a smarter girl than he thought." Malone hoped his voice was carrying into the hall, where the sound of footsteps had stopped. "She called the police when she found Barrone's body. She got back to the beach house, panicked, planning to run for it. She always knew she was being followed. She fired a shot at Espinoza — a shot that missed and landed in the pilings. But another shot was fired from behind her, the one that got him."

He paused. He puffed his cigar.

"It gave her just time enough to get away."

It was while he was clouding the office with cigar-smoke that the tall

man in the brown suit walked casually into the office, pointed to Malone, and said, "There he is. He has her hidden somewhere. Her family's estate paid him a thousand dollars to come out and make a deal with you. Why don't you hold him and make him tell where she is?"

There was a silent hostility in the eyes that faced him.

"Mr. Brown," Andy Connelly said, "may I see your gun?"

"If it checks," Malone said wearily, "hold him." He drew a long breath. "I told you the story, and he knows it."

"All right," Brown said. "I'll show it to you. Like this." He had it in his hand before any of the three could move. "And I'm taking this with me. You won't see me again." He backed to the door. "I've taken chances, and I'll take one more."

Malone's foot came down hard on his. He gave a squeal of pain and slid slightly off center. It took just that time for the lazy-eyed, overweight man to cross eight feet of floor.

A little later Andy Connelly said, "Yes, but how did you get the answers? Do you keep a troupe of trained gypsies?"

Malone said, "Meri Adsmith made a point of travelling or vacationing under an assumed name. When I left my office to come out

here, I told my secretary, don't tell anybody where I've gone. That hit it. Only one person could have known where Meri would be, and when — and that was the crooked private detective who was so expert that he could trail her to Chicago and to my office — and then trail me back here. It was just that one little thing."

Lazy-eyes got up and said, "Drive you to the airport. Got time for a few on the way."

"Thanks," Malone said, "and let me use the phone for a collect call." He turned to Andy while he waited and said, "At that, the guy had nerve. Trying to shoot his way out of police headquarters, with a murder rap on him, carrying a briefcase with about a half million bucks worth of dope!"

He turned back to the phone. "Maggie, darling? You can go and wake the sleeping beauty now. Tell her everything is settled. Tell her to spend all day tomorrow making herself beautiful, because she has a date with me for cocktails, dinner, and taking the town to bits and bits."

He yawned. "It's been a busy day and night, but it was worth it. Because all my life, I've wanted a dinner date with a beautiful blonde heiress." He added a phrase.

"Malone!" Maggie said.



CRIME CAVALCADE

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

Accident Insurance for Thieves?

The cashier of a small-town bank in Ohio tensed as a man in front of his window pushed a revolver between the bars of the cage. "This is a stick-up," the bandit said grimly. Suddenly the cartridge cylinder fell out of the gun, rolled across the counter and dropped to the floor inside the cage. The bandit stared for a moment in astonishment, glanced at his impotent weapon, then fled.

In Detroit a stick-up artist entered a store and confronted the cashier. He whipped out his gun — and shot himself in the foot.

Crime does sometimes pay — in laughs. Officers of the law may have a tough time, but the fate of some criminals is positively pitiful.

Consider, for example, the case of the two robbers in an eastern city who boarded a street car and relieved the passengers of their cash. Jumping from the car they ran down an alley to a parallel street and climbed aboard another street car to make their getaway. It was the same car, however, that they had just robbed. The car had made a U-turn at the end of the block.

Honest citizens have no conception of the problems faced by law-

breakers. There's the police, of course. But sometimes fate and the long arm of coincidence step in, and it's more than a hard-working criminal can bear.

A young bandit in Philadelphia boldly entered a drugstore, displayed his gun and was given the contents of the cash register. He backed out of the store, but as he reached the doorway he met two policemen with drawn revolvers. The bandit promptly fainted, and was removed to the prowl car feet first.

Then there was the thief in London who was making his getaway. He jumped into a taxi — only it wasn't a taxi. It was a police car. A similar misfortune was the doom of a robber who entered the First National Bank in Harlingen, Tex., left in such a hurry that his total loot was only 32 cents, and dashed straight into the open door of a patrol car.

Three young robbers in Chicago in 1950 made off with \$27 from a suburban grocery store. One of them, however forgot his bicycle in his rush to get away. The bike was worth \$35.

These have been getaway problems. However, the nature of a thief's loot sometimes creates difficulties.

One robber escaped with some

homing pigeons from a loft at San Bernardino, Calif. The birds were back home within a few hours. A sneak thief made off with a box from a parked car in San Gabriel, Calif. It is hardly likely that he felt the job worth while when he found the box contained rattlesnakes.

Another surprised larcenist was the chap who stole a big limousine in San Francisco. He managed to drive it 16 blocks before he discovered that his vehicle was a coroner's wagon containing a corpse.

Again, there are the troubles criminals run into while in the commission of their crimes. Sometimes it's carelessness.

The burglars who forced entry into a Spokane, Wash., laundry several years ago should have learned safety first. They broke in by a window, but were so badly cut up that all they swiped were some bandages from a first aid kit.

On the other hand, it's usually fate.

It was a destiny of disaster that overtook a Philadelphia holdup man who stopped a car and seized the driver's wallet. The thief's own wallet, containing his identification card, dropped into the car. Police solved that crime in no time.

Another embarrassed crook was the youth who snatched a woman's purse from her parked car in Malibu, Calif., as the owner was approaching the scene. A short time later the victim picked up a familiar-looking hitchhiker and quietly drove him to

the sheriff's office. She got her purse back with contents intact.

Two auto thieves in Cleveland, O., made off with a car they found parked on a deserted street, but they only succeeded in moving it a hundred yards. The car was owned by an amateur inventor who had labored to protect his property. First the brakes locked, next the engine went dead, then the horn started blowing, and finally the headlights began flashing. The frightened thieves fled.

A pickpocket in a Manhattan subway station was removing the billfold of a sleeping man on a bench when his victim suddenly rolled over. The thief's arm was caught under the body of the man. It was still caught when the train rolled to a stop, the doors opened, and two policemen entered and recognized the red-faced pickpocket.

Chaque á Son Goûte

There's no accounting for tastes in loot. It was, perhaps, a lonely crook who broke into the office of a "friendship club" in Long Beach, Calif., and carried off a file containing the names, addresses and physical specifications of several hundred single women. It was probably a scholarly thief who stole 120 sermons written by a theological student in Huntington, Pa.

In Phoenix, Ariz., someone stole a sign reading: "Dog for Sale." On the following night he returned and got the dog. One chap broke into

a parked car in Providence, R. I., and walked off with twelve shrouds belonging to a casket salesman. And in St. Louis, Mo., a man stole a stocking off the leg of Dorothy Barnstone while she was in it.

Perhaps it's interest in their own profession that causes thieves to steal burglar alarms. At any rate nine burglar alarms were taken from the car of a salesman in Newark, N. J. And in Buffalo, N. Y., a man bought two burglar alarm systems for his home. Before he could get them installed, they were stolen.

Good Manners

Thieves are a temperamental lot, displaying all of the characteristics that we term human. Sometimes they are very considerate. One stick-up artist walked into a Chicago cafe several years ago and handed the cashier a note reading: "Madam, this is a holdup. On you rests the responsibility for the aversion of a tragedy."

In Los Angeles two men robbed a motorist, and then told him to climb into the trunk compartment in his car so they could succeed in making their getaway. The victim protested, expressing the belief that he might suffocate. The thoughtful crooks then led him to another car nearby, where they opened the trunk lid and revealed another victim. "Tell this chap he won't smother when we lock him in his car," one of them said.

"You'll get plenty of air," victim

number one replied. Whereupon the robbers again locked him in, and led victim number two back to his own car to be secured!

Two gunmen in Chicago held up a tavern. Despite the fact that their loot was only \$50, they served the four customers drinks, performed a specialty dance, passed out one dollar bills, shook hands with all their victims, and waved goodbye as they made their getaway.

Another characteristic of some crooks is optimism. A good example is the burglar who stole \$21 worth of grass seed and a lawnmower from a Kansas City flower shop. In New Orleans a yegg who believed in signs removed \$600 from the safe of a theater while the picture "Strike It Rich" was being shown on the screen.

This naturally leads to the opportunists — like the thief who snatched a \$3,000 diamond ring from the finger of a Los Angeles woman as she put out her hand to indicate a left turn. Another was the Chicago burglar who attempted to serve on the jury scheduled to try him. He was excused from jury duty by the judge.

Occasionally the characteristic of persistence pops up in crime reports. One robber, chased out of a garage in Iona, Mich., returned two hours later armed with a revolver and relieved the owner of \$200. "This will teach you to treat people better, he said as he pocketed the money.

Finally, there is a small group

that we can only term "smooth operators." One of them removed \$45 from the shoe of a man sleeping in an Oakland, Calif., movie. "Never even felt it," the victim told officers, "and I'm ticklish too!"

In Rochester, N. Y., burglars broke into a service station and escaped with \$75 worth of merchandise and the collar of the watch dog. A lazy, but ingenious, yegg entered an office in Portland, Ore., one holiday several years ago. He telephoned a welder that burglars had jammed his safe in an unsuccessful attempt to open it. The welder came with his equipment and opened the safe, receiving a small fee for his services. The yegg left the scene a few minutes later with \$1,000 in cash.

Then there's the matter of alibis. A burglar in Washington, D. C., was caught red-handed. He told the police that he was merely trying to get money so he could pay his attorney so he could be kept out of jail.

The grand prize for an alibi, however, goes to the chap in Knoxville, Tenn., who was apprehended in 1950 with a stolen 100-pound sack of flour. "Somebody must have put it on my back," he said.

Police Difficulties

A survey of crime reports made during the past few years reveals that the police have had their troubles, too. In Detroit one officer was accused of lifting his fellow

officers' lunches; and a 1949 candidate for sheriff in Indianapolis was sent to prison for conducting his campaign in a stolen automobile. A discharged cop in Tokyo stole clothing and cash from police headquarters.

In 1950 the sheriff's office in St. Joseph, Mo., was broken into and the cornerstone to the old jail was taken.

Another embarrassed officer was the San Antonio, Tex., policeman who was investigating a burglary at a home. The watchdog bit him three times.

Across the sea in Wealdstone, England, a trial was halted when the Bible used for swearing in witnesses disappeared. It was finally located in the handbag of one of the witnesses.

Despite their difficulties, however, the guardians of law and order did make some easy captures. One involved a California youth who wormed his way through a small hole into a grocery store that had been boarded up for repairs. He helped himself to cookies, cakes, fruit and other food. In fact, he ate so much that he couldn't get out through the hole, and found himself trapped. He finally called the police.

Two safecrackers in Athens, Ga., were shamefully apprehended before they could even get started. The cops picked them up as they were mailing a postcard message to pals in Miami. The message read: "Business looks good here."

Freaks

Another thief who couldn't get anywhere was the burglar who forced his way into a home in Venice, Calif., one afternoon several years ago. He tied up the lady of the house and two guests who happened to be present. The doorbell rang, and another guest was ushered in and tied up. Next a baby in an adjoining room started crying, and he released one of the women so she could care for the child. The doorbell rang again, and a salesman was brought in and tied. Then the telephone rang. This was too much! The burglar stared at the phone, used some language considered improper, and left the house empty-handed.

In Houston, Tex., a burglar broke into a truck-stop restaurant. First, he unsuccessfully tried to open a cash register; next he unsuccessfully tried to open a cigarette machine; third, he unsuccessfully tried to open a soft drink dispenser. Finally, he attempted to drive away a semi-trailer, but the vehicle jackknifed. He left in disgust.

A bridegroom in Winnipeg, Manitoba, suddenly realized his pocket had been picked. Gone were his honeymoon tickets and \$6. Police

were called, and the culprit turned out to be the best man. He made restitution and sentence was suspended.

We'll have to go to Medellin, Colombia, for our prize story, but it's worth the trip. A bride-to-be was entertaining guests on the eve of her wedding, when a masked gunman entered the house unseen by guests and forced the girl into her bedroom. There he robbed her of a large sum of money hidden in a bureau drawer.

The quick-thinking girl asked the robber to leave by going down a rear staircase. There might be a scandal, she explained, if her guests saw him slipping out of her bedroom. The gunman agreed, and went through a door she opened. However, the door led into another room without an exit instead of on a stairway.

Quickly locking the door before the thief could turn around, the girl summoned guests who cornered the intruder and ripped the mask from his face. The wedding didn't come off. You see, the gunman was the bridegroom-to-be.

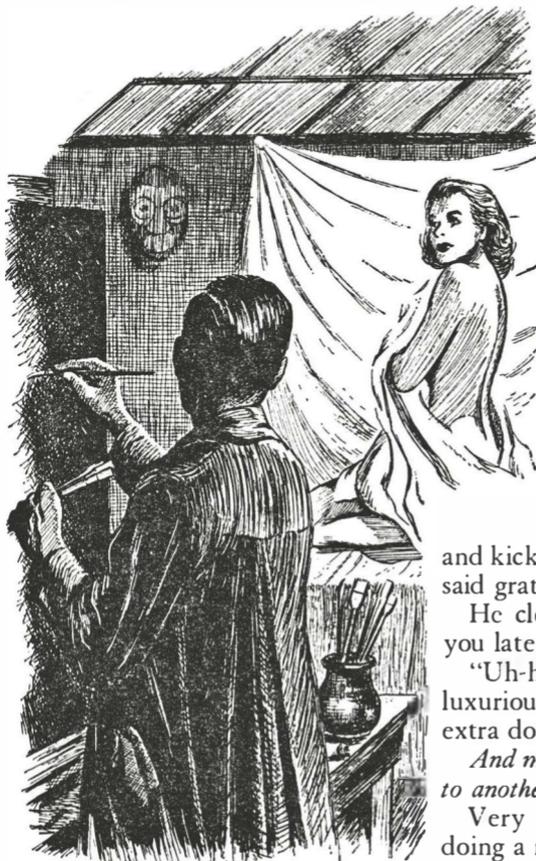
It's mighty tough to fail at anything — even larceny. But when fate joins the battle against crime, the result is a rugged and heart-breaking racket.



Less Perfect

*The stuff in the little amber bottle was wonderful.
It was going to clear up all his problems.
It was going to take care of his wife.*

BY FRANCES CARFI MATRANGA



AT THE SOUND of her high heels clicking in the hall, his heart leaped in his breast, then resumed its natural tempo. He swung his wheel chair around so that he faced the door, and when she entered the room his eyes went over her swiftly.

"Hello, darling," she said. She leaned down and kissed him. "Did you have a good day?"

He nodded, searching her face for some sign. There was none. There never was. Her face was as innocent as always — eyes big and blue beneath hair like polished leather, nose short and tilted, mouth like a rosebud against pale velvet.

How can she look so innocent? he wondered.

She put her bundles down, eased herself gracefully into a chair and kicked off her shoes. "Ahh," she said gratefully. "Feels good."

He cleared his throat. "He kept you late today," he said.

"Uh-huh," she said, stretching luxuriously, "but it means a few extra dollars."

And more time to display your body to another man, he thought.

Very casually he asked, "Is he doing a nude of you?"

She gave him a searching look, then smiled. "No. Semi-nude."

He envisioned her ripe white curves beneath filmy veiling. The most provocative way a woman could pose, he reflected. A dozen times more effective than total nudity.

He forced himself to smile. "I suppose he'll be finished with you soon."

"Couple more sittings," she said. "Then Danielson is going to use me." She slipped her feet back into her shoes, picked up her bundles and walked into the kitchen.

He sat quite still in his wheel chair, his mind spinning. *Danielson*. . . . He had met the artist once. Big blond brute of a fellow, he remembered, with muscles like a fighter. He'd found it hard to believe that Danielson was the same man who was so famous for his nude paintings.

What did artists think about — really — when they painted naked women, he wondered. What, exactly, went through their minds? Could they ever really look at a beautiful naked woman as just a model?

He wheeled his chair to the kitchen doorway and watched his wife as she prepared dinner. *She's my world*, he thought. *I can't stand sharing her with anyone. Anyone!* The thought of her posing in the nude for other men was slowly driving him mad.

She was too beautiful; that was the trouble. Her body was perfect,

and so she was always in demand. If only she'd listened to him, he reflected bitterly. If only she'd given up modeling when he begged her to. He remembered how hurt she'd looked. It was all for the sake of art, she'd said.

Had she really expected him to believe that? *For the sake of art!*

He moistened his lips. "Danielson," he said. "He's married, isn't he?"

She walked into the trap. "He's a bachelor," she said. "I thought I told you."

His hands closed into tight hard fists. *Of course he's a bachelor*, he thought. *Why get married when you can have a beautiful naked woman in your studio all day? And if she happens to be another man's wife, what's the difference?*

Hate filled him, hate for her and for artists and for the world. He was helpless, and she was taking advantage of him. Maybe he was only half a man, but that didn't give his wife a license to be unfaithful. He thought of the amber-colored bottle he had hidden away, remembering how he'd so often been on the verge of using it, only to lose his nerve at the last instant.

They ate their dinner in silence. He watched her stealthily. Once, before the accident three years ago, he had been muscular and virile and demanding, and her passion had matched his own. Now he was a useless cripple.

I can't stand it any longer, he thought. *I'd rather see her dead.*

The summer heat was stifling. Tiny beads of perspiration gleamed on her forehead. She mopped at her face with her apron, and as soon as the meal was over she disappeared into the bedroom. When she came back, she was wholly nude.

He watched her as, completely without self-consciousness, she moved about the table, collecting the dishes. *This is the way those artists see her*, he thought. *She hasn't any shame at all. She enjoys flaunting herself in front of men. She loves it.* Sudden fury welled up inside him.

"I want you to stop modeling!" he shouted. "Get another job, do you hear? Anything but what you're doing now!"

She whirled to face him. She stared at him, and her blue eyes turned cold. "I thought we had straightened that out. I thought you understood."

"I understand too well."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean! Stop being so innocent!"

Her voice was low, lifeless. "You're mistaken."

"Am I?" he said. "You expect me to believe that there's never been anything between you and those artist friends of yours? You mean you could be the way you are now and not one of them ever felt any-

thing except professional interest? That *you* never felt anything? You want me to believe you've denied yourself these last three years?" He broke off. He was sobbing now, his hate a twisted knot in his stomach.

She stared at him with wide eyes, her face white, her hand trembling against her mouth. "Yes," she said so softly it was almost a whisper. "I've felt . . . I've wanted . . . but I never have! Because . . . because I've loved only you."

She turned and ran into the bedroom. He heard the creaking of springs, and then the sound of soft crying.

She admits she's wanted to, he thought. *Does she really expect me to believe the rest?*

He remained where he was until the crying ceased, and then wheeled himself into the bedroom. She lay stretched across the bed, asleep, her form white and lovely in the twilight.

He looked at her loveliness, hating it.

He knew what he must do to make her his.

In a moment he would get out that bottle of carbolic acid.

"Everything will be all right, you'll see," he whispered, and reaching out, he stroked the yet unscarred flesh of her body.



Two O'Clock Blonde

Hull wanted a date with the brunette, but he got the blonde instead. The blonde — and her hard-guy husband . . .

BY JAMES M. CAIN

MY HEART did a throbbing flipflop when the buzzer sounded at last. It was all very well to ask a girl to my hotel suite, but I was new to such stuff, and before this particular girl I could easily look like a hick. It wasn't as if she'd been just another girl, you understand. She was special, and I was serious about her.

The trouble was, for what I was up to, man-of-the-world wouldn't do it. From the girl's looks, accent, manners, and especially the way she was treated by the other guests, I knew she was class. So I



guess 'gentleman' would be more like what I was shooting for. Up until now I'd always figured I was one, but then — up until now — I'd never really been called on to prove it.

I had one last look at my champagne and flowers, riffled the Venetian blind to kill the glare of the sun, and then went to the foyer and opened the door. There she was, her pale face, dark hair, trim figure, and maroon dress making the same lovely picture I had fallen for so hard. Everything was just the same — except the expression in her eyes. It was almost as if she were surprised to see me.

I managed a grin. "Is something wrong?"

She took her time answering me. Finally she shook her head, looked away from me. "No," she said. "Nothing's wrong."

I tried to act natural, but my voice sounded like the bark from a dictating machine. "Come in, come in," I said. "Welcome to my little abode. At least it's comfortable — and private. We'll be able to talk, and —"

She looked at me again and broke out a hard little smile. "Tell me," she said, "does the plane still leave at two?"

That didn't make any more sense than the fact that she'd seemed surprised to see me. I'd told her about the plane when I'd phoned to ask her here. I'd told her quite a lot more, about the construction contract and

how I had closed it, with the binder check in my pocket, and other stuff. But a nervous guy doesn't argue. "I thought I explained about that," I told her. "The plane was booked up solid, and I'm grounded here until tomorrow morning. The home office said to see the town. Have me a really good time. I — thought I'd do it with you."

"I am indeed flattered," she said.

She didn't sound flattered, but I asked her once more to come in, and when she made no move I tried a fresh start. "Don't you think it's time you told me your name?" I asked.

Her eyes studied me carefully. "Zita," she said.

"Just Zita? Nothing more?"

"My family name is Hungarian, somewhat difficult for Americans. Zita does very well."

"Mine's Hull," I said. "Jack Hull."

She didn't say anything. The burn was still in her eyes, and I couldn't understand it. After the several chats we'd had in the dining room and the lobby, while I waited for lawyers, contractors, and the rest during the week I'd been here, I couldn't figure it at all. There wasn't much I could do about it, but there's a limit to what you can take, and I was getting a burn myself.

I was still trying to think of something to say when the door of the elevator opened, and out stepped a cute blonde in a maid's uniform — short skirt and apron and cap, and

all. I'd seen her once or twice around the hotel, but I'd paid no attention to her.

She smiled quick at me, but gasped when she saw who I was talking to. "Mademoiselle!" she said, in the same accent as Zita's. "*Mademoiselle!*" Then she bobbed up and down, bending her knees and straightening them, in what seemed to be meant for bows.

But if Zita minded her being there, she didn't show it at all. She said something to her in Hungarian, and then turned back to me. In English, she said, "This is Maria, Mr. Hull — the girl with whom you have the date."

"I have the — *what?*"

"Your date is with Maria," she said.

I stared at her, and then at Maria, and then at Zita again. If this was a joke, I didn't feel like laughing.

"I heard Maria's telephone conversation with you," Zita said. "I did not know it was you then, of course, but I heard her repeat your room number." She smiled again. "And I heard her say something about wine."

"Listen —" I began.

"Wine . . ." she said. "How romantic."

"I ordered the wine for you," I told her. "My date was with you, not with —"

"Yes, the wine," she said. "Where was it to be served? On the plane perhaps? It leaves at two, you said, when you told me goodbye a little

while ago. You made me feel quite sad. But at two o'clock, with a smile, comes Maria."

I knew by then what had happened, and how important it is to get names straight before you phone — and to make sure of the person you're talking to before you do any asking. It put quite a crimp in my pitch, and I guess I sounded weak when I got the blueprints out and tried to start all over again.

"Please," Zita said. "Don't apologize for the maid. She is very pretty, Mr. Hull. *Very* pretty."

I opened my mouth to say something, but she didn't wait to hear it. She went off down the hall, switching her hips very haughtily. She didn't stop for the elevator, but left by way of the stairs.

I looked at the blonde maid. "Come in, Maria," I said. "We've got a little talking to do."

I had some idea of a message, which Maria could deliver when the situation cooled down a bit. But by the time I'd closed the door and followed Maria into the living room, I'd come to the conclusion that a message was not such a good idea. So I got my wallet out, took out a ten, and handed it to Maria. "I'm sorry," I told her, "that we had to have this mix-up. I think you see the reason. Over the telephone, to an American, one accent sounds pretty much like another. I hope your feelings aren't hurt, and that this little present will help."

Judging by her smile, it helped

quite a lot. But as she started toward the door, something started to nag at me. "Wait a minute," I said. "Sit down."

She sat down on the edge of my sofa, crossing her slim legs while I cogitated, and trying to tug the short skirt down over her knees. It was quite a display of nylon, and it didn't make it any easier for me to think. She was an extremely well-built girl, this Maria, and she had the legs to go with the short skirt. I looked the other way, and tried to figure out this point that had popped into my mind.

"There's an angle I don't get, Maria," I said. "What was she doing here?"

"You mean Mademoiselle Zita?"

I turned around to face her. "What did she come here for?"

"Didn't she tell you?"

"Not a word. Listen, I can't be mistaken. She knew romance was here — with wine ordered, who wouldn't? But she didn't know *I* was here. Until she saw me, I was just Mr. X. Why would she buzz Mr. X?"

I closed my eyes, working on my little mystery, and when I opened them Maria was no longer a maid making a tip. She was a ferret, watching me in a way that told me she knew the answer all right, and hoped to make it pay. That suited me fine. I got out another ten.

"Okay," I said. "Give."

She eyed my wallet.

She eyed my ten-spot.

She picked it up.

"It baffles me," she said.

"Listen," I told her. "I'm paying you."

She walked to the door and opened it part way. She hesitated a moment, and then pushed the door shut again and walked back to where I was standing. She looked me straight in the eye, and now she was smiling. It wasn't an especially pretty smile.

"Well?" I said.

The door buzzer sounded.

"Heavens!" Maria whispered. "I mustn't be seen here. I'd compromise you, Mr. Hull. I'll wait in the bedroom."

I may have wondered, as she ran in there, just what compromising was. But as I stepped into the foyer I was thinking about Zita. I was sure it was she, back to tell me some more.

I turned the knob, and then the door banged into my face. When the bells shook out of my ears, a guy was there. He stood in the middle of the living room floor, a big, thick-shouldered character in Hollywood coat and slacks.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked him. "And what the hell do you want?"

"My wife's all I want, Mister. Where is she?"

"Wife?"

"Quit acting dumb! Where is she?"

I heard the sharp sound of high heels on the floor behind me. "But, Bill!" Maria said. "What is this?"

I looked around at Maria — and got one of the biggest jolts of my life.

She didn't have a stitch on, except those nylons and that little white cap on her head.

"You damned tramp!" Bill yelled, and made a lunge at her.

I took a seat by the window and watched them put on their act — he chasing her around, she backing away — and I woke up at last to what I'd got my foot into. When Maria had gone to the door and opened it part way, it had been a signal to this big bruiser. She couldn't have been wearing anything under her maid's uniform, or she couldn't have gotten so naked so fast. And now I was the sucker in a badger game, caught like a rat in a trap. This pair had me, and unless I wanted the house detective, and maybe even the police, all I could do was grin and kick in when the bite was made.

When the ruckus began to slacken off a bit, I said, "Okay, Bill, I get it. I don't have to be hit with a brick. What is it you're after? Let's hear your pitch." I hadn't seen any bulges on him as he circled around, and it seemed to me that a gun was the last thing he should have if his caper went slightly sour and he had to face some cops. I couldn't be sure, of course, but by then I didn't much give a damn.

But all he did was blink.

"What're you after?" I asked him again.

"Dough, Mister. Just dough."

"How much?"

"How much you got?"

I took out my wallet, squeezed it to show how thick it was, and began dealing out tens, dropping them on the cocktail table. When I'd let eight bills fall, I stopped. "That'll do it," I said.

"Hey," he said, "you got more."

"I think you'll settle for this."

"And what gives you that idea?"

"Well," I said, taking my time, "I figure you for tinhorn chisellers, a pair that'll sell out cheap. It's worth a hundred — this eighty and the twenty I already gave her, which I'm sure she'll tell you about — to get you out of here. I'll just charge it to lessons in life. But for more, I'd just as soon crack it open. You want this money or not?"

It wasn't all just talk. From Maria's eyes as she watched the bills, I knew that for some reason they worried her. She looked at them a second, and then said to me, "Will you please bring me my uniform, Mr. Hull? Like a nice fellow?"

I didn't know why I was being got rid of, but when I went into the bedroom and had a peep through the crack in the door, Maria was down on her knees at the table, holding my tens to the light, looking for the punctures that are sometimes put on marked money. Bill was grumbling at her, but she grumbled back, and I heard her say, "Made-moiselle Zita."

When I heard Zita's name, I saw

red. I made up my mind I'd get to the bottom of this if I had to take the place apart piece by piece. The big problem was how. I sat down on the edge of the bed, and the more I thought about it the madder I got. I glared down at Maria's uniform lying there on the bed beside me, and called her a few choice names under my breath. And then, still glaring at the uniform, I suddenly knew I had it. That uniform was going to be good for something besides showing off Maria's legs.

I grabbed the uniform off the bed, went to the window and threw it out. Then I went back to the sitting room. Maria was still on her knees at the table.

"Lady," I said, "if you want a uniform, you tell Mademoiselle Zita to bring it up here. Call her, and make it quick. Somebody else won't do. I want to talk to *her*."

"But my uniform! Where is it?"

"It's gone," I said.

"Where?"

"Out the window."

She gave a little scream, and Bill hauled off with a barroom haymaker. I stepped inside it and ducked beneath his arm. Then both of them ran to the window, put their heads under the blind, and looked down in the alley. "Good God," Maria said, like there'd been a death in the family. Then she slid out from beneath the blind and ran over to me. "But my money!" she said. "You took my money! The twenty dollars you gave me! I had it in my uniform pocket!

"Oh," I said. "That."

"Give it to me!" she said. "You took it. You —"

"Well, no, Maria, I didn't," I said. "Not that I wouldn't have taken it. Not that you misjudge my character. I'm just that greedy. And just that mean. I didn't remember it, that's all."

"Ah!" she said. "Ah!" She was standing with her feet spread apart and her hands on her hips. I'd never seen a nude woman so completely unconscious of her body as this one was.

Bill came over from the window and slapped her — to make her pipe down with the racket, I suppose — and suddenly I realized I'd pulled a damn good stunt. It was now a question of who was trapped. All three of us were, of course, except that I didn't care any more if the cops barged in or not. I didn't care, but *they* did.

"Get on that phone," I told Maria, "because you don't get out till Zita comes — unless you go with the cops."

"Call," Bill told her. "You got to."

He went to the phone in the foyer, put in the call, and gave Maria the receiver. She talked a long time in Hungarian, and then she hung up and came back into the living room. "She'll be here," she said. "She'll bring me something to wear. And now, Mr. Hull, give me that money you threw out with my —"

I clipped her on the jaw, and I

didn't pull the punch. Bill caught her as she fell, which was his big mistake. I dived over her head and got both hands on his throat, and we all went down together.

I didn't hit him, or take time to pull the girl away, or anything of the kind. I just lay there, squeezing my fingers into his windpipe, while he clawed at my hands and threshed. I let him thresh for one minute, clocking it by my wrist watch, which was as long as I figured him to last.

When he'd quit threshing, and lay there as limp as Maria was, I let go and dragged him away from her. I reached in his pocket and got my eighty dollars, and then I massaged his throat to give him a chance to breathe.

His face was almost black, but he began to fight for air, sounding like a windsucker horse.

I went over to Maria and aimed a kick at her bottom.

It gave me some satisfaction, sinking my toe in like a kick from the 40-yard stripe, and listening to her groan. I did it again, and when she sat up I said, "Once more, baby — what did Zita come here for? You ready to talk about it?"

She opened her mouth to answer me, but then she saw Bill lying there and she gave a yelp and scrambled on all fours to help him.

I had to slap her around a little more to get it through her head that I was the most important guy in this room. And I had asked her a question.

"Come on," I said. "Let's have it.

What was it she came about?"

"To — to warn you," Maria said. "I knew she was becoming suspicious of Bill and me, and —"

She moistened her lips and turned to look at where Bill was still sleeping with noisy gasps.

"The rest of it!" I said. "And hurry!"

She shrugged. "I phoned Bill, right after I talked to you, so that he'd know where to come. I spoke softly — but even so, perhaps Made-moiselle Zita overheard enough to put two and two together."

"You said she came here to warn me," I told her. "Why didn't she go ahead and do it?"

She shrugged again. "You ask her."

She moved over and took Bill in her arms, and I didn't try to stop her. I watched her stroking his face, and I was so surprised to see that a ferret like her could love that I was a second slow on the buzzer when it sounded abruptly.

I was a little groggy from all my exertion by then, but I staggered into the foyer, closed the living room door, and opened the one to the hall.

Sure enough, Zita was there again. She was holding a dress folded across her arms.

I jerked the dress away from her. "Come in, Zita," I said. "Come in and join our fouled-up little party. We're having one hell of a time here, Zita — thanks to the warning you didn't give me."

I took a breath, and was all ready to start in on her again, when she took a step toward me and fired a slap that stung clear down to my heels. Her eyes sparkled with anger.

"What did you expect?" she said. "You dated my maid! *My maid!*"

I stepped out of range and thought over what she'd just said. It could explain a lot, the warning she had expected to give to some poor boob in this suite, and the warning she didn't give when she saw that the boob was me.

The way she'd reacted when she knew it was I who had made the date with Maria was just feminine enough to be compatible with liking me pretty well.

All at once, Bill started that wind-sucking sound in the living room again, a truly frightening sound. Zita grabbed the dress away from me, brushed past me and went in there.

It wasn't more than a minute before Bill went staggering out, and after him Maria, zipping up the dress in back, and crying.

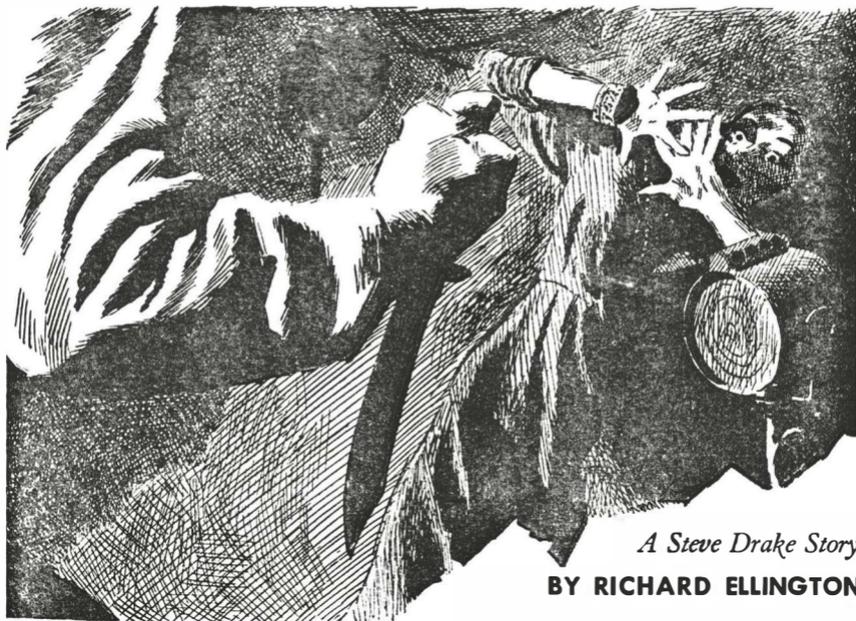
Zita came out of the living room and walked up to me slowly. She apologized then for having slapped me, and I apologized for having spoken so roughly to her, and she nodded at me and I nodded at her.

Pretty soon we were both smiling and there didn't seem to be much point in doing any more apologizing.

And so that was that. Starting from that moment, things moved along very smoothly, and Zita's Hungarian accent never gave me another minute's trouble.

It didn't, that is, until a few afternoons later when we were faced with the novel situation of the bridegroom having to ask the bride what he should fill in under: WOMAN'S FULL NAME — PLEASE PRINT.





A Steve Drake Story

BY RICHARD ELLINGTON

The Ripper

*It had been sixty-three years since Jack the Ripper's last murder.
But now it almost looked as though he were back at work.*

I STOPPED at the entrance to the alley and looked at my watch. It was eleven:twenty-seven, which meant the final curtain at the Mercer Theatre would be down in a few more minutes. I'd been waiting for that all evening. I was tired of waiting. I had business to attend to. I stood there, listening to the muf-

fled drone of the Times Square crowd half a block behind me and peering into the gloom of the narrow alley. A single light fought the darkness some fifty or sixty feet in front of me. That would be the stage door.

I pulled out my handkerchief and wiped the sweat off my face. It was a hot night, hot as only New York

can be in August. You know the sort of night I mean: fat women and undershirted men glower and fan themselves on fire escapes; nerves snap easily; tempers match the thermometer; and it's an effort to pick up a fountain pen. It's not a night to pick up fountain pens, but it might be a night to pick up something else, something like a lonesome lady or the handle of a knife.

I put my handkerchief away and moved on down the alley toward the light. The stage door was open, and the light was spilling out from inside. There was a straight-backed chair in the alley beside the door. A man was sitting in the chair. He was a little man, short and thin; and when I came closer, I saw that he was very old, at least eighty, maybe more. He wore a shiny black suit, a white shirt, black string tie and an old-fashioned cap. It didn't look like the latest thing in summer wear, but it didn't seem to bother him any. He wasn't wasting any sweat. His hair, what I could see of it, was coarse and very white. His face was thin and wrinkled, and there was a crafty expression in his watery, pale-blue eyes. His narrow shoulders were stooped, and he sat slightly bent forward in the chair. He didn't move as I came up to the door, but his eyes studied me carefully. I stopped beside him and motioned with my head toward the open door. "Is the show over yet?"

He shook his head. "No, sir, it ain't. But they'll ring down in just

a minute." His voice was surprisingly strong and clear, and there was a definite cockney accent in it. He studied me some more. "You looking for somebody?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I've got a date."

"With who, sir?"

"One of the chorus girls. I'll just wait out here if you don't mind."

"Oh." His voice had disappointment in it.

I grinned and took cigarettes out of my pocket. "Are you the door-man?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, that I am. Been working here over twenty years." A sly grin spread over his sharp features. "I was born in London and spent my youth in that blessed city. But I came across years ago. I ain't been back now in over sixty years."

I lit my cigarette and blew smoke into the still night air of the alley. "Why not?" I asked.

He shrugged his bent shoulders. "I got my reasons. The past is best done and forgot, I say." The watery eyes squinted suddenly as he looked closer at me. "Have I seen you around here before, Mr. . . . ?"

"Drake. Steve Drake." I smiled at him and shook my head. "And no, you've never seen me before."

"I thought not." There was smug satisfaction in his voice. "I don't usually forget a face. And I've seen plenty of 'em in my time. I've seen 'em come and go right through this very door here. They're all alike, and there ain't a one of them that's any good."

"Who do you mean?"

The old man's face got a sort of crazy look on it, and the cockney accent rose higher as anger flooded it. "Those girls in there, those actresses and chorus girls. They're rotten to the core, every last one of 'em."

I thought I ought to say something. "You seem to know a lot about it."

"I ought to," he said through clenched teeth. "One of 'em done me in proper years ago." There was a second of silence, and then from inside I heard muffled applause as the final curtain came down. The old man leaned forward in his chair and tapped my knee with a gnarled finger. "You're a fool, Mister, a fool if you let one of them girls break your heart. You're a fool if you let 'em do you in."

I kept my eyes on him and felt the sweat trickling down my back. I spoke very softly. "Maybe I don't intend to let anybody do *me* in."

A knowing smile touched the old man's face. "That's it, Mr. Drake," he said. "Sometimes it ain't all to the bad. Sometimes they get what's comin' to 'em. Like that one last week. Right from here she was. Stayed up there primpin' and paintin' her face." His voice dropped lower and took on great importance. "The police think I was the last person to see her alive — that is, except the killer."

I tried hard, but my voice had a slight shakiness in it. "You mean

that redheaded chorus girl who was murdered up on Seventy-first Street?"

"That's the one, that's the one. You must have read the story in the papers."

"Only the headlines. You say she came from this theatre?"

"Yes, sir. Name was Isabel Colins. Pretty as an angel, with bright red hair and soft white skin. Her skin was just like white velvet. You know?"

"Yeah," I said. "I know." My mouth was dry.

"She was goin' home from the bus she took uptown," the old man said. "Nobody knows exactly what happened, but a policeman heard her scream. He found her slumped in a doorway. All bloody she was, and dead."

"A knife?"

"Of course. The police say the killer wasn't satisfied with just murdering her. They say he *multi-lated* her. Oh, he done her in real proper."

"That sounds like a maniac."

The old man said seriously, "It wasn't robbery. Nothing was stolen from her. And it wasn't rape." There was a pause and then he said in a lower voice, "Puts me in mind of Jack the Ripper."

I stared at him. "That was a long time ago."

The doorman nodded and said, "It's been sixty-three years since he disappeared from London. Sixty-three years. . . ." His eyes were no

longer on me, and I knew they were looking far back down the years. "I remember well. He first struck in eighteen-eighty-nine, and he kept it up for over a year. Seven he got, all told, and he done 'em in proper. Tramps they was, every last one of 'em. Jack had a hate for tramps he did, and he didn't spare the knife." There was a crazy expression in his watery blue eyes. "And the notes! He even wrote the policemen notes tellin' where and when he was goin' to strike next. He wrote 'em in blood, real human blood."

"And they never found out who Jack the Ripper was or what happened to him?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Drake, they never did. He just disappeared."

Footsteps sounded down the alley, coming in our direction. I turned and saw the dim figure of a man approaching. He was short and slim, and as he came up I noticed he was wearing evening clothes and a black slouch hat. He held a box of flowers in his hand. His face was ugly and gnome-like, and his head was much too big for his short body. He looked to be about thirty years old.

He said in a soft, carefully modulated voice, "Good evening, Tim."

The doorman looked at him in surprise. "Why, Mr. Croyden, are you back again?"

A sad smile came on the gnome-like face. "Yes, Tim, I'm afraid I'm back again."

"Now look here, Mr. Croyden." The doorman got nimbly to his feet.

He came close to Croyden and tapped him on the chest. "You ought to know better than to come back here again."

"I know, Tim, I know. But I love her. Don't you understand? I've got to see Miss Kelly again. Has she gone home yet?"

"No, she ain't gone home yet. She's up there primpin' and paintin' her face." The doorman jerked his head toward the stage entrance. I leaned up against the wall and waited. There had been three red-heads in the chorus of the show. One of them, Isabel Collins, was dead. The two remaining ones were named June Kelly and Agnes Durkin. They were both beautiful, and about the only way you'd choose between them was in the matter of height. June Kelly was more typical of showgirls, tall and perfectly proportioned, while Agnes Durkin was small for a girl on a chorus line — but just as perfectly proportioned as June.

Croyden was talking again, pleading with the old doorman. "Please, Tim. May I go up to her dressing room?"

The old man's voice was firm. "No, Mr. Croyden, you can't. Miss Kelly says if you bother her again, she'll call the police."

"The police?"

The old man nodded. "She says to me the other night, and these are her very words. She says, 'Tim, I'm through with that little monster and his money. I've got someone else

now, and I'm going to marry him. So if Howard Croyden comes around here again trying to pester me, throw him out. If you don't, I'll call the police!" "

Croyden didn't say anything, and the expression on his face didn't change at all. Eight or ten members of the cast came through the door, said good night to the doorman, and disappeared down the alley. There were some good-looking girls among them, but none of them had red hair. When they were gone, Croyden handed the box of flowers to the old man.

"Tim," he said, "I want you to give these flowers to Miss Kelly. Just tell her I sent them."

The doorman looked doubtfully at the box in his hand. "Well, he said, "I guess that can't do no harm."

"Thanks, Tim," Croyden said. He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a flat pint of whiskey. He unscrewed the top, held up the bottle and smiled ruefully. "Here's to love," he said, and put the bottle to his lips. It was a big drink for such a little man. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and held the bottle out to the doorman. "Have one on me, Tim."

The old man looked around furtively. There was nobody in sight. "Well," he said, "I guess one won't hurt." He took the bottle and gulped greedily. It made his pale eyes even more watery than they'd been before. He coughed and handed the bottle back to Croyden.

Croyden screwed the top on the bottle and put it back in his pocket. "So long," he said and started walking up the alley in the direction of Broadway. His footsteps could be heard for another ten or fifteen seconds, and then the alley was silent.

The doorman shook his head sadly. "I kind of feel sorry for him." He turned and glowered through the open stage door. "That bitch," he muttered. "That dirty no-good bitch."

"Who is this Croyden?" I asked.

"He's a millionaire actor. I hear he's very good at character parts. But he didn't make his millions acting. He inherited his money from his family." He looked at the box of flowers in his hand. "Well, I better take these upstairs to her dressing room." He moved toward the door and complained over his shoulder, "I'm too old to be climbin' three flights of stairs."

I reached out and caught him by the arm. "Let me take them up for you." I grinned down at him. "Didn't I tell you I had a date with one of the girls in this show?" The grin was frozen on my face. It probably wasn't a pretty grin. "Maybe it's with Miss June Kelly."

He smiled knowingly. "Yes," he said in a near-whisper, "yes, maybe it is." He handed me the box of flowers and stepped to one side of the door. "It's number seventeen, the second one from the stairs on the third floor. You'll see it."

I went inside and walked down a narrow hallway to where the stage was. The stairs were back in the gloom behind the sets, iron, open and circular. I went up to the third floor, entered another narrow corridor, and saw a partly open door with the number 17 printed on it.

A woman's angry voice was coming from inside the dressing room. I stopped to listen. The voice rose higher. "June, how could you *do* such a thing? You knew George and I were going to be married."

Another woman's voice, deeper and bored, said, "Darling . . . really!"

"June, listen to me," the first voice said. "Can't you see what you're doing to me? Why should you want George? You have Howard Croyden. And Howard's rich, June. He —"

The woman with the throaty voice laughed. "So is George rich, Agnes. And George is handsome. He doesn't look like a gargoyle."

There was a slight pause, and then the girl called Agnes said in a deadly calm tone, "You'll never live to marry George, June. I — I'll kill you first!"

The sound of a slap exploded inside the room, followed by a sharp cry of pain. There was a short scuffling sound inside the room, the door was pushed completely open, and a small redheaded girl stumbled out into the corridor. I didn't know her personally, but I'd had her pointed out to me. Agnes Durkin.

She slipped and fell in a swirl of skirts above shimmering nylon, but she righted herself quickly and stood there staring wild-eyed through the open door. She was small with a young upthrust figure and exquisite legs. Her hair was a dusky red.

She was panting, but she managed to say, "I will, June, I mean it! I *will* kill you!" She ran past without seeing me, and headed for the stairs at the end of the corridor. The tap-tap of her heels receded quickly into silence.

I went over and stood in the open dressing room door. Another red-headed girl was sitting at a dressing table with her back to me. This one was long-legged, and more lushly curved than Agnes Durkin, and her hair was not quite so dark. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was wearing high-heeled shoes and stockings with fancy clocking at the heels, and nothing else. She was putting the finishing touches to her street makeup.

She saw me in the mirror and whirled around with a startled look in her wide-set green eyes. For just an instant she sat as motionless as the dressing table behind her, and then she gasped and grabbed up a black lace slip and held it before her, trying to make it cover as much of her body as possible. But there was a lot of her body, and not much at all to the slip, and it didn't do very much good.

"Who are you?" she said. "What do you want?"

I walked into the room and held out the box of flowers. "I have some flowers for you, Miss Kelly."

"What gave you the idea you could bring me flowers?" For all the good it was doing her, she might as well have forgotten about the black lace slip. Her green eyes were angry now. "Get out of here!"

I got out my wallet and showed her my license. "My name is Steve Drake," I told her. "I'm a private detective."

She looked at the license, and I looked at her, and she said, "Okay, so you're a private detective. What do you want with me?"

I went over and sat on the edge of her dressing table. She turned to face me, and now she didn't seem to care whether the slip was doing any good or not. "One of the girls in this show was murdered a week ago tonight," I said.

She nodded. "Isabel Collins."

"There wasn't any motive for the killing. It wasn't robbery or rape, so the general consensus of opinion is that the murder was committed by a homicidal maniac."

A look of horror passed over June Kelly's lovely face. "How awful," she murmured.

"Yeah," I said dryly, "that's what Isabel Collins' father thought, too. He came to New York after he heard about her murder. He doesn't think the police are doing all they should to find the killer. So he came to me. He seemed to think a private detective might help." I paused to

light a cigarette. "I'm not so sure he isn't right."

The slip was almost completely forgotten now. She still held on to it, but her hands had lowered unconsciously until the top of the diaphanous black lace was on a level with her waist.

"I don't understand . . ." she said.

"I mean I think I know who the killer is."

She bent forward eagerly. "Who, Mr. Drake?"

I shook my head. "I haven't any proof, and I may be completely wrong. I don't want to do anybody an injustice. Tomorrow I'll tell the police what I suspect. They can take over from there. In the meantime, be careful, Miss Kelly, very, very careful."

"Why?"

I looked her over slowly. "Because, honey, I don't think he likes redheaded chorus girls."

She nodded slowly and moistened her lips. "Yes," she said, "I — I *will* be careful."

"Good." I looked casually around the room. "I don't suppose *you* could tell me anything about the dead girl. I mean anything that might disprove this maniac theory?"

She thought about it a few seconds. She shook her head finally and said, "No, I don't think I can. Everybody liked her, but she didn't have any boy friends at all. She was all wrapped up in her career."

"Did she dress in here with you?"

"No. She had the room at the end of the hall. Number twenty-one." She seemed to remember the slip, and drew it up across her breasts again. But she took her time about it.

"I think I'll look it over," I said. "Would it be locked?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Okay," I said. "Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Drake." She sounded a little wistful, as if she might have liked to get better acquainted.

I went on down the deserted corridor and found the late Isabel Collins' dressing room. The theatre suddenly seemed very quiet, and I guessed that most of the cast and stagehands had gone home for the night. Number twenty-one was unlocked. I turned the light on and went inside. It looked just like any other dressing room.

I started going over the place methodically. Ten minutes of it hadn't bought me anything. Then, outside in the corridor, I heard a door close. Fast feminine footsteps faded quickly off in the direction of the stairs. I guessed it was June Kelly going home. I snapped off the light and stepped into the hall. There was no sound of footsteps or anything else. A single night light burned at the other end of the corridor near the circular stairs. The theatre felt empty and dead. I started walking toward the stairs.

I'd gone maybe ten steps when I heard the scream. It came from

somewhere down on the stage, and it had all the terror of a woman sick with fright. It lasted only a second, cutting off sharply as if the switch on a sound track had been thrown. I had an idea what that meant, but I didn't stop to think about it. I jerked the .38 out of my shoulder clip and headed for the stairs, running quietly on the balls of my feet.

I circled down slowly to the second floor balcony and stopped. There was nothing but silence from below. I leaned over the balcony and looked down.

One thing was out of place down there. It lay in a heap over near the curtain buzzer, just out of line with the corridor leading to the alley. I went the rest of the way down the stairs and moved silently across the floor to within a few feet of the redheaded girl lying there.

June Kelly was wearing a pale green suit now, and she was not nearly so beautiful as she had been a few minutes before. The suit was spattered with blood and the skirt was crumpled up around her thighs. Her head lay back at a grotesque angle with the face turned upward. She lay very still and her golden red hair looked brighter than ever against the dark, slippery blood that was still spreading out on the floor. Her throat had been cut. But that didn't account for all the blood. She'd been mutilated, just as I'd known she would be even before I looked.

There was a soft sound off to my

left. I whirled and ducked back to the stair well and crouched down on the lower steps. Through the iron grill work of the stairs I could see down the length of the corridor. The dim light still burned near the stage door. The door was swinging open now, and a girl stood uncertainly just inside the narrow hallway. Agnes Durkin. The one remaining redhead in the show, and the girl who had threatened to kill June Kelly.

Agnes Durkin moved a few steps down the corridor, stopped and called, "Tim!" There was no answer. Even from where I was I could see the puzzled frown on her face. She glanced down at a piece of paper in her hand, apparently read something she'd already read before, and then walked out onto the stage.

She didn't look around. The dead girl lay off to Agnes' right, but Agnes either didn't know the body was there or its presence wasn't worrying her any. She called again, "Tim, oh, Tim!"

A second door opened and closed somewhere on the other side of the stage beyond the flats of the set. Agnes heard it and took a couple of relieved steps in that direction. Then she stopped, as she apparently saw him. He was still out of my range of vision on the other side of the set.

Agnes indicated the paper in her hand and said in a worried voice, "Tim, your phone message was waiting for me at my hotel when

I got home a few minutes ago. What's happened? Why did you want me to come back here tonight? Is it about June and —" She stopped suddenly and I saw him for the first time.

He was across the stage in the shadows beside the set, and he looked just the same with two exceptions. He still wore the black suit, the white shirt and black tie, and the cap still covered his coarse white hair. But something new had been added. He now wore gloves, and in one hand he held a long bladed knife.

He moved toward Agnes in a sort of crouch and then stopped. The girl said shrilly, "Tim, what on earth —"

He laughed that cackling, crazy laugh and pointed with the knife toward the dead woman on the floor. Agnes backed up a step and said, "What?" She turned and shot a glance over her shoulder. Her eyes saw the thing on the floor and she stared at it for nearly two seconds.

And then she screamed. It was a terrified shriek that rose like a siren and didn't stop. She turned toward the doorman again. Both her hands went to her mouth, and she shook her head wildly. The old man started moving toward her, very slowly. She began backing across the empty backstage, still screaming and shaking her head. Suddenly she whirled and stumbled toward the corridor making tiny sounds.

The old doorman stopped moving and watched her with his crazy eyes. He didn't seem to care whether or not she got away. The girl entered the corridor and ran haltingly toward the stage door, slowing suddenly and staggering against one wall.

The old man couldn't see her any longer, but from where I crouched on the steps I had a perfect view. He couldn't have known what happened next because he was still standing across the stage with the knife in his gloved hand. The girl reeled against the wall and slumped silently down to the floor in an unmistakable faint.

Nearly five seconds passed. The old man made no attempt to follow her. For all he knew she was now out in the alley screaming for the police. He seemed to forget the girl entirely. He turned around slowly, looking the backstage area over as if making sure everything was to his taste. What he saw evidently satisfied him. He started walking fast back in the direction he'd come from.

I got to my feet and pointed the pistol toward him. Then in a loud voice I called, "Hello, Jack!"

He spun around in that same crouch he'd used on the girl. He was over fifty feet away from me, but I could sense the sudden cornered fear in him. I came toward him, and he didn't move. I tried to make my voice as friendly as possible. "Drop the knife, Jack. It's all over now."

The old man said nothing, and he didn't drop the knife.

I stopped walking. "Why didn't you kill Agnes?" I asked. "Was it because you got sick of the blood? Is that what happened in London sixty-three years ago? Is that why you stopped, Jack?"

No sound came from the doorman, but he moved. He was fast, very fast for such an old man. The hand holding the knife whipped back, and the knife came hurtling toward me end-over-end. I ducked sideways, heard the blade clatter against the iron steps, and pulled the trigger of the .38. The pistol roared and jumped in my hand.

The old man turned and scrambled wildly for the flats at the end of the set. I straightened up, took careful aim, and fired again. The roar of the gun was deafening as the sound bounced from wall to wall. The doorman's knees seemed to sag, and he sped up for three steps as if someone had pushed him in the back. Then his knees buckled and he pitched forward against a bench that was standing near the corner of the set. The bench went over, and the old man fell on top of it.

I waited, but no movement came from him. I waited some more, standing there with the pistol in my hand, and then I went across the stage to where he lay beside the overturned bench.

He was very still, the way a man is when he's dead. There's something about it that's unmistakable. His

feet were pointing toward me, and I couldn't see his head. It was hidden by the overturned bench. I put the .38 back in its clip and wondered where the nearest telephone was.

That was when I noticed the black trousers; they weren't as shiny as I remembered, and they had a dark strip of silk down the sides. I quickly went around the bench and looked down.

The old-fashioned cap lay a foot or so away from the body. There was something in it that looked like a bird's nest.

The corpse lay on its face, and the hair was no longer white. It was brown, and curly.

The black suit wasn't worn, shiny, black alpaca. It was a tuxedo, new and expensively tailored. I picked up the cap. It was unmistakably the same one the old doorman had worn. The thing that looked like a bird's nest was the underside of a coarse white wig.

I turned the body over, and at first I didn't recognize him. The makeup was that good. And then it hit me.

I was looking down at the artificially aged face of the late Mr. Howard Croyden.

I stood up and everything fell into place.

So simple! He'd hated the tall, redheaded girl, June Kelly, and had carefully planned to kill her. The old doorman had inadvertently given Croyden his plan. Croyden knew of the old man's hatred for

chorus girls and his fascination for Jack the Ripper.

Croyden was an actor, and a good one in character parts. He realized the possibilities, realized that the old man *could* have been the notorious unknown killer.

The first girl, Isabel Collins, had merely been an innocent victim of the plan.

She'd been part of the stage setting, just a part of the trap for the doorman. Croyden probably hadn't even known her.

And he'd never intended to kill Agnes Durkin at all. That's why he'd let her get away. He'd only wanted her to see him in his makeup, see him from a distance of forty feet in a dim light, see him with a knife in his hand pointing at the dead body of June Kelly. He'd wanted Agnes to run screaming to the police, to swear that the old doorman, Tim, had tried to kill her too.

Tim, the real doorman! I'd forgotten him.

I suddenly remembered the bottle and the drink Croyden had offered him. Croyden had undoubtedly only pretended to drink. The whiskey must have been drugged with something slow-acting, something that would put the old man to sleep at the proper time.

Croyden's timing had been perfect, or nearly so.

He'd known that June Kelly would be one of the last to leave the theatre. She probably always was, and he'd waited for her many times.

But Croyden hadn't realized that I was still upstairs in the dressing rooms when June left. The real doorman would have known that, but Croyden had left us in the alley to go and put his makeup on. An unlucky break for Mr. Croyden.

I remembered the door on the other side of the set, the one Croyden had come out of. I went through it and down a flight of steps.

There was a closed door off to one side. I opened it and looked inside carefully.

A small lamp was burning on a table beside an ancient cot. The old doorman lay on his back. He wasn't breathing.

On the floor close by one of his

dangling hands was a piece of white note paper.

I picked it up and saw crude printing done in what must have been June Kelly's blood. The printing said, "FOR SIXTY-THREE YEARS I'VE FOUGHT THIS URGE AND I CAN'T FIGHT IT ANY MORE. MY WORK IS FINALLY FINISHED. — JACK THE RIPPER."

It was obvious what had happened.

Howard Croyden hadn't only wanted to put the old man to sleep — he'd given him something strong enough to kill him. He'd wanted it to look like suicide leaving no doubts.

I put the paper back where I'd found it and went upstairs to call the police.



Corky couldn't remember what Ed Ritchie had called him. And he couldn't ask him, because the guy was dead.

Kayo

BY ROY CARROLL



HE DIDN'T KNOW what round it was. It didn't matter. He didn't know much of anything, except jogging his fists into the puffed and bloody face before him. He was being careful to keep his punches away from the button. He wasn't going to finish this one in any hurry. He was sore at this guy; he hated the bum. He was going to teach him to keep his dirty mouth shut after this. What was it the guy had said that got him so mad? Corky couldn't remember. He didn't do much clear thinking when he got so angry.

The guy staggered back away from him. From the corner of one eye, Corky saw someone start to come between them. They were going to stop it. He couldn't let that happen. He flung himself forward, without caution. There was nothing to be afraid of. The guy was almost gone. He brought the right in from the hips, close and straight. It landed flush, and the jar told him it was the hardest punch he'd ever thrown. He saw the guy twirl and go down.

Corky started to dance and unlimber, some of the red haze clearing from his eyes now. Someone grabbed him and wrestled him back against something hard. Then there was a big flash of light, sort of, blinding. And everything was clear again. He saw the cop, then, a young Irisher, very clean-cut. Corky's heart jumped. Some trouble about something, when they brought the cops into the ring. What the hell? He'd knocked the guy out clean. He looked toward the opposite corner.

There was no corner. There was the curbstone and another cop, this one older, thicker-bodied, bending over a big man in sports jacket and slacks. The big man's head was bent backward over the curb where he'd fallen.

Corky King blinked, looked down at his hands. There were no gloves. He tried to say something, but his mouth was full of thick stuff and he couldn't get any words out. He spat

but there was no blood. He saw the young cop looking closely at his face.

"A pug, huh," the cop said. "An ex-pug. That guy better not be hurt too bad. It'll go rough with you, boy."

"What?" Corky said. He looked around. He saw that he was leaning against the doorway to Fallon's place, the Third Avenue saloon where he hung out.

He saw Fallon, with the dirty apron over his tub of belly and a couple of customers from the place, a couple of the regulars. Corky grinned at them, his lumpy face twisting. He snorted through his nose.

He looked back at the man at the curb and the old cop.

The old cop straightened, came toward them, reaching back to take the book from his back pocket. He looked at the young cop. "We got a big one," he said. "Dead. Very dead. I think he was that way before he hit the curb. You never saw such a face."

The old cop turned toward Corky. "Hell, how could you hit a guy that much? You're a pro, King, a real tough pro. Couldn't you see what you were doin'?"

Corky's head jerked a little on his neck, but he wasn't aware of it. He was pushing his blood-smearred fists together in front of him. His feet were doing a jig. "I — ah —" he started.

It came to him, then. The sports jacket, the slacks. The guy was Ed Ritchie. Ritchie, who was always

needling him. Ritchie, whose big mouth everybody hated. What were the cops so sore about, then? Lots of times Fallon had told him: "Why do you keep taking it from that guy, Corky? Why don't you stuff his mouth some time? Nobody would mind. Nobody on this earth would care."

He looked toward Fallon. Fallon's eyes, with the big purple pouches under them, were staring at Corky with a funny expression he couldn't make out.

The older cop turned to Fallon. "Did it start in your joint, mister? How did it happen? Tell us just what happened."

"Well, yeah. It started there — I mean they were both in there. They're regular customers, both of 'em. But neither of 'em had too much. Only a couple of beers. They didn't start fightin' inside." Fallon turned pleadingly to one of the other men.

"I don't want to lose no license. You saw it. There was no fight in the place."

He jerked his thumb at Corky. "He just suddenly says to Ritchie, 'Let's you and me go outside a minute,' and Ritchie does. Then they started."

"Why didn't you stop it?" the young cop said. "Even though the other guy was bigger, didn't you know what a pro, an ex-champ like King, could do to him? What were you, enjoying it or something?"

"No, officer," Fallon squealed. He

kept rubbing his puffy white hands on his apron.

"Ask anybody. Ritchie had been needlin' him. He's been doing it for years. It never seemed to bother Corky, though. He always just laughed. But today Ritchie must've said something that got Corky real sore. When they started fightin', we didn't worry too much. Corky ain't fought in five years. And anyhow, he's —"

He cut it off and jumped his eyes toward the little man with the lumpy face and baggy clothes. "We figgered even if Corky did give him some lumps, Ritchie had it comin'. But then, for maybe half a minute, Corky got like something we've never seen before. By the time we decided to step in, Corky gave him the clunker and Ritchie flew —"

"What'd he say?" the old cop broke in. "What'd this Ritchie guy say to tee King off, finally? What'd he say?"

Fallon pulled down his mouth. He knuckled a temple tuft of white hair.

"Why, he must've said . . . Y'know, I don't know. Nobody was payin' much attention to 'em. Ritchie was *always* sittin' next to Corky, *always* ribbin' him. I guess — I can't tell you what he said. I didn't hear."

Corky King was pushing at a loosened tooth with the tip of his tongue. He was watching the way Fallon's stubbly dewlaps danced when he talked.

He jumped in surprise when the cop said: "Hey, you. What did he say, this Ritchie, you had to beat him to death for it?"

"Ritchie?" He looked around at the crowd that had gathered. Everybody was staring at him. He turned back to the cop. This old cop had a glass jaw. Corky could tell by the bone structure.

He said: "Ritchie, he had a nasty mouth, officer. I never paid him no mind, though. I was — used to it. But then he said . . ." His words trailed off. One eye started to jump and twitch. The thickness gathered in Corky's mouth again and he spat. "What did he say? I — I dunno. I don't think I know, now. I don't know what he said."

"God," the young cop said, looking at the other one.

He was a nice looking kid, the young cop, Corky decided. He wished he had a kid like him, a son. He watched the young cop walk toward Ritchie, still sprawled across the curb, and admired the way the cop brandished his stick to clean back the crowd.

Corky wondered briefly why Ritchie didn't get up, the bum. Then he remembered what someone had said. Who was it had said it? He wished he could remember. He asked the faces around him:

"Is Ritchie really dead?" Something like electricity ran through him.

He began to sweat. Corky wished he was dead, too, the way his head

hurt right now. It came to him that Ritchie's brother was an alderman. A lot of other things ran, twisted, through his mind. He thought, "Boy, what they'll do to me for this."

He said: "I didn't mean to, officer, honest."

The older cop took his arm. "Come on with me," he said, tiredly.

"What'll they do to me?" Corky asked. "Don't let 'em put me in no loony bin. I — I'd rather get 'lectrocuted than that."

"God," the cop said. "Why doesn't he shut up? How punchy can you get?"

Corky twisted violently free from the cop's grip.

He clenched his fists and his lips tightened over his teeth. "Don't say that!" he screamed. "Don't ever say that! That's what *he* said. I remember now, and that's what he said!"

His voice rose to a shriek. "Punchy! I'll fix any liar who calls me punchy!"

He hit the old cop twice, hard, then turned in the same blind fury on the young cop who'd come running.

He kept punching at them both until their swinging nightsticks beat him to the pavement.





Rhapsody in Blood

Someone left fifteen thousand in cash in Phil Elliott's apartment, but it didn't please Elliott at all. The money, he knew, could only buy him a prison rap.

A Scott Jordan Novelette

BY HAROLD Q. MASUR

SHE COULD have been sunning herself at Palm Beach or frolicking with impoverished noblemen on the Riviera. She could have gone to Mexico for the bull fights or to Paris for the fashion shows. She chose, instead, to remain in New York, having herself a career as a society warbler, dispensing songs at the Monte Carlo.

And it wasn't the money. Money had nothing to do with it. Because Lynn Elliott was the last survivor in a long line of coupon clippers.

Now, with all her ancestors gone, she needed the help of a trust company and a certified public accountant to keep her income in order. Her tax bill supported a couple of senators and two battleships. But that was only the beginning. In a few years, at the age of thirty, she would come into the bulk

of her inheritance, something astronomical, according to rumor.

And this, by no means, completed an inventory of her assets.

I sat at a ringside table, inspecting them while she sang. Tall, she was, sumptuously and salaciously upholstered, wearing a strapless gown of black sequins that glittered under the amber spot. Long-legged and supple, with hair like black ink pouring around the cream-white shoulders. A low contralto, her voice, breathy, with insinuating overtones.

From behind her came music from Carter Reid's band; from in front, asthmatic breathing from the male contingent. She held her audience, but not with the undying quality of her voice. No, sir, RCA Victor would never come hammering at her door. The appeal was less aural than visual. She knew how to sell a song and her salesmanship was jamming the club every night.

Quite a feat at those prices. Seven-fifty cover, fifteen for breast of guinea hen, and alcoholic refreshments scaled accordingly. A fine revenue producer, the Monte Carlo, operated by that smiling genial boniface of 52nd Street, Milo Gilbert. Customers came to ogle the singing heiress and how pleased he must be with his new attraction.

She finished her song. Enthusiastic applause. Lynn Elliott blew a kiss at Carter Reid and glided out of the spotlight. Came dance music from the bandstand; couples moved out onto the floor, tangled them-

selves and swayed rhythmically.

I turned to my host across the table. "Well, Phil, I know what you mean and I don't blame you for not wanting to let her go."

Phil Elliott looked at me glumly. "But how can I keep her, Scott?"

"You can't," I said. "There's no statute in the books that will force a girl to live with a man after the flame has died. If she wants a divorce, give it to her."

He snorted. "Such advice I can get elsewhere. I came to you because you're a lawyer and you're supposed to know all the angles. So shell out, if you please, counselor, and give me an angle."

I sat back and surveyed him. A big man, Phil, thick-shouldered, with a cynically shrewd face under his wild red-thatched dome. We'd been through school together, played on the same teams, but we hadn't seen each other for years, not since he'd married an heiress and moved out of my league. I'd seen pictures of him in the society columns, Phil Elliott and his lovely wife at Southampton, Phil Elliott on a new polo pony, that sort of thing.

So when he called me this afternoon and asked me to meet him at the Monte Carlo, I'd accepted, though I had no idea what was on his mind. He was waiting for me in the lounge when I arrived, and had briefed me on the situation over cocktails. I knew how much money meant to Phil and I was properly sympathetic with his needs.

The loss of the girl, I gathered, didn't disturb him at all. In each man's life there is room for only one truly great love, but Phil had been too infatuated with himself.

I sipped my champagne. Nothing but the best for Phil Elliott and his guest.

"You want an angle," I said. "Okay. Sit tight. Don't do a thing. There is only one ground for divorce in New York. Infidelity. Behave yourself and she's balked, check-mated."

"Suppose she goes to Reno."

"Her lawyers won't permit it."

He frowned. "Why not?"

"Because New York doesn't recognize the validity of a Reno divorce unless both parties submit to the jurisdiction of the court. If she died, you might come along later, claim the marriage had never been dissolved, and demand your cut of the estate."

Phil's bottom lip bulged thoughtfully behind his tongue for a moment. A slow smile of satisfaction moved his lips.

"Unless," I went on, "they decide to frame you."

"How do you mean?"

"By planting a girl and then raiding your apartment."

He stopped smiling. "I wouldn't put it past them. How can I scotch that?"

"I don't know," I said, and then brightened. "You can move into the Y.M.C.A. They'd never get a girl past the elevator."

He didn't like the suggestion and he sat, concentrating.

"Tell me, Phil," I said. "Is there any chance of a reconciliation?"

A white ring formed around his mouth and I saw the muscles contract in his jaw. "Not since that s.o.b. Carter Reid came along. She walked out on me one week after they met. Wouldn't talk to me for months. And now they're clawing at me all the time, hounding me to give her a divorce." His hand tightened around the glass. "The hell with that, boy! She can have her divorce, but it'll cost plenty. She'll have to pay through the nose."

Ah, I thought, this sounds more like my Phil.

I took a look at the man who had split up his marriage. Carter Reid used no baton. His hands were graceful, his fingers articulate, evoking music from his boys on the bandstand. About medium height, slender, long-haired, easy-going, with sensitive eyes and an ingratiating smile. The school girl's dream. The poet of jazz. And my idea of nothing.

"So," I said to Phil, "then you'd agree to a divorce if she offered you a cash settlement."

He didn't mind saying it himself. But he would have appreciated a little more subtlety on my part. He looked piously down his nose at the glass in his hand.

"You're my lawyer, Scott. What do you suggest?"

"She wants it badly and she can afford to pay for it. Sell."

He made a pretense of indecision, then he shrugged. "Yes, I suppose you're right. There's no sense in trying to hold her." He looked up. "I'd like you to represent me, Scott."

"In what way?"

"Contact her. Try to negotiate a deal. See if you can get me an offer."

I hesitated. What did he think I was, a Syrian rug trader? This was not the kind of practise I had in mind when I studied law. I was on the point of declining, but asked instead, "Does your wife have a lawyer?"

"Morgan, DeWitt, Fairchild & Stanley."

That tipped the balance. Ten senior partners distributed over two whole floors of a Wall Street skyscraper. Locking horns with an outfit like that had certain definite attractions. Don Quixote Jordan, counselor-at-law, tilting against windmills.

I grinned. "Okay, Phil."

He grinned back. "Then we're squared away. Let's bail out of here."

He summoned the waiter, got the tab, extracted four twenties from his wallet, and sat back to wait for change. Carter Reid was playing a rumba and now it was the patrons who provided the floor show, with anatomical churning and a kind of dedicated fervor. What a waste of energy, I thought. And because my attention was focused I did not notice the two men who had moved up unobtrusively on either side of Phil, until one of them spoke.

"Mr. Elliott?"

He glanced up. "That's right."

"Sorry to bother you. Would you mind stepping into the office with us for a moment?" His voice was crisp and businesslike. He was young, but he looked hard, fast, and competent. He wore crew cut hair and a Brooks Brothers suit. His partner was cut from the same cloth, unsmiling and alert.

Phil's brows descended over his eyes in a frown. "What gives here? Who the hell are you?"

A leather folder flipped open under Phil's nose, exposing credentials. "The name is McCabe. Treasury Department. I suggest you come along quietly." His tone was courteous but forceful.

Phil turned to me, at a loss, his eyes questioning, and I nodded gravely. Something was in the wind and I couldn't recommend bucking these lads. "Better go along, son."

"You, too," he said. "This is my lawyer, Scott Jordan. I want him with us."

McCabe lifted an eyebrow and sized me up. His eyes were clear and direct. He nodded. "Let's go."

We threaded our way through the tables, one Treasury man ahead of us, the other bringing up the rear. Past the cocktail lounge and opposite the checkroom was Milo Gilbert's office.

He sat behind his desk, undersized but overfed, with a few strands of black hair combed sideways over a shining skull, with a complexion that seldom saw the sun, bleached

by nature and veined by alcohol, a bloated smiling toad. But there was no humor in his smile now, as he looked up unhappily at Phil. "Mr. Elliott," he said haltingly, "I —"

McCabe cut him short. "Never mind. I'll take it." He swung a chair around. "Sit down, Elliott." Phil sat. A pair of twenty dollar bills appeared in McCabe's hand. "These are two of the bills you gave the waiter, Elliott. Where did you get them?"

"Hold it, Phil," I said. "What's wrong with them?"

"Plenty. They're counterfeit."

"My bills!" exclaimed Phil, suddenly awed.

"The best samples we've seen in years. Engraved and printed by experts. What can you tell us about them?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Phil was at a loss. "I don't know how I got them. From my bank, probably. I cashed a check there today."

McCabe smiled meagerly, lips pinched together.

"Try again, Elliott. These bills are part of a series that have been flooding the city. All banks and trust companies have been alerted. Several of them have passed through this club and you've been a patron ever since they first appeared."

"How did you boys get here so fast?" I asked.

"We've been staked out here for days, waiting for a break. Gilbert had the serial numbers. The waiter

claims he got them from you." McCabe extended his hand. "May I see your wallet, please?"

Phil glanced at me and I nodded. Why not? Refusal would only delay the action. They could get a search warrant easily enough.

McCabe fished out a sheaf of currency, thumbed through it adroitly, found nothing of interest, and returned it to Phil.

"Satisfied?" Phil asked, a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Not quite. Afraid we'll have to inconvenience you a little further. Will you come down town with us?"

"What for?"

"Questioning by the chief," McCabe said.

And an additional search, too, I thought. Passers of counterfeit money seldom carry their stock in the obvious places. Human ingenuity has devised many hiding places and thorough search here would be impractical. If Phil was clean on this thing, he had nothing to worry about.

He appealed to me. "Will you come along, Scott?"

"Are you innocent?"

He looked aggrieved. "What a question!"

"Then you don't need a lawyer. It's late and I've got a big day ahead. Just tell the truth."

"Look, Elliott" — it was Milo Gilbert, palms upturned, very apologetic — "I didn't mean to cause you any trouble. But my hands were tied. It was the waiter who pointed

you out. If you —” He paused as one of the waiters came in with a tab and a fifty dollar bill. Milo examined it, concluded it was a true specimen, made change and dismissed the waiter.

Phil was on his feet, withdrawn and remote. “Okay, boys. Let’s go.”

The Treasury men flagged the first cab and I got in the second. My last view was one of Phil sitting stiffly between them. I mulled it over on the way home. Phil had a good job as a customers’ man with a brokerage firm. He liked easy money, the fast buck, as who doesn’t? But a shady sideline of this nature — I hardly thought so.

A man may get hold of counterfeit bills through any number of innocent channels. Change in a restaurant, a haberdashery store, or the box office of a theatre. If the workmanship is good, it takes a practised eye to tell the real from the false.

In bed, too, I thought about it. Thinking is bad for sleep. I got up and rummaged and swallowed a phenobarbital. Bad habits I was falling into. Maybe I needed a new line of work, with fewer problems, like selling shoes or digging ditches.

The telephone awakened me. At first I was too drugged to grope for it. Then I pried my eyes open. Daylight poured brilliantly through the windows and my head felt like a medicine ball. I got the handset into position and mumbled my name.

“Where the hell have you been,

Scott?” It was Phil, his voice strained. “I need you, boy. Shake a leg and get down here.”

“Where are you?”

“Federal House of Detention.”

I sat erect. “What’s up?”

“All hell has broken loose.” He swallowed audibly. “I’m under arrest.”

“What for?”

“Those government boys woke up some judge last night and got a court order to search my apartment. They came back with fifteen grand in phony bills. Claim they found it in a shoe box hidden in one of my closets.”

I gripped the phone hard. “Who put it there, Phil?”

“How the hell do I know?” Anger toned his voice to a sharp, biting edge. “Santa Claus, maybe. It isn’t mine. Look, I’m being arraigned this morning. Will you plead for me? It —” He paused at an interruption from the other end. “My time is up, Scott. Get on the ball, boy.” The line went dead.

I glanced at my watch. It was nine o’clock and all I had was one hour to get shaved, dressed, tanked up on coffee, and down to the Federal Courthouse on Foley Square.

Phil was the second case for arraignment. His face was lined and worried and he looked generally neglected. He’d had no sleep at all. He managed a wan smile and then he was standing sullenly before the United States Commissioner, with me at his side.

It was only a legal formality. There was plenty of evidence to hold him for indictment. I mentioned bail and the government attorney blew his top. He was a crusty bantam, named Klinger, with a caustic voice. But he had talent, a true virtuoso, and he hauled Phil over the coals, broiling his reputation.

"Bail?" he snapped. "For this man? No, sir, your honor. Fifteen thousand dollars in counterfeit money was found in his apartment. How much more is hidden elsewhere, we don't know. I submit this man is one of the kingpins in a vicious ring responsible for debasing our national currency and undermining our economic system. His attitude has been nothing but contempt and scorn. He steadfastly refuses to cooperate. If this man is put free on bail, he'll be out of the country on the first available plane."

The Commissioner agreed with him. But he set bail anyway. A sky-scraping one hundred thousand dollars.

I put on my own performing, crying out in anguish, pleading and cajoling, to no avail. The Commissioner was adamant. He couldn't be moved. Phil went back to the House of Detention on West Street while I scouted around trying to raise bail.

Try it sometime.

The surety companies wouldn't touch the deal because Phil had no resources of his own, and the independent bondsmen never accumulated their pile taking risks. Who

knew when the case would be reached. In the meantime you couldn't let a man rot in jail. I worked on it all morning and finally got it arranged.

Barney Nash posted the bond.

He was my last choice. I seldom did business with Barney. Mostly he worked for the top men in the rackets, bailing out their runners, bookies, collectors, and happiness girls. He whistled when he first heard the sum.

"What did this guy do?" he said. "Try to blow up the United Nations?"

"He did nothing, Barney. He's accused of counterfeiting."

"But a hundred grand. That's a lot of money, counselor, even if you say it fast. Who is this Phil Elliott?"

"A client of mine."

"Yeah. That's what you said. But does he own any real estate, bonds, securities? Can he put up any collateral?"

"If he did, he wouldn't need you, Barney."

Barney was big, heavily fleshed, and swarthy, with a weakness for young blondes and aged scotch. His small beady eyes rested on mine. "You know this guy pretty well, counselor?"

"He's my friend."

"Will he stick around for the trial? Maybe you spring him, and he takes a powder. My hundred grand is up the creek."

"Elliott is a responsible citizen."

Barney Nash gave me a horse

laugh. "That's a hot one. With fifteen grand fresh off his own private printing press."

"Alleged, Barney, not proven."

He sucked on a tooth, considering it.

"He won't lam out," I said quickly. "Take my word for it."

After a moment, Barney nodded briefly. "Okay, counselor, on your say so."

Arrangements were made and the gates swung open, liberating Phil. I was waiting for him and I took him around to a small bar near the prison. He was badly in need of a shave, but he was more in need of a drink. A double brandy went into him like a shot of aspirin. I looked at him steadily.

"All right, Phil, tell me about it."

He said nothing.

"Listen, boy, you're in a jam. You're fooling with Uncle Sam now and those boys mean business. I can't help you unless you come clean."

He had no words.

"You want me to walk out on you?" I said.

His face was carved from wood. "Don't worry about it, Scott. I've got my freedom and I'll handle it."

"How, for Pete's sake!"

He leaned across the table, eyes bright. "Ever hear of a guy named Homer?"

"The Greek poet?"

"No. Louis Homer, the private eye."

I slapped my glass down on the table. "Look, Phil. Stay away from

that bird. He's no good. He's got a bad reputation. You'll wind up—"

He made an impatient gesture. "Stop talking to me like a Dutch Uncle. I'm not a kid. Louis Homer's a very shrewd operator."

"You mean crafty."

Phil's jaw was set. "This job needs a full time investigator. You're too busy with your law practise. I need professional help on it. You handle the divorce angle and leave this other thing to me." He got to his feet, wheeled, and headed for the door.

I finished my drink slowly. A night behind bars had changed Phil. His eyes were grim and there was an ugly cast to his mouth. After a while I stood up and went to the telephone booth. Information gave me Lynn Elliott's number.

Her voice held a note of genuine surprise when I identified myself and stated my business.

"Well," she said. "This is a surprise indeed. You mean Phil is actually willing to give me a divorce?"

"It might be arranged."

She caught the implication at once. "You don't have to be so discreet. I'm sure we understand each other. Naturally there's a price involved. My Phil is running true to form." She laughed lightly. "He's in trouble, I've heard, and I suppose he needs money for lawyers. They'll bleed him, of course, but that's his affair. Yes, Mr. Jordan, you've caught me in a receptive mood. When can we discuss it?"

"Tomorrow morning; my office."

She demurred apologetically. "I'm terribly sorry, but I work late and like to sleep mornings." She hesitated. "Could you drop by at the Monte Carlo?"

"Tonight?"

"Yes, between shows. Ten o'clock, shall we say?"

I agreed and we broke the connection.

There was a lot of work to be done at the office. After all, I had other clients besides Phil. I kept at it steadily until nine o'clock, left the deserted building, dined alone, and finally sauntered forth to the Monte Carlo on schedule.

The early show had just finished. Carter Reid was making dance music. Tobacco smoke hung over the swaying couples like a disembodied cloud. Business was brisk, the room bulging with customers. Alcoholic voices mingled with the blaring of wind instruments in an unholy din. Synthetic excitement for the bored business men and their plaster-faced ladies.

A waiter directed me to Lynn Elliott's room and I knocked. "Come in," she said.

She sat at a dressing table, touching up her face. Her gown tonight was a tight-fitting sheath of gold lamé. She glanced at me briefly through the mirror from under darkly shadowed lids, her eyes strangely incurious.

"Sit down, Mr. Jordan. You look familiar. Weren't you here last night with Phil?"

I said yes, really noticing her eyes for the first time. They were dark and opaque, without depth or expression, like polished agates, and I had a queer forboding sensation.

"So Phil is finally coming around," she said lazily, accenting the arch of her left brow with a pencil. "Just what did you have in mind, Mr. Jordan?"

"That depends."

She laughed coolly. "On my offer, I suppose?"

"Partly."

"How much does he want?"

There was no need for subtlety or delicacy. I took my cue from her own bluntness. "You know how much it's worth to you," I said. "You name the price."

"All right." She shifted the pencil, carefully articulating the other brow, and said casually, "How about ten dollars?"

My jaw dropped and I blinked at her. I was mute for a moment and then I got my tongue wired for sound. "Let's stop kidding and start talking sensibly. I'm a busy man."

She swung around, no longer friendly. "I must say, Mr. Jordan, all this is a trifle disgusting." Her voice was unpleasant. "Oh, I may have been willing to buy Phil off, but that was yesterday. Today he's in trouble and I wouldn't raise my little finger to help him." Her voice accumulated bitterness as she spoke. "He married me for my money in the first place and he gave me small value in return. Phil was no bargain, let me tell you.

Always making furtive telephone calls, and sneaking out at night, with never an explanation. I always suspected he had some shady sideline and now he's got his finger caught and I'm glad. He's on the griddle and I hope they fry him good."

"He's still your husband."

"In name only, Mr. Lawyer. He hasn't been my husband for months. I don't — "She paused as the door opened and looked past me. Her voice softened. "It's all right, darling. Come on in."

Carter Reid crossed the threshold and stood beside her.

She said, "You're just in time. This is Scott Jordan, the lawyer I told you about who phoned me."

A king-sized cigarette smoked itself between his lips. He surveyed me, squinting through the upward curling smoke. His nod was brief and unamiable. The skin at the corners of his eyes were folded over, hooding them. An odd half-amused smile played around his mouth.

Lynn Elliott said, "I've just made Mr. Jordan an offer. Phil can have ten dollars if he consents to a divorce. Don't you think I'm being very generous, darling?"

"Magnanimous, my dear."

Whose leg were they pulling? What kind of an ace did they have up their sleeve? I exercised control, keeping my temperature normal, and stood up.

"Excuse me," I said. "We're tuned in on different wave lengths. For some reason you think you have

Phil over a barrel, but I'd like to give you some information. The divorce laws in New York are very rigid."

Carter Reid was unconcerned. He blew a smoke ring and watched it flatten against the ceiling. "Everything bends, counselor."

"Go ahead," I said. "Hire a girl and try to frame him."

"We don't have to. Phil saved us the trouble. Lynn always suspected he was a criminal and now he's proved it. After he's convicted she can get an annulment. On the ground of fraud, marrying her under false pretenses, that he was a law-abiding citizen."

It stopped me cold. This was a new angle I hadn't thought of. Apparently, they'd already had legal advice. Some lawyer had cooked up a perfectly plausible loophole.

I looked at Mrs. Elliott. If your mind was made up, why did you let me come here?"

She shrugged. "We wanted the pleasure of telling you this to your face."

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," I said, and slammed the door on my way out.

I had it coming, I suppose. I should have insisted that Phil do his own bargaining. I was heading through the lounge toward the checkroom when a hand caught my arm.

"Not leaving so early, are you, counselor?" It was Milo Gilbert, the accustomed smile on his white toad face making it obnoxious.

"It's early for you, Milo," I said, "but it's late for me. We're in different professions."

"How about one for the road? I'd like to talk to you. On the house." His fingers around my arm were insistent and I let him steer me to the bar.

I ordered bourbon. He asked for scotch. His eyes, staring into the glass, were clouded and preoccupied.

"What's on your mind, Milo?"

He chewed the inside of his cheek, looking uncomfortable. Then he cleared his throat. "Elliott's out on bail, I hear."

"That's right."

"Damn fool trick! Trying to shove those phony bills in my place. He must have gone soft in the head. Why the hell didn't he try to pass them at some movie during rush hour?"

"Then you think he's guilty, Milo."

"What else?"

"He says no."

Milo knocked off his scotch in a single nervous gulp. "I didn't expect him to plead guilty." He looked up at me. "Do you believe him?"

"Sure. Because he's on the warpath?"

"Against whom?"

"He doesn't know yet. He's trying to find out."

"It's an act," Milo said. He rubbed his forehead. "Look, counselor, I'm worried." He stole a quick sideward glance in both directions to see if anyone was tuned in. He

lowered his voice. "You know how it is, a place like this, taxes, union shakedowns, a guy has to manipulate a little to stay in business. Nothing fancy, understand" — he smiled lopsidedly — "you rig the books a little, keep two sets of figures, just enough to keep your head out of the water."

He waited for me to sympathize. I could feel my heart bleeding for him, waiting for him to get on with his tale.

"It's bad for business," he said. "I can't afford to have those Treasury boys hanging around here. They catch wise and I'm in trouble. Up to my neck."

"What do you want me to do, Milo?"

"You're Elliott's lawyer. Maybe he'll listen to you. He was here tonight, sniffing around. It gave me the willies. Those government boys may have a tail on him." Moisture glistened on Milo's forehead and he was trembling a little. "Keep him out of my hair, Jordan. Tell him to stay away from me."

"Slow down," I said. "Did you talk to him?"

"He talked to me. I didn't even want to look at him. What's he trying to do, build up a picture of innocence at my expense? Goddammit, counselor, tell him to search elsewhere."

"This was the logical starting point, Milo."

"Why?"

"Because he was picked up here.

Now take it easy, Milo. Keep your shirt on. I'll talk to him."

He mopped his forehead with a linen handkerchief. "Okay, and thanks. How about another drink?"

"Not tonight, Milo. I've had enough."

Carter Reid was back at work on the bandstand when I left.

I was in court the next morning on a mandamus proceeding, and I didn't get a chance to call Phil until after lunch. He hadn't reached his office yet and they were miffed because a deal was cooking with one of his customers. I tried his apartment and got no answer there either. What the hell, I thought. Phil was a big boy now, capable of making his own decisions. If he wanted to toss everything aside in order to go hunting, that was his affair. And then I remembered a name.

Louis Homer. The private eye Phil was going to hire.

I looked up the number and dialed. A guarded voice answered promptly on the first ring.

"Homer?" I asked.

"Who wants him?"

"Scott Jordan, attorney for Phillip Elliott."

"Speaking. Go ahead."

"Have you seen Elliott?" I inquired.

"Yesterday."

"Are you working for him?"

"Yes."

"Heard from him today?"

"No."

"Don't strain your larynx," I told him.

"What's that?"

"Never mind," I said wearily. "Will you ask Elliott to get in touch with me if he contacts you?"

"Sure."

A very windy bird, this Homer, I thought, as I thanked him and hung up. I went back to correcting syntax on an appeals brief. It's all part of the profession. There are painful periods of hard labor, with your seat applied to a chair for hours. At five-thirty I knocked off and went to the window, stretching.

Clock punchers swarmed through the streets, converging on subway entrances. The sky was a purple bruise where the sun had struck across the horizon in passing.

And where was my boy, Phil Elliott, this fine twilight evening in Manhattan? Peering up which alleys, and finding what under the rocks he was kicking over?

Thursday came and went with no word from Phil. On Friday I began to feel the first stirrings of alarm. I tried his office again. They hadn't been able to reach him either, and had contacted the Missing Person's Bureau.

That brought it home to Barney Nash. A man like Barney always has his lines piped into Headquarters. He heard the news and came high-balling into my office late that afternoon, head between his shoulders like a charging bull, all steamed up and glowering like a thunderhead.

"Where is he, Jordan?" The breath was harsh and angry in his flared nostrils. "Where's Elliott? Did he take a powder?"

"Settle down, Barney. Relax."

His hands were flat on the desk as he leaned across. "Have you heard from him?"

"Not in a couple of days."

It wrung a hoarse groan out of Barney's throat. "When does he come up for pleading?"

"On Monday morning. What are you worrying about?"

"What am I worrying about?" He threw his hands out and appealed to heaven. "A hundred grand I got tied up in this clown! One hundred grand, friend! Something to worry about, hey? I posted that bond on your say so. What are you going to do about it?"

"He'll show up, Barney."

"How do you know? If he doesn't appear on Monday morning I forfeit my bond." Barney was torn between anguish and wrath. "I don't take a loss like that lying down, Jordan. You find him, alive or dead, understand?"

I reached for my phone and got through to Louis Homer again. "Any word from Elliott?" I asked.

"Who is this?" He sounded wary.

I told him and added, "It's important that I reach him. I'll appreciate it if you can help me."

"Sorry."

"Look, Homer, has he contacted you at all?"

"Not recently."

"Any idea at all where he might be."

"None."

I rang off, irritated. If he knew anything he was keeping it under his lip. The gabby bastard disgorged information with all the prodigal abandon of a slot machine.

"He's working under cover," I explained to Barney. "Trying to find out who jobbed him."

Barney was pacing back and forth, wearing out my rug. "What's the matter with him? Who does he think he is, a one man police force? He's bucking a gang of counterfeiters. These guys are hot. If he gets close to them, they'll rub him out like a chalk mark. The damn fool! He's probably in cold storage right now." Barney paused and set his teeth hard. "I'll find him myself. I'll find him if I have to pull every building in New York apart, brick by brick."

He concentrated a baleful glance in my direction and went out, the door slamming like a pistol shot.

The money was important, sure. But there was a principle involved here, too. The whole system would collapse if the boys felt they could run out and leave their bondsmen holding the bag.

I sat back uncomfortably and rubbed my jaw. I was sore, too, at Phil. As his lawyer he owed me an explanation. I was entitled to an occasional progress report.

I called the Missing Person's Bureau. The sergeant in charge was not

especially concerned. He had drawn his own conclusions. Phillip Elliott, he thought, was guilty as hell, and loathe to face a trial, so he had probably lammed out and was holed up somewhere, incognito.

By Sunday night I was testy and irascible. Phil was up for pleading in the morning. I tossed restlessly, unable to sleep. I got out of bed and poured myself some bourbon. It acted first as a stimulant, then as a soporific, and I finally passed out.

The jangling telephone went into my brain like a dentist's drill. I came instantly awake, nerves raw, and groped in the darkness for the handset.

"Scott?"

"Yes." The voice had been vaguely familiar.

"John Nola. Can you hear me?"

I sat erect, kicking my feet off the bed, the skin tingling between my shoulder blades. John Nola was a detective-lieutenant, attached to Homicide. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was two o'clock. A call at this hour could mean only one thing.

"John," I said, "what —"

"You represent a chap named Phillip Elliott?"

My mouth was dry. "Have you found him?"

"What's left of him." The lieutenant sounded grim.

"How — how did it happen?"

"Suicide."

The phone damn near splintered in my hand. I yammered into the

mouthpiece. "Phil? A suicide? Impossible."

"Tighten up, counselor. Elliott stuck his head in the oven and turned the switch. There was a freak accident. The pilot light set off the gas with an explosion that rocked the building. Damn near blew his head off."

I closed my eyes. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes. Haul yourself over here. Pronto. We're checking details, just in case."

In five minutes I was dressed and flagging a cab. I sat back, thoughtful and morose. No doubt of it. Phil had been in a bad spot. Suicide was one way out. Only I couldn't believe it. Not about Phil. Self-destruction requires a certain mentality, complete surrender, and Phil had been full of fight, mad clear through. So I wasn't ready to buy the verdict yet.

It was a tall narrow building on West 23rd Street. A few curious stragglers were huddled under a street lamp on the opposite curb, staring morbidly. I got past the uniformed cop guarding the street door and rode up in the self-service elevator. Another cop stopped me at the apartment door, and then let me through.

A varied assortment was deployed around the living room. Lynn Elliott sat on the love seat, placid and composed. Carter Reid stood behind her, his hands solicitously and protectively on her shoulders. De-

tective Lieutenant John Nola was in the center of the floor, a dark-skinned man, slender and precise, with a quiet unassuming manner, but still emanating authority through his direct and sober eyes. McCabe, the Treasury man was there, too, tight-lipped and silent.

"Where is he, John?"

Nola pointed his thumb at the kitchen. I went and looked. It was a shambles. Plaster and broken dishes littered the floor. The top and sides of the stove had been blown out. Phil lay amid the wreckage on the floor, part of it. I turned away, afraid for a moment that I was going to be sick, bitter saliva threading its way down my throat.

I looked at Nola and my voice was unsteady. "You want me to identify him? I can't."

He shook his head. "Not necessary. Mrs. Elliott knew him better than you did. It's him, all right."

"But how?" I gestured vaguely. "His face is all . . ."

"His trouser leg is hitched up. There's a large triangular birthmark over the left ankle."

I stared at him. Then I turned and stared at her. Nothing in Lynn Elliott's eyes, not a flicker. The same flat, incurious expression. It was slightly unnerving. I opened my mouth to speak, then swallowed the impulse, and closed it.

Nola hadn't finished questioning her.

"You say you weren't living with the man."

"That's right, Lieutenant."

"And you were trying to get a divorce?"

"Yes," she said without any feeling, "but Phil was being very difficult."

Nola shifted to Reid, eyes probing at him. "And if she got this divorce, you were next on the list."

The band leader flushed. He did not like the implication, and his neck inched out of his collar, truculence in the thrust of his chin.

"Just a second, Lieutenant. Let's get something straight. Yes, I expect to marry Mrs. Elliott, it's no secret. She's beautiful, talented, and rich. Besides that, I love her. Phil Elliott was in the way, I admit that, but I wouldn't —"

"Relax," Nola said. "Simmer down."

"No." Reid was all wound up and he plunged on. "You heard Mr. McCabe's story. Elliott was tied up with a ring of counterfeiters. He'd been caught with the goods and he was going to stand trial. He was hooked and he knew it. They had enough evidence to ship him away for a long stretch and he was scared. In addition to that, he had lost his wife and he couldn't get her back. The future was bleak and hopeless. Why shouldn't he commit suicide? What's strange about that, under the circumstances?"

"Nothing," Nola admitted.

Reid looked very tired. "This has been a terrible strain on Mrs. Elliott. I think she's been extraordinarily co-

operative. I'd like to take her home."

I glanced at her. For all the expression in her face, she might have been sitting in the Stork Club, waiting for cocktails.

The lieutenant nodded, and Reid threw a cloak over her shoulders. He took her arm and guided her through the door, no further word from either of them.

McCabe sighed heavily. "I was hoping we could break Elliott down. If only he had given us a line on the mob behind these operations!" His eyes rested on mine. "You were his lawyer, Jordan. Did he sing to you at all?"

I shook my head.

Nola was watching me closely, his eyes narrowed. "What's needling you, Scott?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Something's on your mind. Let's have it." Another exhibition of the lieutenant's uncanny intuition.

"Take a deep breath," I said. "Something's so rotten you can smell it all the way from Denmark."

"Meaning what?"

"That stiff in the kitchen isn't Phil Elliott."

Both men gawked at me. "His wife identified him," Nola said.

"She lied. I went to school with Elliott. We played on the same teams. I've seen him in the shower room a hundred times. He didn't have a birthmark on his foot then, and he sure as hell didn't develop one since."

Nola and McCabe exchanged sig-

nificant glances. The same thought crossed both their minds at once.

"Just a second," McCabe said. "If the body inside is a ringer, then the whole setup is a plant."

"And rigged by Elliott," said Nola. "To take the heat off himself, to throw mud in our eyes. Make us think he's dead. So we'd close the case against him."

I shook my head. "Rigged, yes. But not by Elliott. I think I know him pretty well. He might be guilty of counterfeiting, but murder's out. I don't believe Elliott killed that man inside. Find out who he is."

"He's wearing Elliott's clothes," Nola said.

McCabe turned up his palms. "It may have gotten out of hand, Councilor. He may have been forced into it."

"I'm sticking to my opinion."

Nola's growl became words. "So now we have an unidentified corpse."

"You've got facilities, Lieutenant. The personnel and the budget. Put them to work."

He stroked his closed eyelids. "What's the woman's angle, Scott? Why did Mrs. Elliott lie?"

I shrugged. "Ask her psychiatrist. Who knows what goes on behind that beautiful face?"

We kicked it around for a while, inspecting the angles. Then I glanced at my watch and yawned. "Look, Lieutenant. You yanked me out of a warm bed. It's late and I've got to appear in court tomorrow morning. Elliott's up for pleading."

McCabe raised his eyebrows. "You think he'll be there?"

"I hope so," I told him fervently. "For the sake of Barney Nash."

"Nash?" Nola was frowning.

"The bondsman who posted bail."

"Go ahead," he said, waving his hand. "Get your beauty rest."

But there was no more rest for me. A picture of that human wreckage on the kitchen floor kept running through my brain in brief kaleidoscopic flashes. Try sleeping with that on your mind some night. And then my imagination conjured a nightmare portrait of Lynn Elliott, sitting on her husband's grave, singing a funeral dirge in swingtime rhythm, with Carter Reid leading a band of skeletons in the background. The picture dissolved and a new one took its place. I saw Barney Nash in court, giggling hysterically, as he produced Phil from a large suitcase, piecemeal.

It jackknifed me out of bed in a cold sweat. I arose as if by levitation and made for the bathroom. A shower helped and so did a pot of steaming black coffee. But I was aching and weary when I finally left for the United States Courthouse on Foley Square in the morning.

Phil Elliott was not in the lobby. He was not in the courtroom. He was nowhere in sight. I culled some fine Anglo-Saxon words out of my vocabulary and applied them to his ancestry. But obscenity was no help. He failed to materialize.

Phil's case was the third one to be called. The clerk sang out his name and ordered the bondsman to produce the accused or forfeit his recognizance.

Barney Nash was seated in the front row. He stood up, approaching the bench, and addressed the judge.

"Your Honor, because of unavoidable circumstances, we cannot produce the defendant at this time. Mr. Elliott died last night. He committed suicide and his body is in the morgue at Bellevue. I respectfully request that the bail bond be discharged."

There was a brief rustle as the U. S. Attorney popped out of his chair, bristling. "The bondsman is mistaken, Your Honor. There was an error in identification last night. The man alleged to have killed himself is not Phillip Elliott. Lieutenant John Nola of Homicide, and James McCabe, the government agent in charge, are convinced of this fact. Since the defendant is not in court, and no one seems able to produce him, the bond herein should be forfeited."

Barney Nash's face was squeezed into an expression of acute suffering. "No, sir," he said hoarsely. "That fact has not been conclusively established. Elliott's wife identified the body. I ask the court to reserve decision until —"

The judge cut him short. "What's your position, counselor? Have you seen the body?"

"I have, Your Honor."

"Is it your client?"

"No, sir."

Bang went the gavel. "Bail is forfeited. Should further evidence be forthcoming, a motion will be entertained."

Barney sagged, bleeding to death inside. Then he turned and stuck a knife into me with his eyes.

"I couldn't lie, Barney."

"You could have kept your damn mouth shut." He staggered heavily down the aisle and disappeared. I couldn't help feeling sorry for him. But those were his trade hazards.

I stopped off in the lobby and used a telephone booth, putting a call through to Nola.

"What happened in court?" he asked.

"Elliott failed to show."

He exhaled softly. "You were right, Scott. This was no suicide. There was very little gas in the man's lungs. He'd been hit on the head first and then shoved into the oven. Death was caused by damage to the brain."

"Has he been identified yet?"

"No. But we checked the dental work and it's not Elliott."

"Thanks, John. I'll keep in touch with you."

"Careful boy," he said. "If I know my customers, you're going to start sniffing around. Careful you don't wind up in cold storage too."

I hung up and took a deep breath. I thought and decided on my next step. The program called for a conversation with Louis Homer.

Homer's office was on Park Row. The building had been constructed during Cleveland's administration and smelled like Harding's administration. The private detective shared an office on the fourth floor with a harried-looking specimen in the mail order business. Send a dollar bill and get a package of foreign stamps. The man answered my questions in a high-pitched anxious voice.

"Mr. Homer isn't in."

"Do you know where I can reach him?"

He shook his head fretfully. "I can't understand it. He always calls when he's late. Phones for his messages. Maybe he's sick. Why don't you try his home?"

I got the address and left.

Homer's apartment was in the East Sixties, a square and unlovely brownstone. I got the number from the directory in the vestibule and climbed three flights of stairs. No answer when I rang the bell. Silence when I knocked. Nothing when I rattled the doorknob. I turned the knob and heaved against the door. It usually works with those old common type locks. Pressure sprang the latch and the door flew inward.

What Homer needed was a wife or a housekeeper. The place was badly disorganized. I called his name and heard my voice echo through the empty apartment. I prowled. Three and a half rooms. Utterly deserted. No sign of Homer and no trace of Phil Elliott.

The telephone rang and I jumped.

I stared at it for a moment, then covered the mouthpiece with my handkerchief and mumbled into it.

A familiar voice spoke and I felt the skin tighten along my scalp. There was vexation in the voice, and a note of anger. "We had an appointment this morning, Homer. Why the hell didn't you show up?"

"Busy," I said.

"Our business comes first. I want it settled today. And I want you out of town. You're taking a vacation, understand? All expenses paid." There was a significant pause while static crackled softly over the line. "Unless you'd rather go swimming like your friend."

"I'll be there," I said, my face muscles so rigid they ached.

"Twenty minutes, soldier. Don't make me send for you."

The line went dead and I hung up slowly. My heart was pumping, my pulse accelerated. Thoughts digested in my head. Pieces of the puzzle jumped into place. I had the clue at last. The phone call was my link. I jiggled the hook and rang Headquarters.

"John," I said, when I had him on the wire, "listen, if —"

He broke in. "Glad you called. We identified the corpse."

I crossed my fingers. "Who?" I asked, and held my breath.

"A private detective named Louis Homer. Report just came through from his fingerprints. What's on your mind?"

It fitted. Perfectly. "John," I said,

"this case started at the Monte Carlo with those counterfeit bills. Let's finish it there. Can you meet me."

"In an hour. Suppose you spill it."

"Not now. It's still perking. Try to get there sooner."

I plugged another dime into the slot and rang Barney Nash. He started to call me a dirty name. His voice was hostile and bitter.

"Barney," I broke in pleasantly, "how would you like to save some money?"

He held his tongue. "How much?" he asked suspiciously.

"About a hundred thousand dollars."

That got through to him. It struck the right chord and now he was interested, his voice almost normal. "I'm listening, Jordan."

"Meet me at the Monte Carlo," I told him. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

He was on his way before I hung up. I grinned wolfishly. His bail bond was safe, but poor Barney was going to wind up behind bars.

How he must have flown! The smell of money gave him wings. He was waiting for me under the canopy, and he clutched at my sleeve when I debarked from the cab. Barney was keyed up and excited. "What's it all about, Counselor? Give me a —"

"I'll tell you inside, Barney."

He tagged along, flapping his lip. Inside, with the chairs piled on the tables, a couple of high-voltage bulbs

glaring nakedly, the club looked like a barn. They were rehearsing a new number. Carter Reid and his musicians were in shirt-sleeves. Lynn Elliott wore a tailored skirt and a cashmere pullover. She could forget the black sequins and the gold lamé. No sculptor ever contrived a finer work of art.

Milo Gilbert sat at a table, watching his high-priced talent. He heard our footsteps and glanced around. He leaped convulsively to his feet, startled, and advanced to intercept us, blocking the way, nervous and jittery. "We're busy now, counselor. What is it? What do you want?"

"Let's go into your office, Milo."

His eyes were jumpy, spurting to the door and back again. "Some other time, Jordan. Come back tonight."

"What's the trouble, Milo? Are you expecting company?"

"Company?" Moisture glistened on his forehead. "No, I —"

"He isn't coming."

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"Louis Homer," I said. "He's dead."

Milo tried to smile, if you can call the muscular distortion of his lips a smile. He stood mute, with his Adam's apple running crazy in his throat, and his face a gargoyle's face. Then, with a visible effort, he pulled himself together. "What are you talking about?"

"Too big an audience here, Milo. Your office would be better. Invite

Mrs. Elliott and Carter Reid. I want them along too."

And how I wanted them!

He lifted his voice and beckoned and they came. We trooped into the office. Lynn perched herself on the edge of the desk and crossed her legs and looked bored. Milo got into his chair behind the desk and folded his hands to keep them steady. Reid was watchful. Barney Nash looked tense.

"Okay," Milo said. "Speak your piece, Jordan."

I took a long deep breath. It was very clear in my mind now.

"I had a friend," I said quietly. "He was Mrs. Elliott's husband and she wanted to get rid of him. But the laws of the State made it difficult and my friend wouldn't cooperate. I admit he was no prize and hated to see her money slip through his grasp. There was another candidate for her hand. Carter Reid. He wanted Mrs. Elliott, too, with her bank account intact —"

"Her money had nothing to do with it." Reid's jaw was out.

I smiled pleasantly. "Let's say it did, just for the sake of argument. You wanted Mrs. Elliott and my friend stood in your way. So there was an impasse, which you decided to resolve by cooking up a scheme. And you enlisted Milo here to help you. Milo had a nice profitable sideline. He was dumping counterfeit bills here in the club. The setup was a natural. Most of the customers wound up drunk and if part of their change was phony they'd never

remember where it came from.”

I looked at Milo. He had no use for his tongue. His face was impassive and said no comment. But his breath was loud and harsh. Why did he do it? Greed, probably. Or maybe he was tied up with the boys and they wouldn't let him cut loose.

“Milo agreed,” I said. “He wanted to keep Lynn happy. And he had a good reason of his own. The government agents had traced a couple of complaints back to the club and were beginning to poke around. Here was a chance to get off the hook. Throw up a smoke screen. Make them think the bills had originated with Elliott. He'd been spending most of his time here and it would be easy. So Elliott was jobbed. Milo framed him. A little sleight of hand and the waiter thought the counterfeit bills came from Phil. I believed him when he swore to me it was a plant. But my confidence was shaken when McCabe turned up that fifteen grand in his apartment.”

I looked directly at Lynn Elliott.

“It was a cinch, wasn't it? You had lived there with him and you still had a key. Milo gave you the bills and you planted them. They were supposed to wrap it up. With Phil convicted, you'd get your annulment. Very neat and very ingenious and it might have worked except for one thing. Phil knew he was innocent and he guessed what had happened. So he hired himself a private detective and set out to prove it.”

I looked at Milo. His head was hunched down between his shoulders and his eyes were openly malevolent.

“That brought it back to you, Milo. Phil was on the prowl and he was going to break it wide open. You had no choice. He had to be liquidated. And more than that, he had to vanish. For two reasons. First, to avoid a homicide investigation; second, to make the Treasury boys think he'd taken a powder and steer them away from the Monte Carlo.”

Milo's whole fat face was bathed in moisture now, and deep hollows were gouged out of his jaws. A corner of his mouth kept twitching erratically. I had him backed against the ropes now and I plunged on.

“You hired outside talent and gave them orders and they performed. I heard you on the phone when you thought you were talking to Homer. You asked him if he wanted to go swimming like his friend. That means Elliott was kissed off and dropped overboard, properly weighted. Then you sent the boys to Elliott's apartment, to see if he'd left any evidence. And that's where they ran into a spot of trouble.

“Louis Homer walked in on them and got tagged. You never learned about that. It wasn't on the agenda and the boys neglected to tell you. It hadn't been covered by your instructions.”

The skin on Milo's face was taut and yellow. His mouth was a tight

ring of compressed skin. He couldn't tear his eyes away; they looked murky and stagnant.

"You wouldn't have been sore, would you, Milo? You'd have paid them off anyway, and given them a bonus, too. Because in the meantime Louis Homer had learned plenty from Phil. He knew the whole score, music and libretto. And when his client disappeared he guessed the truth. So he came to you with a proposition. He tried to shake you down and you were forced to negotiate. You were going to close the deal this morning. You wanted him out of town before the cops reached him and started to take him apart. Guys like Homer melt under heat. But he didn't show up and you called him and it was me who answered the phone. I recognized your voice, Milo, and your words gave me a chance to piece it together."

I paused for another breath. Milo's jaw was clamped and working from side to side.

"You contrived the deed, Milo, and you're just as guilty as the hired hands —"

An interruption came from Barney Nash. He'd been listening like a man in a trance. It was coming to a head and he wanted to clear his skirts of taint. He wanted to get away before the fireworks began.

"This has nothing to do with me," he bleated, and headed for the door.

"Stand fast, Barney," I said coldly. "You're in this too, right up

to the wrinkles on your thick neck."

He turned, jowls quivering in suppressed indignation. He spread his fingers flat across his chest. "Me?"

"You, Barney. You've been in a sling ever since Elliott disappeared. With your connections around town, you probably heard a rumor that he was under water, chained to a lump of concrete. But you'd never save your bail bond unless you could prove it. You were with me when I called Homer, and you went after him, hoping he'd give you a lead."

Mostly, this was guesswork. But I could tell from his face that I was hitting the bull's-eye with every word.

"You tailed Homer to Elliott's apartment. When he didn't come out, you followed him in. By that time, Milo's boys had finished their work. Homer was there with his skull caved in. You made a quick decision on the spur of the moment. Homer and Elliott were of the same general height and build. You changed Homer's clothes, dragged him into the kitchen, and rigged up that business at the stove. An explosion would take care of the face. He'd be identified as Phil and your bond would be safe. Risky, sure, but a hundred grand was at stake."

Barney Nash was breathing like a man suffering from adenoids. He looked sick.

"Obstructing justice, Barney," I said. "Suppressing evidence vital to solution of a homicide. You weren't

thinking straight. You must have had paresis of the brain to think you could pull a stunt like that and get away with it. Even though you had help from an unexpected source."

Lynn Elliott was staring at me, peculiarly calm and imperturbable.

"You knew that corpse was a ringer," I told her, "yet you identified him. Because with Phil gone, you'd have to wait five years to get an Enoch Arden decree."

"Anyone can make a mistake," she said idly.

"No, ma'am. It's a bad hand. After that baloney about the birthmark. You're guilty of—"

"Enough!" Milo's voice a growl. "No more talk."

I looked at the gun in his hand and at the desperation in his eyes. He addressed the others in a strained inhuman voice.

"We're in this together, all of us. With Jordan shelved, we're free. Everybody agree?"

The black muzzle of the gun loomed like the open door to hell.

"Don't listen to him," I said. "He's a murderer. He's got more to lose than any of you."

Barney Nash, however, didn't want to lose anything. Not even a few years in jail. "Do it Milo!" he whispered. "Do it now." Hysteria wove itself into the timbre of his voice. "Go ahead, give it to him."

All the color had dissolved out of Carter Reid's face. He was white as paper. Lynn Elliott hadn't moved. She sat detached, unemotional.

Milo raised his gun. "Outside, Carter. Get the band together. Start them playing, that drum number."

Reid moved, walking stiffly. His hand stretched out for the door-knob, but never reached it. The door was suddenly opened and there stood Nola on the threshold. His eyes encompassed the room in one glance. He saw the gun in Milo's hand. The desperation in Milo's eyes. His own hand flashed under his lapel.

Milo Gilbert screamed, "Duck, Carter!" and fired at the same time.

The bullet caught Reid in the left shoulder and knocked him around like a blow from a hammer. Nola's gun answered once, a sharp report.

There was no time to aim and he took no chances. He had seen the look in Milo's eyes, and he knew what it meant. A red carnation suddenly blossomed under Milo's tie-knot and his mouth fell open and he looked surprised. The gun bounced on his desk. And then, slowly, his chin rested against the carnation.

Carter Reid was on his knees, clutching wildly at his broken shoulder. Barney Nash had crouched back his breathing loud and asthmatic.

"They're all yours," I told Nola. "The lot of them. I'll come downtown and sign a statement."

Lynn Elliott laughed. It lasted for only a second. But the strangely stilted smile remained in firm possession of her painted mouth. She was off in her own private world.

I hoped they had a good psychiatrist where she was going.

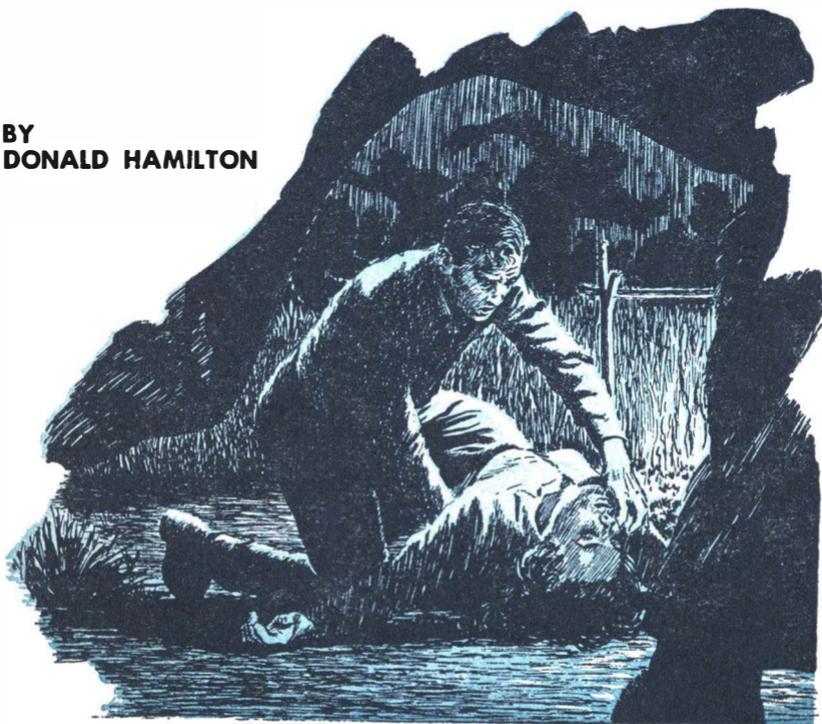
Throwback

A few corpses more or less didn't matter. After all, the streets were already piled high with them . . .

THERE was a fight in the camp that night. It went the usual way; after three months of this kind of life, George Hardin could have written the script from memory: the firelight, the two men's voices rising suddenly, the girl's half-suppressed

scream as she was roughly swept aside. Then the men were flailing at each other in the flickering orange light; then closing in and grappling, tearing up the ground with their feet. There was the usual officious character — this time a stranger in a tattered air force uniform — who waved everybody back. "Let the boys fight it out," he shouted, "let the best man win!" There was the girl standing back a little watching,

BY
DONALD HAMILTON



her tongue occasionally stealing out to moisten her lips.

Looking up, Hardin saw his wife come around the edge of the light towards him. He tried to catch her eye; failing, he looked back to the straining, panting, sweating men by the fire. They crashed to the ground and rolled almost to the feet of the girl. She stood unmoving, watching them, as if unaware that she could easily be knocked down by their heedless violence and badly hurt. In a world where most of the women along the roads had taken refuge in what durable men's clothes they could find, this girl still wore a wool suit, a sweater, and high-heeled pumps, all hinting vaguely of expensive origin, and all looking about the way you would expect expensive clothes to look after three months of campfires and sleeping in the bushes. But the firelight flattered her, emphasizing the long lines of her body and the strong planes of her face, and almost failing to reveal the uncut, unwashed, uncombed look of her hair and the state of her clothes.

The firelight gleamed on the tip of her tongue as she again moistened her pale lips, long strangers to lipstick. The action gave her a predatory, wanton look as she watched, unmoving, the two men fighting over her. Yet Hardin had a feeling that she was not really concerned over the outcome. He did not think it mattered to her in the least which of the men took her; any more than

another snag in her torn sweater would matter, or another stain on her grimy skirt, or another crack in her broken shoes. She did not care, because she was dead. She had died three months ago. Nothing more could happen to her now.

He recognized the look. Right afterwards, it had been understandable; they had all been dazed and unbelieving. He remembered himself and Ellen getting out of the car that morning on the highway, still dressed for the party they had attended at the home of a friend who lived outside of town. The jets had come over when they had been halfway home, the roads had jammed up with traffic within a few minutes, and they had sat in the stalled car all night, the windows up against the fine powdery dust, watching the unimaginable sight of the world being blown to hell. He remembered the little whimpering noise Ellen had made in his arms when the flame had gone up straight ahead of them. Sometimes he still wondered if the kids had been asleep when it hit, or if they had had time to wake up and be frightened; and if Mrs. Strong, the sitter, had been able to calm them. Not that it really mattered.

In the morning they had left the car and gone ahead on foot, neither saying anything about where they were going, but hurrying, breathless, along the miles of highway, the stalled cars powdered with dust, the thin sunshine that later turned to

rain. There were other people, some standing around, or sitting, dazed and blank; others moving quickly and purposefully like themselves, but with a kind of sleepwalking look about them.

The closer they came to it, the tighter the cars were packed; there had been collisions, bent bumpers, crumpled fenders, once important but now insignificant. In the blast area itself — long before the town was in sight — the going had got progressively worse, with fallen trees and telephone poles and snakelike coils of wire down across the pavement. The very pavement itself had no longer been smooth, as if the earth had moved a little during the night; embankments had run down over the road, bridges had fallen. There had been dead people and injured ones among the living.

Then they had come to the top of the rise above the town, and there had been no need to go further. Beyond there was only dust.

He remembered turning to his wife and looking at her for the first time since the morning, seeing a strange, haggard woman in a torn fur wrap and the remnants of a taffeta evening gown. Then there had been a sound in the air and they had fled together as a flight of jets went over.

He could never remember much about the next few days except that they had hidden in the woods and it had rained most of the time: they

had been the only people in the world for a while, sharing the warmth of each other's bodies against the cold spring nights in the places where they hid, hearing the planes overhead from time to time. He could not remember anything they had said to each other. Then the sun came out and there were no more planes and they left the shelter of the woods and, each shocked at the other's incredible appearance, as if they had not opened their eyes for the days and weeks that had passed, they had stolen soap and food and fresh clothes from a small country store that had already been looted several times. That had been while it was still easy, before the farmers and the scanty population of the untouched small towns had organized against the displaced, hungry hordes from about the destroyed cities. Since then he had twice had to use the revolver which, with a box of cartridges, he had found in the glove compartment of an abandoned car in which they had stayed one rainy night.

It had been another funny war, George Hardin thought, as he watched the two men on the ground pounding at each other with growing weariness: there had been the same year of preliminary skirmishing with the good old-fashioned weapons that just blew cities up a block at a time; for a while it had looked as if nobody would have the nerve to start the ball rolling. But when it started rolling, brother, he told himself, it

really rolled. And here these two jackasses, having avoided atomic death by a miracle, were trying to murder each other with their fists. And the girl would give herself numbly to the victor because it did not matter, because she didn't care what happened to her in this nasty world that wouldn't keep her hair in permanents. He had seen the attitude before, and he had no respect for it.

"Who is it?" Ellen asked, reaching him and sitting down beside him. He was always glad to look at her these days, proud of her for managing to keep herself looking clean if not exactly dainty in the overall trousers and the boy's denim shirt they had found for her. Some of the other women — and the men, too — had let themselves get pretty unappetizing; it was easy enough to do. But Ellen always looked nice, even at the end of a long day of walking. "Who is it?" she asked. "Anybody we know?"

"One's Jack Dodd," Hardin said. They both knew Jack Dodd; he was by way of being the group bully. He had once made a pass at Ellen, to be discouraged by Hardin's gun. The fact that they were married, which Dodd had claimed not to know, had let the man back down without too much loss of pride. "The other just joined up today with the girl," Hardin said. "I don't know his name." He glanced at his wife. "Where have you been?"

"I want to talk to you, darling.

Let's get out of here for a moment."

Hardin glanced at the fighters. "Well, Jack's got him licked, anyway. Looks like Miss High-heels has a new protector."

"Mrs. High-heels," Ellen said. "She's wearing a wedding ring."

There was something disturbing about the thought that a few months ago this young girl, now being fought over like a camp floozy, had had a husband, a home, perhaps even children. Hardin put the thought aside; every person you met on the roads these days had a tragedy. Come to that, if he was going to brood on tragedies, he had a perfectly good one of his own. He put this thought quickly aside as well, and followed his wife out of the camp.

Away from the fire, they could see the light of a farm in the distance, up the hill. The camp was down among the trees, between the highway and a creek. Out in the open it was quite bright from a half moon that, getting ready to set, still hung above the horizon. The silence was the thing you noticed, Hardin thought; no traffic on the road, no planes overhead, no radios or television sets playing in the distance.

"Let's not get too far away," he said feeling for the gun in his pocket. "I don't want some farmer to blow my head off with a shotgun. They're getting tougher all the time."

Ellen said, "Do you think we'll ever find a place where they'll leave

us alone? I—I never thought I'd know what it was like to feel like an Okie."

"We'll find some place," he said. "Or make one." They faced each other for a moment; then he took her in his arms and kissed her hard. "Don't go running off like that," he said at last, a little breathlessly. "Another couple of minutes and I'd have been chasing around looking for you. Don't get lost, darling. This would be a hell of a world to be alone in."

"George," she said presently, "George, do you really think it's this way all over the world?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not. Perhaps it's just such a hell of a big job of rehabilitation that the countries that weren't smashed can't figure out where to start. Or perhaps they simply don't want to."

"What do you mean?"

"When the big boys knock each other out, it gives the little fellows a chance. Why should they rush in to put us back on our feet again? Most of them were never very fond of us, anyway." He stroked her hair gently. "It's all right, Ellen. We'll make out."

"We're going to have to," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw that doctor, George. He says there's no doubt about it."

He was silent for a moment, taking this in. "Is it . . . is everything all right?"

"Yes," she said. "He didn't think

I ought to have any trouble, particularly after having had two normal—" She checked herself; it was something to which they did not refer if they could help it. "In March, he said. And he's writing out exactly what we're to do if . . ." Her breath caught briefly. ". . . if there's no doctor handy when the time comes. I'll get it from him in the morning." He could not make out the expression of her face in the moonlight; but he could feel her trembling. "I'm scared, George. Doing it alone . . . it was all made so easy for me, the other times."

"I'm sorry —"

"Don't say that!" she breathed fiercely. "Don't ever say that. We wanted it and we're going to have it and to hell with this lousy world. Somebody's got to keep on living. I'm not a bit sorry. I'm just scared stiff."

The fight was over when they came back into camp. Somebody told them the stranger had lost and had beat it. Dodd, the victor, was lying back near the bushes, grunting occasionally as the girl, wiping the blood from his face with a wet rag, hit a sore spot. He looked rather exhausted from his victory. The girl did not seem to care greatly whether she hurt him or not; and after a while Dodd swore at her, sat up, and used the rag on himself.

The air force officer who had constituted himself referee had got himself an audience, and was holding forth. "I tell you people," he said,

“you should have seen it, it was really something. We came in like this at thirty thousand feet . . .” There were the usual gestures; if you tied a fly-boy’s hands, Hardin thought, the poor guy would be unable to talk. “. . . just like going up in an express elevator. Christ, I thought the old bucket was a goner. The instruments went all to hell; I flew her home on the seat of my pants. Hit the coast at Charleston instead of Norfolk where I was heading. No radar, nothing. Christ. But you should have seen that blast, she was a beauty. Hiroshima was a firecracker beside it.”

Hardin felt his wife’s hand, cold, steal into his own and press it tightly. Somebody asked a question.

“Moscow?” The airman laughed. “I wasn’t there myself, but I talked to one of the boys. He said that what happened to Moscow shouldn’t happen to a Rooshian. Haha. He was a real comic. . . . What’s the matter?”

The man got slowly to his feet, facing the people who had gradually crowded in around him, as if only now realizing that their faces were hostile. Yet something in his attitude said that he had been through this before. Suddenly there was a big army automatic pistol in his hand.

“Get back there, children. Who do you think you’re crowding?”

A middle-aged man said, “That’s fine. But where were you boys while my wife and kids were being killed? That’s what I want to know.”

There was a murmur of approval through the crowd. Somebody cried, “If you were so damn brave, why didn’t you stop them?”

“It wasn’t my job to stop them,” the airman said. “Nobody ever claimed we could stop them. All we said was that we could hit them, and we did.” There was something pitiful and savage and lonely about him, Hardin thought; and wondered into how many camps this man had wandered, by how many fires he had told his story in the same challenging fashion, seeking attack so that he could defend himself. “Hypocrites,” he said. “You damn hypocrites! We did what you sent us to do, yes, people like you. And now you’re squawking because their fliers did the same to you. Did you expect to sit comfortably at your TV sets watching us fight your damn war for you? Well, now you know.” He took a step backwards. “Stand back.”

Then somebody rose out of the bushes behind him, and Hardin swept his wife to the ground as the pistol in the airman’s hand discharged. They were a little back from the fire, and suddenly they were alone. Ellen sat up and shook the hair back from her face. She shivered, and turned away from the knot of people trampling, animal-like, over something on the ground. She buried her face in Hardin’s shoulder.

He did not look away. There were certain things to be kept track of,

if you wanted to survive along the road, and he wanted to learn who would wind up with the airman's gun, but things were too confused to tell; and suddenly there was more confusion, the bushes crackling and snapping as armed men stepped out of the woods on all aides of the camp.

"All right, you Townies!" a man shouted. "All right, we've had enough of your kind around here. Get on the road and start moving —"

Somebody kicked the fire apart. A revolver went off, answered by the heavy report of a shotgun; and the revolver again, and the shotgun, and something that sounded like a deer rifle; and people were running and crawling through the darkness.

"Come on!" Hardin whispered urgently. "Let's get the hell out of here —"

He reached for his wife's shoulder, and suddenly the din and confusion seemed to move to a great distance, as he felt the terrible slackness with which her body yielded to his touch. When he touched her face, his hand came away warm and wet with blood. He picked her up.

"Ellen," he whispered. "*Ellen . . .*"

Daylight found him crouching in the bushes near the stream. After a while he got up slowly, looked around, and went back to where the camp had been. It was very quiet now. The fire was still smoldering. Two bodies lay near it, and various items of personal equipment lay

discarded around it. He found a blanket and an army entrenching tool and went back to the edge of the creek, selecting a little rise overlooking a meadow as a suitable place to dig. Then he went back into the bushes with the blanket, wrapped up his burden carefully, and carried it to the grave, filling this and laying the sod back over it with care. He tried to remember a prayer but none would come to him.

He heard a splashing in the creek but did not turn at once, until footsteps stopped behind him. Then he rose to face the newcomers, Jack Dodd and the girl for whom Dodd had fought the previous night. They were both wet to the armpits and muddy to the knees from wading the creek and scrambling up the steep earth bank. The girl carried her high-heeled shoes in her hands; after a moment she leaned down to put them on, making no other effort to pull her wet clothes straight or wring them out; she would dry in time, her attitude said, and who cared, anyway?

"Your wife?" Jack Dodd asked, glancing at the place where the sod had been replaced.

Hardin nodded.

"Hell, that's tough," the other said. Hardin noted that Dodd carried the airman's .45 automatic. "Those damn farmers! Well they'll laugh on the other side of their mouths pretty soon." Dodd glanced at Hardin sharply. "Come along. You look like you ought to be handy

in a scrap. This ought to be right in your line."

"What?"

"We're sick of being kicked around. A bunch of us is going to raid that farm back there. Raid it and burn it to the ground. Show the bastards they can't kick us around. Just because nobody dropped any bombs on them they think they're God Almighty."

"What will you do after that?"

"Get the hell out, I guess. We just want to give them something to remember us by, for last night, until we get stronger and come back this way. . . . You've got a gun, haven't you? That's swell. Look, Hardin, I've got ideas. Get a bunch together — this raiding a farm is nothing, see — get a bunch of tough cookies with guns, like you and me and, hell, we can put the fear of God into these bastards. They'll pay us to lay off. Protection, like. Better than being driven up and down the roads like sheep, eh?" Dodd made a gesture with his big, battered hands. "Hell, I don't like to go in for the rough stuff, but what choice do they give us? It isn't our fault we haven't got a place to stay."

He still could not quite get it into his head that Ellen was dead; but he knew that he was getting very tired of people whose troubles were always somebody else's fault. The guilt for what had happened was everywhere; you might as well take a piece of it and start chewing. You had to get used to the taste.

"Count me out," Hardin said.

"That's a hell of a way to act," Jack Dodd said. "After the way they killed your wife?"

"Let me worry about my wife," Hardin said.

"You'll just leave her lying there dead?" the other man said. "So sorry, Mr. Farmer, my wife got in the way of one of your bullets . . ." Dodd stared at Hardin for a moment, then shrugged. "All right. But if you're that peaceful, you've got no use for a gun, so pass it over. I can find a guy who will use it." His voice became harsher. "Come on, come on! Listen, Hardin, I haven't forgotten that you slapped my wrist once just for speaking civilly to your wife . . ."

Dodd took a step forward, reaching for the gun in Hardin's fist. Hardin backed away quickly, swinging the gun around and then bringing it hip-high, tilting the muzzle up at Dodd's face.

For an instant, they faced each other, the silence between them as deadly ominous as a primed hand grenade. Their eyes locked, and they each read meaning into the other man's face, each striving to understand that meaning. It was Hardin who grasped it first. His finger tightened on the trigger of his gun. The pistol kicked in his fist, sent a shock rumbling up the length of his arm.

He saw Dodd's face erupt when the bullet took it, and then Dodd pitched forward into the dirt, and

the sound of the shot seemed to linger on the air for a long while, long after he had crumpled to the ground, his face holding a look of shocked surprise under the blood.

Hardin looked at the revolver in his hand and frowned; he was getting a little too handy with the thing. That was three times he had used it. He would have to watch that, he reflected, as he picked up the other weapon and felt the dead man for another clip. There was none, but .45 Auto was a common caliber and he had no doubt he would find more shells for it along the road.

Grief struck him suddenly, like the ache of a nagging tooth suddenly flaring into pain. *Where are you going now?* he asked himself. *What are you going to do? You with two guns and nobody, nothing.*

The girl, about whom he had completely forgotten, stirred a little on the spot where she was standing, from which she had not moved. In daylight, her wet and grimy clothes, her streaked face and stringy hair made it almost impossible to recall the hint of beauty that the firelight had suggested the evening before.

She looked merely hungry and dirty. The wedding ring, and a rather good diamond, gleamed on her hand like a forgotten memory. The fact that she had been allowed to retain her rings through all her experiences was, Hardin reflected, a commentary on the situation: it had not taken people long to realize that you could not eat jewelry. These days you could carry a bar of gold safely down the highway, but you were very apt to be killed for a can of Spam.

He looked at her for a moment longer. In his mind was something Ellen had said: *Somebody's got to go on living.* After a moment, he put the guns away, one in his pocket and the other under his belt. He did not look at the broken turf by his feet, but turned away.

Somewhere to the south there would be a place where a couple of people could endure the winter to come without freezing to death. After that, who knew?

"Come on," he said irritably over his shoulder, then flushed a little as he saw that the girl was walking right beside him.



The Innocent One

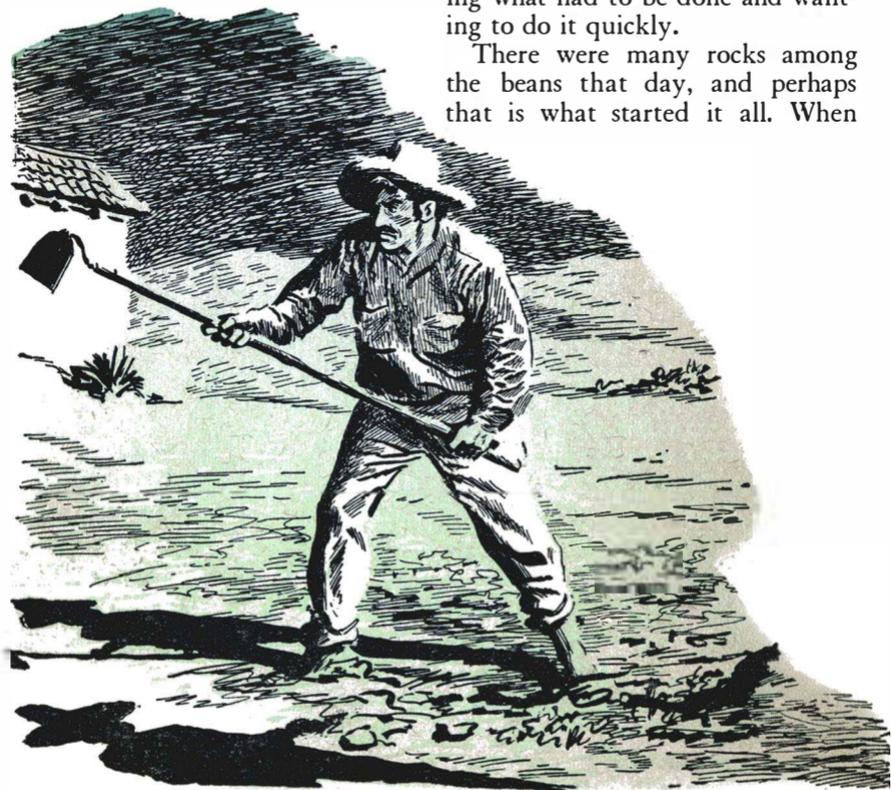
How is a man to work — when everyone wants to discuss his passionate wife?

BY RICHARD MARSTEN

IT WAS the next poor bastard who got it.

You must understand, first, that the sun was very hot on that day and Miguel had been working in it from just after dawn. He had eaten a hearty breakfast, and then had taken to the fields early, remembering what had to be done and wanting to do it quickly.

There were many rocks among the beans that day, and perhaps that is what started it all. When



Miguel discovered the first rock, he reached down gingerly and tossed it over his shoulder to the rear of his neat rows of beans. The sun was still not high in the sky, and the earth had not yet begun to bake, and so a smile worked its way over his brown features as he heard the rock thud to the soft earth behind him. He started hoeing again, thinking of Maria and the night before.

He would never regret having married Maria. *Jesu*, she was a one! There was the passion of the tigress in her, and the energy of the rabbit. He thought again of her, straightening up abruptly, and feeling the ache in his back muscles.

That was when he saw the second rock.

He shrugged, thinking, *Dios, another one!*

He lifted it, threw it over his shoulder, and began hoeing again. He was surprised when he came across more rocks. At first he thought someone had played a joke on him, and he pulled his black brows together, wondering who it could have been. Juan, that pig? Felipe, that animal with the slobbering lips? Pablo?

Then he remembered that it had rained the night before, and he realized that the waters had washed the soil clean, exposing the rocks, bringing them to the surface.

He cursed himself for not having thought to protect the beans in some way. Then he cursed the rocks. And since the sun was beginning to

climb in the sky, he cursed that too, and got to work.

The rocks were not heavy. They were, in fact, rather small.

It was that there were very many of them. He picked them up painstakingly, tossing them over his shoulders. How could a man hoe his beans when the rows were full of rocks? He started to count them, stopping at ten because that was as far as he knew how to count, and then starting with one all over again.

The sun was very hot now. The hoe lay on the ground, the rich earth staining its long handle. He kept picking up the rocks, not looking up now, swearing softly, the sweat pouring down his neck and back. When a long shadow fell over the land before him, he almost didn't notice it.

Then a voice joined the shadow, and Miguel straightened his back and rubbed his earth-stained fingers on his white trousers.

"You are busy, Miguel?" the voice asked. The voice came through the speaker's nose rather than his mouth. It whined like the voice of the lamb. It was Felipe.

"No, I am not busy," Miguel said. "I was, at this very moment, lying on my back and counting the stars in the sky."

"But it is morning . . ." Felipe started. Miguel's subtle humor struck him then, and he slapped his thigh and guffawed like the jackass he was. "Counting the stars!" he bellowed. "Counting the stars!"

Miguel was not amused. "You were perhaps on your way somewhere, *amigo*. If so, don't let me detain you."

"I was going nowhere, Miguel," Felipe said.

Miguel grunted and began picking up rocks again. He forgot how many tens he had counted thus far, so he started all over again.

"You are picking up rocks, Miguel?"

Miguel did not answer.

"I say you are picking up . . ."

"Yes!" Miguel said. "Yes, I am picking up rocks." He stood up and kneaded the small of his back, and Felipe grinned knowingly.

"The back, it hurts, eh?"

"Yes," Miguel said. He looked at Felipe. "Why do you nod?"

"Me? Nod? Who me?"

"Yes, you. Why do you stand there and nod your head like the wise snake who has swallowed the young chicken?"

Felipe grinned and nodded his head. "You must be mistaken, Miguel. I do not nod."

"I am not blind, *amigo*," Miguel said testily. "I say my back hurts, and you begin to nod your head. Why? Is it funny that my back hurts? Is it funny that there are rocks and stones among my beans?"

"No, Miguel. It is not funny."

"Then why do you nod?"

Felipe grinned. "Maria, eh?"

Miguel clenched his fists. "What about Maria, *amigo*? Maria who is my wife."

Felipe opened his eyes innocently. "Nothing, Miguel. Just . . . Maria."

"You refer to my back?"

"Si!"

"And you connect this somehow with Maria?"

"Si."

"How?"

"This Maria . . . your wife, God bless her . . . she is a strong one, eh, Miguel?"

Miguel was beginning to get a little angry. He was not used to discussing his wife among the beans. "So? What do you mean she is a strong one?"

"You know. *Muy fuerte*. Like the tigress."

"How do you know this?"

Felipe grinned. "It is known, Miguel."

Miguel's lips tightened into a narrow line. "How is it known?"

"I must go to town, Miguel," Felipe said hastily. "I see you soon."

"Just a moment, Felipe. How is it . . ."

"Goodbye, *amigo*."

Felipe turned his back, and Miguel stared at him as he walked toward the road. The dust rose about him, and he waved back at Miguel. Miguel did not return the wave. He stood there with the strong sun on his head, and the many rocks and stones at his feet.

How did this animal with the slobbering lips know of Maria's passion? Surely, *he* had never spoken a word about it to any of the men. Then how did Felipe know?

The possibilities annoyed Miguel. He turned back to the rocks, and this time they seemed heavier, and the sun seemed stronger, and his back seemed to ache more.

How did Felipe know?

He was pondering this in an ill-temper when Juan came to stand beside him. Juan was darkly handsome, his white trousers and shirt bright in the powerful sunlight. Miguel looked up at him sourly and said, "So? Do you wish to pass the time with idle chatter also?"

Juan smiled, his teeth even and white against the ruddy brown of his face. "Did I offend you, Miguel?"

"No!" Miguel snapped.

"Then why do you leap at me like a tiger?"

"Do not mention this animal to me," Miguel said.

"No?"

"No! I have rocks to clear, and I want to clear them before lunch because Maria will be calling me then."

"Ahhhhh," Juan said, grinning.

Miguel stared at him for a moment. The grin was the same one Felipe had worn, except that Felipe was ugly and with slobbering lips — and Juan was perhaps the handsomest man in the village.

Miguel stared at him and wondered if it had been *he* who told Felipe of Maria's great passion. And if so, how had Juan known?

"Why do you 'ahhhhh'?" he asked.

"Did I 'ahhhhhh'?"

"You did. You did indeed. You made this very sound. Why?"

"I was not aware, *amigo*." Juan smiled again.

"Was it mention of lunch that evoked this sigh?"

"No. No, I do not think so."

"Then there remains only Maria."

Juan grinned and said nothing.

"I said . . ."

"I heard you, Miguel."

"What about Maria?"

Juan shrugged. "Who said anything about Maria?"

"You are saying it with your eyes," Miguel said heatedly. "What about her?"

"She is your wife, Miguel."

"I know she is my wife. I sleep with her, I . . ."

Juan was grinning again.

"What's funny about that, Juan? Why do you grin now?"

"I have nothing to say, *amigo*. Maria is your wife. God bless her."

"What does that mean?"

"It means . . . well, God bless her. She is a good woman."

"How would you know?" Miguel shouted.

"That she is a good woman? Why, Miguel . . ."

"You know what I mean! Why is my wife the sudden topic of conversation for the whole village? What's going on? Why do you all discuss her so intimately?"

"Intimately?"

"Yes! By God, Juan, if there is something that someone knows."

Juan smiled again. "But there is nothing, Miguel. Nothing."

"You are sure?"

"I must go to town now, my friend. Is there anything I can do there for you?"

"No!" Miguel snapped.

"Then, *adios, amigo.*"

He turned and walked off, shaking his head, and Miguel could have sworn he heard him mutter the word, "tigrass."

He went to work on the rocks with a fury. What was all this? Why Felipe? And now Juan?

What was going on with his wife?

He thought of her passion, her gleaming black hair, the way it trailed down the curve of her back, reaching her waist. He thought of the fluid muscles on that back, beneath the soft, firm skin. He thought of the long graceful curve of her legs, the way the firelight played on her lifted breasts, the deep hollow of her navel.

Too passionate, he thought. *Far too passionate.*

Far too passionate for one man. Far too passionate for simple Miguel who worked in the fields picking stones and hoeing beans. Yes, she was a woman who needed many men, many, many men.

Was that why Felipe had laughed with his dripping lips? Was that why Juan had smiled that superior, handsome smile? Miguel picked up his hoe and swung it at a large rock. The rock chipped, but it did not budge from the earth.

Was that it? Was Maria then making a cuckold of her simple Miguel? Was that why all the men in the village were snickering, smiling, laughing behind their hands? Or was it only the men from *this* village? Was it the adjoining village, too? Or did it go beyond that?

Did they pass her from hand to hand like a used wine jug? Did they all drink of her, and was that why they laughed at Miguel now? Was that why they laughed behind their hands, laughed aloud with their mouths and their eyes?

The sun was hot, and the bowels of the earth stank, and the rocks and stones were plentiful, and Miguel chopped at them with the hoe, using the sharp blade like an ax.

I shall show them, he thought. I shall teach them to laugh! I shall teach them to make the fool of Miguel de la Piaz!

It was then that Pablo strolled by. He had passed Miguel's house, and Maria had asked him to call her husband home for lunch. He was not a bright lad, Pablo. He walked up close to Miguel, who furiously pounded the earth with his hoe, using it like an ax, the sharp blade striking sparks from the rocks. He tapped Miguel on the shoulder, smiled, and started to say, "Maria . . ."

Miguel whirled like an animal, the hoe raised high.

So you see, it was the next poor bastard who got it.

MUGGED AND PRINTED

JAMES M. CAIN, author of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity* and a long list of well-known, suspenseful and hard-



hitting novels and movies, was born in Annapolis in 1892. He worked initially at newspaper reporting and editorial work, until, in 1931, the first of his sensation-ally successful novels appeared. Since then he's been consistently turning them out with the best —

as witness the yarn in this issue. His writing is always noteworthy for its swift pace, believable characterizations and fast plot twists. Many of his stories have become mystery classics.

FREDRIC BROWN was once a proofreader for a Milwaukee newspaper, but his parents probably disliked proofreaders in general when they spelled his first name.



When one of Brown's short stories appeared in a British anthology *Frederick* was listed in the contents, *Frederic* in the by-line, and finally the correct *Frederic* in the copyright line. Whatever the spelling, his novels all

bear the touch of a master craftsman. His most recent novel was *The Deep End* and a volume of short stories, *Mostly Murder*, is soon to appear.

RICHARD ELLINGTON could very well use three typewriters and six hands. The fact is that his literary output is divided into three categories. As a novelist, he's written *Shoot The Works*, *It's A Crime*, *Stone Cold Dead* and *Exit For A Dame* — all featuring Steve Drake. He's also a radio script writer, and he's done some of the most successful shows for *Top Guy* and *The Fat Man*.



Not to mention television, wherein he has been a steady contributor to *Man Against Crime* and other high-calibre shows. All this activity takes place usually in the sunny Virgin Isles.

HAROLD Q. MASUR is a good-looking gentleman who might well pass for his own lawyer-private eye, Scott Jordan. There was a time

when Masur was a successful lawyer himself, and all of his cases were real ones. That time has long gone by. He prefers now to give the work to Mr. Jordan, who has been carrying the burden thus far in the novels *Bury Me Deep*, *Suddenly A Corpse*, *You Can't Live Forever* and *So Rich, So Lovely, And So Dead*. Scott Jordan untangles a difficult one in *Rhapsody In Blood*, the story in this issue.



CRAIG RICE is back with a new novelette about John J. Malone — *The End Of Fear*. Watch for her collection of Malone stories, soon on your newsstand. Tentative title: *The Murder Of Mr. Malone*. DAN SONTUP, well-known mystery writer who is doing *Manhunt's Portrait Of A Killer* series, has moved with his lovely wife, his typewriter, and several reams of paper to a new apartment in New York. The wife, incidentally, is almost as new as the apartment. FLETCHER FLORA is a comparatively new writer — a writer worth watching as you can see from his *The Collector Comes After Payday*, and *Manhunt* will be running more of his hard-hitting stories in the future. FRANK KANE (*Slay Belle*) informs us that his new mystery novel, *Poisons Unknown*, should be in the bookshops any day. Naturally, the book's hero is Johnny Liddell.

IN THIS ISSUE:

POWER

JAMES M. CAIN, author of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, comes up with the tale of a man who got his women mixed up — and found himself in a pack of trouble. HAROLD Q. MASUR is present with a Scott Jordan novelette that mixes a bundle of counterfeit bills with a passel of murder.

PANIC

CRAIG RICE spins a John J. Malone novelette about a girl with several false names running from a corpse. And FREDRIC BROWN writes of a man's frantic search for his missing woman. There's a powerful tale of sub-human fury set in the future by DONALD HAMILTON.

PURSUIT

FLETCHER FLORA's novelette, *The Collector Comes After Pay Day*, is the savage story of a man who commits a murder and launches a fantastic streak of good luck. FRANK KANE's private eye, Johnny Liddell, is featured in *Slay Belle*, the story of a molested woman and her murdered bodyguard. And EVAN HUNTER, in *Still Life*, takes the police on a desperate search for the assault-killer of a young girl.

PASSION

There's ROBERT TURNER with *The Crime Of My Wife*, the story of a ruthless con man and the sordid uses to which he puts his wife. And FRANCES CARFI MATRANGA is on tap with *Less Perfect*, a short-short shocker.

PLUS

Manhunt's special features: *Portrait Of A Killer*, the true-crime series by DAN SONTUP, and *Crime Cavalcade* by VINCENT H. GADDIS. It's an all-out August issue — packed with pure entertainment value!