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Dale was a little ridiculous with all his muscle-building. But it was comforting to have him around while that sex maniac was on the prowl.

CHANGE OF HEART

BY ARTHUR PORGES

"IF THE fog rolls in again, I may have to stay in Frisco," Temple said, giving his wife a side-long, apprehensive glance, as if expecting vigorous objections. "In that case," he added hastily, "you'd better call a cab, and spend the night with the Bakers. I certainly wouldn't want you to stay here on the beach all alone at night. Not with—" He bit the sentence off, conscious of having said too much.

"You mean not with that sex-criminal prowling around every time the fog is thick," Laura said lazily, squirming on the couch like a great cat. Certainly she was as lithe as one, and outwardly as much a sexual animal. But for all that, he knew very well, she was cold inside: a tease who promised a great deal with every motion of her lovely body, every flicker of those big violet eyes; but gave almost nothing. In fact, she hated sex, except as a device to use against men in general, and her husband in particular.

"The idea doesn't frighten you?" he asked drily.



"You bet it does," she said in a fervent voice. "He's a terrible animal. One of those little, greedy men, out to get by force what he can't win by conquest. There's a strong element of thief in such perverts," she said judiciously. "At least, that's what the psychiatrists and crime-experts say."

"Then you'll stay with the Bakers if I can't get back."

"Any place rather than alone here all night. Of course," she added thoughtfully, "Dale is only half a mile away. I could phone him if there was any trouble—a prowler, or something."

"That might not even be necessary," her husband said, his lips narrowing. "He seems to have an instinct for dropping by whenever I leave. Really, Laura, you shouldn't encourage him."

She laughed, a tinkly, cool sound like distant bells.

"I didn't think you'd ever be jealous of poor Dale. He's a perfect type, predictable to the last degree. A middle-aged bachelor, scared to death of women, and so reduced to flirting with a safely-married one—I am safely married, aren't I, Dick?"

"It's not a matter of jealousy," he said plaintively. "You don't seem to realize that no man can be teased forever. I know old Dale is as harmless as they come; but the basic policy is wrong. If he's so innocuous, why bother stirring him up; and if he's not so old-maidish underneath, why take chances?"

She laughed again.

"Chances? Really, Dick, be sensible. He's forever hinting that I should sleep with him, but if I once said yes, he'd run like a rabbit. He wants a pretty woman to adore safely from a distance. He takes my hand, or tries to kiss his way up my arm, and I can tell he wants to be interrupted before getting any farther. That makes him feel dangerous and male without committing him to anything."

"You're quite the little psychologist," her husband said, looking at her with affectionate amusement. In spite of that underlying coldness, she was often good fun, and a damned pretty girl at that. If their friends didn't know how little she gave of herself, so much the better; they envied him for having such an attractive wife. There was some compensation in that, and in having her on his arm at company affairs. No doubt whatever she was an asset to his business career. Old R. J. doted on her; and even his old clam of a wife gave in to Laura's gayety and charm—a conquest no pretty wife had ever achieved in that organization before.

"Gotta go," he said. "If it stays clear, I'll be back before eleven tonight. Right now it looks pretty good." Through the huge, glowing picture window they could see the long Pacific rollers creaming in on the beach. The sky was blue; the sun bright; the air cool and fresh. Yet by dark all that might easily

change, and thick, wet fog, like soaked cotton-wool, blanket the whole area. It was on such nights that the sex-killer had been striking. There was little enough known about him; only that he was small, sharp-faced, invariably wore a long, bluish trenchcoat, and killed his victims by strangulation. A hard one to catch; the beach extended for miles, with small, isolated cottages often shared by young girls. When that heavy fog covered the area, such a man could evade a thousand police standing side-by-side in a cordon.

"Lock up before dark," Temple told his wife just before leaving. "Fog or no fog."

"I will, Darling."

He kissed her, and left. It was just after noon.

Laura made herself a scratch lunch: lettuce salad, a boiled egg; some left-over pudding, and a glass of milk. No point in fussing for one person; if Dick was there, he'd want something hearty, like hamburgers or even a lambchop.

At two, five of the kids from down the beach came by, and urged her to join them in a swim. She hesitated, then agreed. Her black suit, skimpy and very flattering, set off her lovely blondness. She could feel their young eyes on her white skin. It was amusing to watch how they stole glances from the corners of their eyes. More mature men, especially Europeans, would have stared at her with frank approval. In the water, they were bolder, grab-

bing her ankles to duck her; touching her when they could, and always as if casually, or by accident. The contact meant nothing to her, but it was pleasant to be the center of things, an object of desire.

At five, they followed her in like so many frolicking puppies; and she gave them Dick's beer. Willie Mason, suddenly bold, said: "Laura, that swim-suit really does things for you. I'm in favor of locking old Dickie out tonight."

"That's an idea," the short, very dark kid—she didn't know him at all—said. "Change one over-forty for five under-twenties, ma'am. Now there's a bargain!"

"Are they too fresh?" Dave Par-doe grinned. "Just say the word, Laura, honey, and I'll toss out the whole lot of 'em." She thought he could do it, too. One ninety, or so, all rippling muscles. She felt a sudden contempt for all of them hanging around an obviously unavailable woman instead of getting their own. A boy like Dave could collect pretty girls in batches like bananas, if he had the sense to try.

"Look," Larry said. "The fog's coming in. It's going to be another ceiling zero night."

"Boy," the dark one said, "that's putting it mildly. Thick enough to make birds walk."

"I wonder if the Beach Monster's gonna walk tonight," Willie Mason giggled, his voice high. He was looking at Laura's thighs: when she caught his eye, he blushed dark red.

"Shut up," Dave snapped. "Trying to scare her to death. If you like," he told her gravely, "we'll stick around until Dick gets back."

"He won't be back; not in this fog," Laura said. "I'm going to spend the night with friends, so don't worry about me. And now, you'd better all scoot. It's me for the shower, and then I'm off like a bunny."

"You could stay here," Dave said hopefully, "and we'll have an all night party."

"With Dick's beer, no doubt," she said drily. "No thanks. Out, you beach bums!"

When they were gone, she took a leisurely hot shower as if to defeat the chill fog in advance. Then, in just a robe, she sat down for a Martini before calling a cab.

The fog came in very fast—so fast she became uneasy. Without waiting to dress, she picked up the phone. No doubt it would take at least twenty minutes for a cab to get out here; maybe even longer with visibility so bad.

It turned out to be worse than that. The dispatcher was unable to promise anything. "We're mostly trying to deal with emergencies," he told her. "I can't say just when anybody will be able to get out your way. Traffic's hardly moving at all; lights are absolutely useless."

"I'll wait," she said. "Please try to make it as soon as you can."

"I will," he said, but she sensed the emptiness of the promise.

I'd better call Dale after all, she thought. If the cab comes, I'll drop him off, but if not, he'll be good to have around. She thought again of his bulk, the strength of the man. A typical physical culture nut, strong as a bull, always demonstrating special exercises for neck, or arm, or calf. Trying to prove maleness without risking the one demonstration expected of a real man. And yet Dick was worried about their relation.

It was a relief to hear his mellow baritone, and good to savor his anxiety to help.

"Don't worry about a thing, Laura," he said. "I'll be over in half an hour, at most, and hang around until the cab comes—or even if it doesn't. Remember, light on the vermouth."

"I know," she said, feeling as if a dark cloud had moved away. "Just dip the vermouth cork in the gin—right?"

"Right. See you soon," he said. "And by the way, I—" Then the phone went dead.

She took it from her ear, and examined it.

"Dale?" she said petulantly. "Hello. Dale, you still there?"

She got no reply. Slowly, Laura hung up; then lifted the phone again, listening for the dial tone. Silence. She shrugged, and replaced the instrument on its hooks. The service in this part of the country was certainly lousy. Fifth time in a year the phone had gone dead. Once

it had lasted for ten hours. Maybe the corrosive salt air was hard on the outdoor equipment. More likely California just didn't have the knowhow of the Eastern States yet.

I'd better get dressed, she thought. The cab might just show up before I expect it; or Dale come galloping in five minutes under his par for the course.

Laura went up to the bedroom, took off her robe, and was about to begin dressing when she heard faint sounds outside on the patio. She opened the window and peered down. Nothing.

Quickly she grabbed the robe again, and put it on. She knew everything was locked up tight, but still there were nagging doubts. Had she fastened the chain on the back door? And that tricky lock on the bathroom window—was it really set tight, or ready to slip at a good tug?

She made the rounds, shivering a little at the sight of the fog, which now enveloped the whole house like some amorphous beast from the sea—a giant creature with innumerable moist tentacles.

In the kitchen, she thought she saw a face through the window; then decided it was only a blob of fog. All the doors and windows seemed quite secure, yet her heart pounded. Surely there was somebody prowling around outside.

I'll catch him by surprise, she thought grimly, and snapped on the patio floodlights. But all she could see was more fog, weirdly glowing

from the struggling beams that were caught in the woolly mass.

Just nerves, she told herself firmly. I *must* get dressed. I know; I'll lock the bedroom door until either Dale or the cab comes. You feel safer in just one locked room, than in a whole house. Second floor, too.

Then she remembered that the sex-killer was known to climb like a cat. All right, silly; but not through a locked window. If he tried that, with her inside, she'd hit him with something heavy, and he'd fall to the concrete patio.

Hurriedly, as if expecting pursuit, she ran up the stairs to her bedroom, closed the door, and locked it. She started to take off the robe once more, then froze at a sound from the closet. With a scream boiling up her throat, she whirled, pulling the robe tighter than ever. He was standing there, a small man in a blue trench-coat. His weasel face, narrow and bony, seemed alight with a kind of eager gloating; his eyes were crumbs of dark glass. Then he was reaching for her with oddly tiny hands that had thick fingers out of proportion.

The scream broke free at last, but he just grinned at the sound. With no house for hundreds of yards, and the thick fog covering the whole area, why should he care about a few cries, soon to be stifled by those little sausage-fingers that had already killed four women?

Laura screamed again, fighting with long nails. He held her close,

tearing at the robe. Then there was a roar outside, followed by a splintering crash as the door gave.

"I'm coming, Laura," a voice boomed; and there was the sound of a heavy body on the stairs.

Whimpering, the killer let her go. He ran to the window, and struggled to raise it. When it was halfway up, the bedroom door slammed open under a mighty thrust, and Dale was there. He had a forty-five in his hand; the small man teetered on the sill, and the gun boomed, sounding intolerably loud. Dale shot twice more, and the killer screamed, a thin, rabbit-y sound. Then they heard his body hit the concrete below.

"I got him!" Dale boomed. "By God, I killed him!"

"Oh, D-Dale!" Laura sobbed, clutching the tattered robe about her. "T-thank G-God you c-came."

"When we were cut off, I figured something might be wrong," he panted. "So I ran damn near all the way. Imagine, me killing the guy. But I shoulda used my bare hands. I didn't need a gun, did I?"

"N-not you, D-Dale; he was small. Oh, Dale, I c-could kiss you."

"I hold you to that," he cried, an odd ring in his voice. "Man, I feel ten feet tall—it was just as natural, shooting that way. C'mere—I'll take that kiss, by God!"

He pulled her close; his mouth came down on hers with brutal strength. She hadn't expected such

urgency; it was as if he wanted to make up for thousand missed opportunities. His big hand was in her hair, pressing her bruised mouth more tightly against his. She mumbled a protest; he ignored her. Furious, she mustered all her lithe strength, and pulled her face clear.

"Stop it, Dale! Stop it! Let me go!"

But he dragged her back, his mouth seeking hers again, and when she clawed at his eyes, he slapped her hard. Then his hands were going wilder under the torn robe.

"Stop!" she begged. "No, Dale, no—please!" Then, angrily: "Dick will kill you!"

"You've despised me," he said, "but that's over. I'm a new man. I killed him with the first shot." He dragged her towards the bed.

"You're crazy!" she gasped. "If Dick doesn't kill you, you'll rot in prison. You can't get away with this."

"The hell I can't," he said, his voice high. "Don't you see, Laura, the teasing is over. I came just too late, after *he* was through. I killed him, but you were dead—strangled. I'm a hero. And I can do what I like. For this one night, the bars are down—I can do exactly what I like—what I've always been afraid to do."

The fog, now yellowish and greasy, took another lap around the beach house, possessing it for the night.



ONE THOUSAND STEPS

His form was pretty bad. But for a scrawny little guy, he could really lift the weights.

BY JOHN CHANNING CARTER

McGINNIS was no stranger at Rocco's Gym but no one there really knew him. He came each night from seven to eight and sweated over the weights. At first he asked Mac, the attendant, how to lift weights properly without straining a gut, but he never did learn to lift with smooth, animal like grace like the thick muscled regulars at the gym. Later he never said a word to anyone but lifted in silence as sweat oozed from his scrawny body and dribbled to the sagging floor of the old second floor gym.

None of the regulars at Rocco's paid much attention to McGinnis. They were used to seeing strangers there, to exercise or lose a little weight. Usually the characters would wander in for a few nights, then give it up after finding that lifting weights isn't exactly the easiest form of

exercise.

McGinnis stayed on night after night working hard but never mastering the correct method. Never a press or a good clean-and-jerk. He just lifted the weight off the floor, walked a few feet, then put the weight down. Sometimes he just dropped it as if he couldn't hold it anymore. The whole gym rattled and dust rose out of the old sweat soaked floors, nearly choking everyone in the place. That's when the regulars began to notice McGinnis.

He was such a little guy, too; only weighed about one hundred and thirty-five pounds. Mac began to wonder which would break down first—McGinnis or the gym floor.

"When's that little creep gonna learn to lift?" groaned Mac, lifting a gnarled hand to brush away globules of sweat from his forehead.

"This joint's about to cave in now."

"He ain't learning nothing," Kelsey, the old pro fighter replied. "He sure can lift weight for a little punk, though. He's hefting nearly one hundred and seventy-five pounds now."

"You're kidding!" Mac looked at McGinnis with some interest. "He couldn't heft mor'n fifty pounds two months ago. What's he trying to prove?"

Kelsey grunted and took a tremendous swat at the sandbag. He straightened up and began removing his gloves. "Dunno. I asked him once. Just said he wanted to lift his wife. Did you ever see her? She outweighs him a hundred pounds."

"Yeh, I saw her waiting for him one night when he left the gym. She looks like an elephant. She almost stomped him right there on the street. My old lady could yell at me the way she screamed at him and I'd break her back."

Kelsey hung the gloves in his locker, took out a towel and began rubbing his back briskly.

"Why don't he learn to lift right?" he asked.

"I tried to show him," Mac sighed. "He just smiled at me and said he's doing all he wants to do."

"Well, there oughta be a law—way he treats this old floor."

"He pays his fee like everybody else. Don't hurt nobody, I guess," Mac said.

Each night McGinnis lifted a little more weight, added one, maybe two

pounds to the bar. Then he would strain hard, pick it up and walk a few feet, then drop it on the floor. Lift and walk—lift and walk. Drop and pick it up. Got so everybody in the gym would watch him struggle, sweating hard and gasping for breath. Every once in a while he would stop to rest a minute, take a quick swipe at the sweat on his balding head with the sleeve of his ragged yellow sweat shirt, then go back to lifting.

It went on this way for three or four months. Every night somebody would ask, "How much he hefting now?"

"One ninety six," Mac would say, or "One ninety-seven, or "One ninety-nine."

McGinnis didn't seem to notice the men watching and laughing at him. He would sniff the air in the gym, puckering his large, pear-shaped nose in distaste as if he couldn't stand the smell of rubbing alcohol, arnica and good honest sweat. But he was oblivious to sounds in the gym, the clank of the weights, the rumble as they were lowered to the floor, the slap-slap of the jump rope, the heavy thud of a fighter's fist as it rammed into the big bag or the rhythmic tap-tap of the speed bag.

The little man just lifted and walked ten, twenty, then thirty feet. When he could walk all the way around the gym, puffing miserably, chest heaving, he would stop, add another pound and start again.

Then, at exactly eight o'clock each night, McGinnis carefully placed the weights in the rack, walked out the door, down the dark narrow stairs and out to the street. He never stopped to shower, to feel the steaming water rush over his tired body, soothing aching muscles. He dashed out of the building as if in a wild panic.

Downstairs, he met his wife, waiting there like a hovering storm, screeching like a gull as he emerged. More often than not, Kelsey, Mac, and some of the other regulars stood at the upstairs window and listened while she raged at him.

"You scrawny little twerp," she screeched. Grabbing his shoulder in a large, flabby hand, she shook him violently.

"You're going to stay out of that dump!" Then she pointed toward the upstairs windows, saw the men smirking there and shook her fist.

"You miserable bums—you gawawful loafers," she raged, "This idiot would stay out of there if you didn't encourage him—and he smells like a mule!"

Then she turned on McGinnis like a tiger, quick for a woman of her size. "You'll come back here over my dead body."

Mac whispered, "Boy, would that body make a lump to crawl over."

McGinnis never said a word but he was back at Rocco's the next night same as always and she was out there waiting.

Lifting weights didn't do a thing

for McGinnis. After six months he was still the narrow shouldered, thin armed gnome, and he gained no weight. Lifting weights was no easier for him either. He still grunted and strained, yet he added pound after pound on the bar. One night a newcomer to the gym went over to the weights McGinnis had returned to the rack. He couldn't budge it!

"How can a runt lift that?" he asked. "What gives with the guy?"

No one had the answer.

Just as suddenly as McGinnis had come to Rocco's gym, he was gone. One night he fastened on two hundred and fifty pounds of weight. He stood up for a second, wiped the sweat from his face, rubbed his hands dry on his pants and then bent over. Grasping the bar tightly, he stood up in one swift movement. He stood motionless, looking at the ceiling, wet his lips with his tongue and began walking. As he walked he counted the steps in a sing-song fashion. Without pausing he walked eight times around the gym shouting the count at each step.

The regulars stopped their workouts and stared open-mouthed as McGinnis came at last to the end of his eighth trip around the gym.

"One thousand!" he shouted and thrust the weight from him as if dropping a red-hot iron. It smashed to the floor and rolled violently to the wall.

McGinnis appeared to be in a trance. He looked around at the gap-

ing onlookers, smiled and said quietly, "Two hundred fifty pounds, one thousand steps. That's it, fellows!"

Then, without another word, he turned, walked out the door and clattered down the stairs. The regulars peered from the window at McGinnis and his wife as they walked down the street into the darkness. They heard her shrill voice as some distant foghorn as it faded into the night.

It began to rain as McGinnis and his wife walked the long six blocks toward their home and it was dark. The big woman slogged along, hardly lifting her feet and as the rain drummed down upon them out of the blacksky, she was soon drenched. They turned down an unpaved alley, rutted and littered with trash.

A strong wind began to blow and the ruts filled with water. With heads bowed into the wind, McGinnis and his wife trudged down the alley. The woman was silent now and only the steady rhythm of the rain beating into the mud and against the sodden wood fences along the alley broke the stillness.

Finally they reached home, an old frame, two story building standing with its steeply slanted roof piercing high into the rain-blackened sky. Neither spoke as they climbed the back porch stairs and opened the kitchen door.

The huge woman reached for a light switch and cursed when the light failed to work. She fumbled through the kitchen and tried the

hall light but it, too would not work.

McGinnis still stood in the open doorway peering into the blackness, listening as his wife stumbled about the house, going from room to room, searching for a workable light. He could hear the squeaking of the rain soaked shoes and the rumble of movement as her large body brushed against the furniture.

McGinnis was cold and wet and his small body shook violently as he waited and listened. He heard the scratch of a match and soon he saw the flicker of a candle down the narrow hall.

His wife appeared suddenly, the candle held at arms length, casting a yellowish glow over her wide, flat face. Her long scraggly hair still dripped water onto her ponderous shoulders and down the shapeless mass of her body. Her eyes were dull and half closed.

"Well," she rasped hoarsely, "You going to do something about these lights?"

McGinnis turned to a shelf at his right, closing the door behind him as he did so. The shelf was above his head and his hand groped among the tools lying on it.

"I'll check the fuse box," he said as he located a heavy hammer on the shelf.

She followed him into the utility room, almost falling over a large wooden box lying in front of the door leading out to the driveway.

"What kind of mess you got here now?" she grumbled, rubbing her

bruised shin. She bent over, holding the candle low. "A damned old box."

While the rain pounded the side of the house with an almost numbing fury, McGinnis stood over his wife's bowed head for an instant which became an eternity. Then he quickly raised the hammer high above his head, holding it tightly with both hands and swung it downward. The heavy metal struck her head with a crashing thud and was almost buried there. The candle fell from her hand into the box and, still lit, rolled forward as her body dropped to the floor. Her head hung over the edge of the box directly over the flame of the candle.

McGinnis stared blindly at the grotesque head in the flickering light. As he stood there, drops of blood and rainwater slowly dripped onto the candle flame, leaving the room in darkness.

He then opened the fuse box be-

hind him, flung the switch upward and the light flashed on. McGinnis did not look upon his wife's body but took a blanket from the top of the washing machine and with eyes closed, wrapped her in it.

Now standing over her at almost rigid attention, he took a deep breath, bent his knees and lifted her into his arms.

Out into the rain he walked, down the driveway and across the road into the wooded area which fronted his home. There he began to count softly as he took each step through the thick water-soaked brush.

He finally came to the edge of a high embankment at the bottom of which lay the murky waters of an abandoned quarry. Here he dropped the body and heard the splash above the whistle of the wind.

"Two hundred fifty pounds, one thousand steps," he murmured and walked away into the rain.



*I fired slowly six times,
killing them both, and
then left them locked in
each other's arms.*

"strange triangle" by ray stewart

AFLY paused in his flight to admire himself in the greasy film a soiled rag had left on the bar. Satisfied with his appearance, he buzzed lazily to the rim of my glass, smelled the liquor and flipped to the cigarettes parked next to it. I caught him with an open hand slap that startled the bartender standing a few feet from me.

The fly, temporarily stunned, buzzed between my thumb and forefinger. I watched him kick and flail his legs. We both knew he was in a trap. He had been caught as easily as I intended to trap Ceilia and her latest lover. Bitterly I thought of the two of them, probably at this very second wallowing in each other's arms in my apartment, in my bed.

I stared at the fly. He seemed to

sense he was going to die, he stopped struggling and lay still. I increased pressure slowly until his guts exploded through his skin! I felt no remorse for killing the insect and I'd feel none for killing Ceilia and her lover.

I wiped my fingers on the front of my shirt and watched one of my former girlfriends enter the bar from the hot afternoon sunshine. When her eyes adjusted to the gloom she smiled and walked over.

"Hello darling, all alone this afternoon?" Her question came on rancid breath, through crooked teeth. Her smile was a bright crimson smear painted on thin chapped lips.

I stared into the half empty glass. "Not today Gloria, I'm not interested!"

She laughed, slid from the bar stool next to mine and disappeared in the general direction of the jukebox. Her voice trailed after her, "My, my aren't we getting senile in our old age? There was a time when you couldn't get enough!"

I finished the drink, ordered another — the seventh or was it the eighth? I didn't need a tramp to remind me I was getting old. The mirror with its reflection was taking good care of that. The face staring back at me was grey and lifeless. Dark circles surrounded eyes that lately even barbiturates failed to brighten. My hair was greying and beginning to thin at the temples.

The glass was empty again. I signaled for another, barely lifting the glass from the bar. Life was just as empty as the glass — empty without Ceilia. Next month I'd be forty-four or was it forty-five? Too old to start over again — too young to spend the rest of my life without a girl. Life had failed me and now even memory was becoming physically painful.

The first day I saw her, she was alone in the confusion of Penn Station. Her confusion highlighted her innocence and youthfulness. I watched her quietly as did others like me. She didn't appear more than fifteen or sixteen, even though she had piled her hair high and wore too much makeup in an attempt to appear older than she actually was.

When I spoke to her, she reacted as I expected — frightened and un-

certain. I forced myself to smile and speak with a confidence I didn't actually feel. By talking quickly and quietly I was able to get a return smile and partially gain her confidence. After that it wasn't too difficult!

When Ceilia and I left Penn Station we left together. I carried her cheap cardboard suitcase for her. I wasn't surprised at its lightness, she obviously wasn't the richest girl in the East.

She had her first meal in New York with me in the forty-second street Automat. She ate hungrily while I only toyed with the food in front of me. Hunger for her softness and youth made my hands tremble. It was all I could do to control them under the table.

The little I needed to know about her I had already suspected. She was sixteen and had run away from a grubby little coal mining town in Pennsylvania. She was sure no one would be overly concerned with her disappearance, in fact she pointed out, there was one less mouth to feed.

As I spoke to her I tried desperately to keep my voice under control and surprised myself by my own apparent sincerity. "Ceilia, you've never been to a city like this before, and you wouldn't be the first girl to come here and get herself hurt. This whole place is crawling with rotten, degenerate people looking for young girls like you, and when they find them they only hurt them!"

"You're young enough to be my own child and I surely don't want any one to hurt you. I know you don't have much money and you're going to need a place to stay until you get settled. I want you to stay with me where I can keep an eye on you and help you to get settled." Being the hypocrite I was, I lowered my eyes to the table and held her smooth, young hand, "Besides I'm getting old and lonely. I need someone to help and take care of, or else my whole life is a complete waste."

A tear started in the corner of her eye and I knew I had won!

The first evening was the best. She was tired from the trip and sleepy from the heavy Italian wine we had with dinner. Curled up on the sofa, she was completely absorbed in the play on television. I reached for her and she nestled in my arms. Then it was only a matter of seconds before I tilted her head and tasted the candied sweetness of her mouth. She opened her eyes wide and neither returned nor repulsed my kiss.

Her breath was warm and pleasant in my ear. "I've never done anything like this before," she whispered.

"Don't be afraid." I countered, "I'd be the last person in the world to hurt you!"

Hours later she responded slowly to my love making and explorations of her young body. She answered with a passion that almost overwhelmed me. In the hours, days and months that followed she grew more adept at our bedroom games and

responded to every erotic demand I made of her, never failing to fascinate or arouse me.

I took great pains to keep her happy and her presence unknown from my few friends and intimates. Eventually when I did have to introduce her to them I told them she was my niece. Occasionally I received a knowing leer from someone who knew I had no family of my own.

As time passed Ceilia developed an insatiable appetite for love making. I learned too late I had taught her too well. On nights she tired me, she'd become irritable and frustrated. I introduced her to barbiturates to calm her nerves and, more important, to get some badly needed sleep.

The inevitable finally happened and the incident added twenty years to my life!

It was a Saturday afternoon; I was alone in the apartment. Ceilia had gone off to a movie alone, and I was catching some badly needed rest. I answered the shrill ring of the front doorbell, annoyed that my sleep had been interrupted.

Ceilia stood in the hall, her face chalk-white, a hangdog expression on her face. She was in the custody of a policeman. I felt the color draining from my face, panic building inside me.

"What's the trouble," I blurted out, my heart pounding wildly.

"Does this girl live here?" The cop's face was expressionless. He never took his eyes from me.

"Of course; she's my niece," I lied.

Once inside the apartment, the policeman sat on the sofa, Ceilia refused to look at me. "How old is your niece?"

"She'll be seventeen in another month," I stammered.

He inhaled slowly on the cigarette he had lit, and then flipped the match into the ashtray. "I'm telling you this for your own good. Your niece has been hanging around a bar on Third Avenue and this is one of the best ways I know for a kid to get into trouble. Now I warned her once and I'm telling you, keep an eye on her or you'll find yourself, and her, in court."

It seemed as though hours had passed before the policeman left and I was alone with her.

"Ceilia what's wrong with you? Don't you know I could get into a lot of trouble, even go to jail if anything happened to you?"

She pouted, lifted her eyes from the floor and answered defiantly, "I don't care . . . you . . . you're no fun anymore. You're always tired and besides you don't own me anyhow!" With this she flounced into the bedroom and slammed the door.

I sat for a long time staring into space. Finally I mixed myself a drink, my hands trembling—spilling half of it.

From that day on, life for me was a living hell. I catered to Ceilia like a slave, careful always to keep her time occupied as best I could. I lavished her with gifts, many I

couldn't afford. My bank account dwindled yet her demands became more and more insistent as well as impractical. I also noticed the change in our lovemaking. She deliberately tired me; her kisses were a mockery. Her drinking increased and she stayed away from the house for hours at a time—day and night.

Then there were the evenings I returned home from work to find strange cigarette butts in the ashtrays and could smell the animal sweat of foreign lovemakings. If I questioned her, she only lied—if she wasn't laughing.

Leaving for work one morning I discovered a note addressed to her in the mail box. Even before I read it I knew approximately what it would contain:

"Ceilia, I was unable to come yesterday as I expected. Miss you already doll. I'll stop by this afternoon. Wear the same outfit you wore the last time you answered the door for me. Love, Lee"

The note infuriated me; jealousy was something painful. I knew what ". . . wear the same outfit you wore when you answered the door," meant! Ceilia enjoyed nothing more than promenading around the apartment as nude as the day she was born.

Perhaps it was that day I decided to kill her. I had created a monster. But she was a beautiful monster and living without her would be just as painful as living with her was getting to be.

I made her what she was and it stood to reason that I could destroy her!

That was two days ago or was it two years, I don't know anymore. I had no choice, I had to get rid of her. The gun I stole from the office weighed heavily in my pocket—the die had been cast—she had to go.

The jukebox erupted in song shocking me back to reality. My hands were heavy on the empty glass. I signalled the bartender for another drink and welcomed its fiery bitterness.

The heat of the afternoon hadn't let up. The cement under my feet was still warm as I drew nearer the apartment. Evening had fallen on the city and I hardly noticed. The jacket was draped over my right arm and I felt the pull of the gun.

The hall was dim and smelled of a thousand offensive odors. I took the stairs lightly on tip toe and slipped into the apartment unnoticed. All the rooms were in shadows except the bedroom where light showed under the door. I eased into a chair and tortured myself by the sounds coming from the tiny room where I had realized all my wildest dreams.

The bed springs sang rhythmically, laughing at me, mocking me! In the gloom of the living room I stared at the hand holding the gun. It was wrinkled and old. Where had my youth gone? I wondered.

Finally the noise of their lovemaking stopped and I heard the familiar

contented sigh which meant Ceilia's passion had abated. I knew she'd now entwine herself in her lover's arms and rest with her eyes closed.

I waited long minutes in the gathering darkness until the entire apartment was as still as death itself, save for the ticking of the clock, ticking their lives away. I walked slowly to the room, soundlessly skirting the furniture and pushed the bedroom door open.

They were together as I expected—asleep in each other's arms, oblivious of the entire world. Ceilia looked like an angel sleeping with her familiar half smile on her face. A thin line of perspiration beaded her lips. My heart cried out to her as I lifted the pistol and aimed it at them.

I called to her softly, whispering her name as I had done when we were lovers. She opened her eyes sleepily, smiled then screamed as I pulled the trigger. I fired slowly six times, killing them both, and then left them locked in each other's arms.

In the confusion that followed the shooting, I vaguely remembered apartment doors slamming and heard people pounding on the front door. I slipped out the back door, locking it after me from force of habit. I passed no one on the way out the building. As I turned the corner I heard the scream of a police car on its way to the building.

I walked the streets alone that night saying goodby to New York. I tried to put all thoughts of Ceilia from my mind but it was impossible.

On the half hour I swallowed barbiturates until I thought my heart would explode. Aimlessly I walked the familiar streets, seeing Ceilia's young face in every girl I passed on the street. Her pouting smile was in every store window I passed.

Her musical laughter echoed in my ears. People stopped to stare at me as I listened and spoke to her—memory tortured me. I rode the subways that night—they always fascinated her and she was a little afraid of them.

Was there really a Ceilia, I thought—or was she a figment of my imagination? Did I really kill her? I wondered. Where was the gun. I didn't have it with me. I slept fitfully on the subway, on into the Bronx and then back to the heart of the city.

I awoke suddenly wondering where I was, and then remembered. Was there ever a Ceilia? The face mirrored in the opposite window was hollowed and sunken checked. I was old, perhaps my memory was

failing me, perhaps this night was all a monstrous dream.

I left the subway somewhere in the middle of Manhattan and bought a newspaper. The headlines screamed at me—"POLICE HUNT SUSPECT IN LOVE NEST DOUBLE SLAYING!" It was true, my head ached—I was tired.

I found myself alone in front of a police station. The sergeant was by himself behind his desk. His eyes were red rimmed from his long shift.

He smiled, "Can I help you?"

I placed the newspaper on his desk, "I killed them both!"

Obviously I startled him, he never took his eyes from my face when he buzzed an office somewhere in the building. He picked up the phone, "Chief, there's someone here claims to have killed those two in the village."

He listened for a moment then asked, "Did you kill them both lady?"

I nodded. "Yeah chief, she says she killed both those girls."





hard-rocks

BY ROBERT MCKAY

Most of the time it was a thankless, hopeless, helpless job. But the rewards, when they came, were great.

As the steel door on his right clanged shut, Carmichael pushed the buzzer under his foot and the door on his left opened.

Jake Gorman stuck his head in. "Burton didn't show, Dep. Do you want Milan?"

Carmichael nodded. He set Burton's folder aside and opened the one marked #35467—Milan, Roy. He knew it by heart but he opened it, anyway; while Milan hard-heeled into the small, bare courtroom and, with a patient sigh, stood waiting.

Milan's F.B.I. sheet showed sixteen arrests: 3-19-52 arr PD Miami Fla B&GL, Rel; 8-23-53 arr PD NYC Inv of Rob, Rel; 10-2-53 arr PD NYC Sus of Murder, Rel; etc., etc. Then in 1956 New York finally made a burglary charge stick and it was good for three years in Auburn. Milan jumped his parole immediately, but less than a year later Carmichael's state caught up with him, and he was going to stay caught for a while this time. His sentence was

20-to-50 years, for armed robbery and kidnapping.

The psych report: *Psychopathic personality—Criminal values—No insight—Authority rebel—Institution adjustment should be satisfactory but may react violently under stress.*

The stereotyped phrases, true enough in one sense, but nearly meaningless after you had read the same cliches applied to a thousand different men; and had then talked to each man and found that each of them was a living individual—and as different one from the other as any thousand men can ever be.

But the deputy warden couldn't blame the psychologists. There were only two of them and they never stayed at the pen more than a year or two and seldom were they able to talk to a new inmate for more than fifteen minutes—and how the hell could one human being probe another human being's troubled or twisted or frightened mind in fifteen lousy minutes?

The Dep raised his eyes and said, "Sit down, Milan," and knew that the psychologists were right about this one, but it didn't help. You could call this bucko a criminal psychopath, or a compulsive sociopath, or a double-banded ruby-throated slitzocrack—and you hadn't gained an inch.

Sociologist's report: *Roy Milan—32 years old, 6'1", 185 pounds, Never married (N. V.), High School education (N. V.).* "Not verified," said the sociologist. Because with three sociologists for 4000 prisoners there was never time to verify much of anything, except dependent children (always) and divorces (sometimes) and service records (occasionally). *No family ties—Product of broken home—Whereabouts of father unknown. Mother died in subject's fifth year and he was reared in a succession of foster homes. Extensive J. D. record.*

Milan's light blue eyes stared at Carmichael unblinkingly. Once, long ago, that bright steady gaze might have impressed the Dep as candid. But Milan's eyes *never* blinked; and they had no depth. Looking into them was like trying to look into polished enamel.

"You're charged with threatening another inmate," Carmichael said.

"Yeah? Who?" Milan spoke in the staccato monotone he affected. Or perhaps it wasn't an affectation. Carmichael was never sure how much of Milan was real and how much was front. Sometimes he

thought there was *no* real Milan—nothing you could ever hope to get hold of and say, "This is what he really is." And then again he would wonder if maybe the man wasn't completely real, neither more nor less than he appeared to be.

Milan's denims were, as always, immaculate; his shoes new and well shined, his thick black hair neatly trimmed. Milan was one of the hard-rock sharpies. The hard-rocks with their mocking eyes and their swagger. The hard-rocks who made running a prison the tough, nasty job that it was.

Now Carmichael looked at the court ticket and silently cursed the guard who had written it. The guard had heard Milan say, "I'll run this shiv right through your liver, Kid." But there had been a pile of boxes between the guard and Milan and by the time the guard came around the boxes, Milan was standing in a group of inmates and nobody was saying anything. The guard shook Milan down but he was clean of course, and now he was sitting in Inmate Court, smiling a little because he knew that this was one deputy warden who played strictly by the rules.

A smart guard wouldn't have written the ticket without some evidence to back it up. But it wasn't that simple, either. Some of the old guards had grown up under a regime where any ticket was a good ticket—they couldn't understand Carmichael's way of running a

prison, and they didn't want to understand it. And new or old, a smart guard was an exception. Three-fifty a month didn't attract geniuses.

But that part didn't matter. Someday this same guard might catch Milan with the shiv in his hand or buried in a kid's liver, and then nothing would matter except that the guard be able to move quickly and have the *desire* to move quickly. The desire was the thing. And you couldn't instill that desire by tearing up every ticket the guard wrote.

So the Dep considered, for a moment, doing it the easy way. He could find Milan guilty, just because he, the deputy warden, wanted it that way. He could sentence Milan to Segregation for six months or a year; and the prison would run a shade smoother, perhaps, while Milan was out of circulation. But there were a couple of hundred Milan's in prison and he couldn't put them all in Segregation—and even if he could, he was sure he didn't want to.

"All right, Milan," he said. "You've got a winner this time. But if you come to court in the next three months for *any* reason, I'm going to take you out of the chair shop and put you back in the cotton mill."

Milan lifted his eyebrows and nodded. The Dep watched him swagger out the door—heading, maybe, for some kid who would die soon with a knife in his guts.

I suppose I ought to take him out

of population, the Dep thought. But Jesus he's gotten along all right for two years now and the place is running better now than it ever has, and I'm not going to start playing God just to protect myself these last few weeks.

Not until the last thought formed in his mind did he realize that he had finally made his decision. But I guess I knew it all along, he thought. How the hell could I turn it down?

"How can I turn it down?" he had said just last night to his wife Ruth. She heard the baffled anger in his voice. Twelve-year-old Jack kept his eyes on his plate, but Missy, at five, had no reserve and she stared wide-eyed at her daddy.

Later, when the kids were in bed, Ruth put her arms around him and said, "Look, honey. Let's don't make the money too important. I want you to do what you *want* to do."

"Sure," he said. "But they're offering me *twelve thousand dollars*. To *start!* You can't just say 'Don't make the money too important.' If I'm very lucky I might be a warden in ten years. So what! What's so wonderful about being head man in a stinking prison?"

She looked at him, studying his intense, tightly controlled face. An ascetic face, she had thought when she first met him, and the years had only strengthened her impression. He was thirty-five years old now, a little over medium height, heavy in the neck and shoulders, balding slightly at the temples. There was

nothing remarkable about his appearance—but there was a burning, driving, tightly held fierceness in him. His eyes were brown, and their gentleness was disturbing.

After fourteen years of marriage, Ruth loved her husband wholly. She also thought he was a great man. She thought that in some ways he was close to being a saint. But she never said anything like that to *him*.

“Honey, I don’t know what’s best for you—for us,” she said slowly. “Sometimes I wish with all my heart that you were out of that prison. I worry about you—”

He shook his head and opened his mouth but she put her hand on his mouth.

“I know I *shouldn’t* worry,” she said quickly, “but I’m going to tell you now how I feel and then you’re going to have to make up your mind and quit torturing yourself.” She kissed him lightly.

“Sometimes I hate that penitentiary and the way you’re on call twenty-four hours a day and every time you have to go out there at night I get scared all over again that there’s a riot or a fire and you’re going to get hurt.”

He frowned at her.

“But lots of wives have to worry about their husbands,” she went on, breathlessly now. “What’s important is that we go on feeling good about each other and our life together. And I think the only way we can have this good feeling is for you to be doing the kind of work you

want to do—work you care about.

“You see,” she said, kissing him again and then pushing him away and looking at him very seriously and honestly. “I’m being practical and selfish, when you get right down to it. My happiness depends on your happiness. If *you* want to be a personnel director, that’s what I want. But if you want, really and deep in your heart, to stay in prison work—then that’s what I want, too.”

Which sounded fine when she said it, but this morning he had been right back where he started. Because he didn’t know how he would feel *after* he made his choice, and it would be too late then if he decided later that he had made the wrong choice. There weren’t many \$12,000 jobs floating around, and—funny thing—there were even fewer \$8500 Deputy Warden’s jobs.

He didn’t know yet where American Metals had got the idea they wanted him for their personnel director. He had thought he was settled for life in prison work—even when the cost of living had gone on jumping much faster than his salary, and the price of Jack’s first long-pants suit had shocked him, and he had understood bleakly what it would be like when Missy needed party dresses and Jack needed money for college.

But the offer from American had turned his world upside down. He knew now that he had no choice. Not really. He owed his family more than he owed the prison system and

all the convicts in the world. He shook his head and frowned. The more he examined his motives for sticking with prison work, the more they smelled of egotism. Other men in the service could do the same job he was doing. Do it better!

He slammed the lid on his mind. The decision was made now. He'd tell the warden tonight. He pushed the buzzer under his foot.

The next case was a sissy and his jockey, caught red-handed or red-something—and there was no need to exercise judgement here. It was automatic that they both go to Sex-Deviant Segregation for an indefinite stay. This was no real answer to anything either, and Carmichael knew it. But in a crowded and under-staffed penitentiary you locked up the active homosexuals when you caught them, and the rest of the time you thought about it as little as possible.

The morning wore on. Forty cons came through the door and sat briefly in front of him and some of them went back out, thankfully or cockily or stolidly. And some of them went through the steel door on his right to spend a day or three or ten on a diet of soup and solitude.

You could call it a Correctional Cell if you wanted to, the Dep thought wryly. And even though there was soup, these days, to go with the bread and water, and a blanket to spread on the concrete floor; it was still solitary confinement in a stripped cell, with nothing

to look at but a bare wall and a dim bulb that burned night and day. The convicts called it The Hole, and that's what it was.

The men who sat in front of him were charged with Gambling and Possession of Contraband and Illegal Communication and Fighting and Immoral Acts and Wasting Food and Shirking and Insolence and Destruction of State Property. And occasionally one was charged with Attempted Escape or Assaulting a Guard or Stabbing Inmate # So-and-so With Knife made from Steel Spring.

The Dep read the tickets and listened to the stories and listened mainly for what the tone of voice told him. He watched for the tell-tale gestures and the sweating and the danger signs of mania or delusion or acute depression. And he knew he was often fooled and often wrong. But he did the best he could.

When court was over he and Jake Gorman went back upstairs to the Deputy's Office. Jake Gorman was his inmate clerk. Jake had six years in on a 10-to-20 for armed robbery and would be eligible for parole in less than a year.

He was tall, strongly built, good looking in reckless, narrow-eyed, burr-headed fashion. Twenty-eight years old, prison wise, cynical, and smart. His background, up to a point, was altogether different from Milan's. He had had what appeared to be a normal childhood and had never tangled with the law until

he was eighteen. But from then on his record and Milan's were similar, at least on the surface.

Carmichael liked Jake. Liked him because he didn't swagger, liked the way he commanded respect from guards and inmates both—an accomplishment for any con who had to work so close to The Man.

Jake's first three years in the prison had been a different story. He had been a trouble-maker and a con- niver—until the Dep, against the advice of all his captains, had lifted him out of the machine shop and given him the job he held now.

Jake had not been in trouble since. But after three years of close association, Carmichael admitted ruefully that he had not the faintest idea whether Jake's post-prison plans were built around a lunch bucket or a Luger.

Shagle, the yard captain, was waiting in Carmichael's office. A shambling, loose-skinned man with pale gray eyes and a prissy mouth—Shagle had earned his captaincy by twenty years of rigid rule enforcement. To Shagle, an inmate was a number on a prison shirt. And he handled his numbers as ruthlessly as a bookkeeper.

Five years ago, after the last and worst riot, when Carmichael had been brought up from the Reformatory to take over this job, he had clashed head-on with Shagle.

For the Deputy ran the prison; make no mistake about that. The Warden had his hands full with

other matters. He had to act as a one-man lobby to squeeze a few more bucks out of the legislature. He had to spend more time than you'd think being kind to women whose sons and husbands were marking time inside the walls. He had to pacify a crew of loud-mouthed politicians who wanted to know when he was going to stop mollicoddling all those thieves and murderers. He had to deal endlessly with do-gooders whose plans for prisoner aid and rehabilitation never included provision for raising the money that might make some of their plans workable.

Shagle had been a problem and was still a problem, but the Dep had learned quickly that in a big penitentiary the cold rigidity of a Shagle was sometimes the exact disciplinary implement you had to have.

The yard captain had become the Deputy's hatchet man. And rather than resenting his role, Shagle seemed to consider each opportunity for action another small victory in his constant war against the Deputy's softness.

"So you let Milan off the hook again," Shagle said.

"Yeah." Carmichael walked to the window and stared out across the prison yard. The autumn sunlight was kind to the yard. Even the gray stone cell blocks were mellow in this light. But then the sun caught the brass badge of a hurrying guard and the Dep noticed

as if for the first time the heavy black bars on the narrow windows of the cell blocks—the dull black steel bars crisscrossed the windows and absorbed the sunlight, leaving the impression that beyond those barred windows could be nothing but darkness.

The bars should be light gray; or cream-colored, thought Carmichael. Or better yet, there shouldn't be any bars on those inside windows at all. Then he grimaced impatiently within himself and turned and saw Shagle and said, "What's on your mind?"

"Giving Milan a break is like giving a shark a break," Shagle said. "He'll tear your guts out first chance he gets."

Carmichael sat down at his desk without answering. He wished Shagle would go away. Right now he wanted to think about American Metals and the \$12,000, and what it would be like never again to have to deal with men like Milan; or Shagle either, for that matter.

"You've been lucky, Shagle said. "Putting birds like Gorman in your office and letting Milan and that crew of psychopaths run around like they own the joint. And those *art* classes and *book* clubs, for Chrissake . . ."

"Well, I wouldn't let it bother me, if I were you," Carmichael said coldly. And then with a new and savage pleasure he said, "Shagle, I suppose they'll always be a place for a few men like you in every peni-

tentiary. But your place is in the yard, not in this office. Now get out there and do what you're paid to do."

Shagle flushed a purple crimson. "OK, Mr. Deputy Warden," he said in a strangled voice. He turned stiffly and reached for the door knob, but the door flew open and Klipstein, the young red-headed desk captain, burst into the office.

"Dep, there's hell to pay at that chair shop! They've grabbed a couple of guards and there's supposed to be a con bleeding to death on the second floor but they won't let anybody get close to him."

"Ah . . . Jesus! Jesus! *Jesus!*" It was a curse and a prayer. It was silent. It took two seconds and then the Dep was up and moving toward the door and Shagle said, "This is *my* baby."

Carmichael stopped. This was the kind of job Shagle was good at. The yard captain would move in with twenty club-swinging guards and the trouble at the chair shop would be over quickly. Maybe.

"Who're the ringleaders?"

"No dope on it yet," Klipstein said, "But I'll bet on Milan and Boynton and Rizzo."

Yeah . . . Milan, Carmichael thought. And Boynton. He glanced at the clock. 10:30. At 11:45 the men from the shops would be streaming across the yard toward the messhall.

"You stay here," he said to Shagle. "Have the riot squad ready to roll. If you don't hear from me by 11:15,

close in fast and sew the chair shop up tight. We—”

“Are you gonna *talk* ’em into the Hole?” Shagle interrupted, his prissy mouth curling in disgust.

“I’m going to try. Now do what I tell you.” He turned to Klipstein. “I’m appointing you Acting Deputy Warden in my absence, Klip. Do what you have to do; but for God’s sake don’t let anything get started while those chow lines are moving.”

Before either captain could answer he was out of the office. He caught Jake Gorman’s sharp glance. And then he was down the stairs, walking quickly through the golden sunlight toward the appointment he had always known he would someday have to keep.

He was unarmed; guns were forbidden inside the walls. And he was unprepared. For despite the strength of his convictions, he had never been able to decide in his own mind exactly how he would meet the reality of mass violence.

The chair shop looked quiet from the outside. Four guards stood tensely at the door and the only cons in sight were a couple of sweepers half a block away, looking over their shoulders, sensing trouble but satisfied to stay clear of it.

Inside the shop he was struck first by the silence and the gloom and emptiness. Then a rustle and murmur filtered down from the second floor. When he put his foot on the stairs a voice from above said, “Just hold it right there unless you want

a sack of iron on your head.”

“This is the Deputy Warden,” he said as he slowly climbed the stairs. “I’m alone. I want to talk to you.”

“OK, Dep, come on up.”

But he was already up by then and the second floor looked the way he thought it would look. A hundred and fifty cons standing and sitting around. Some looked sheepish and some looked scared and some looked bewildered. And in the center of the floor, facing him, stood a group of about twenty and none of these looked the least bit sheepish or was in this group.

scared or bewildered. Roy Milan But it was Boynton who spoke first. Boynton the 6’4”, 250-pound moron who was serving four consecutive life sentences for multiple rape and murder. “What’s on your mind, Dep?” he said, waving a three-foot length of steel pipe as if it were a willow switch.

Carmichael had been scanning the room carefully. Now he brought his gaze back to Boynton and winced in his heart at the blank, manic ferocity in the giant’s glittering eyes.

“I heard you had a guard up here.”

“Yeah, we got two of ’em locked in the can,” Boynton said. “We ain’t hurt ’em any.”

“I heard that an inmate had been knifed.”

“You heard a lot, and most of it wrong, as usual. But you ain’t heard nothin’ yet.” This was Milan speaking now for the first time, and stepping forward. Milan was the

man who would have to be convinced.

Carmichael glanced at his watch. 10:42. In thirty-three minutes Shagle would be here with the riot squad and the talking would be over.

"Nobody knifed?"

"No," Milan said, putting his hand inside his shirt and coming out with a blade a foot long. "But there will be if you don't play ball—and it won't be no con."

"What do you want?"

"I want out. Me and these guys." His gesture included the group around him. "Those punks—" motioning toward the other men in the room, "Those punks want to stay here and rot while they wait for the parole board to spring them."

"It won't work, Roy," Carmichael said quietly. "The guards on the main gate have standing orders to ignore hostages. They'll shoot, regardless of who you've got with you; because they know that if they don't shoot they'll be prosecuted for aiding and abetting an escape."

"I doubt that," Milan said. "I doubt that they'd shoot the deputy warden."

Carmichael didn't answer. Milan was smart and cool and his mind worked in ways impossible for a normal mind to understand or anticipate.

"This isn't something that just happened on the spur of the moment," Milan said. "We know what we're doing and we've got you by the balls, Dep."

While Milan talked, the cons around him had spread out and some of them were behind Carmichael now, between him and the stairs. He looked over his shoulder. Jake Gorman stood directly behind. Jake Gorman with a baseball bat in his hands.

So I was wrong about him, too, Carmichael thought. He must have been right on my heels.

"What are you doing mixed up with this bunch, Jake?" His voice was calm, but his mouth was sour with the taste of betrayal.

"I'm a con, Dep. And you're a cop. I do your paper work for you, but we're on opposite sides of the fence." Gorman grinned. The reckless, cynical grin that said nothing; and everything.

"You haven't got a chance," Carmichael said flatly. "Put your weapons down and release those hostages and I give you my word there'll be no rough stuff."

His eyes moved from man to man, trying to reach each one separately. "You guys made a mistake. But if you stop now, we'll forget it. Keep going and I won't be able to help you. You know what kind of trouble you're heading for."

Milan laughed. "You're real comical," he said. "Listen, Boy Scout. We'll give *you* some trouble if you want it. Now shut your fat mouth or I'll have Boynton shut it for you with that piece of pipe."

Milan's hand came up and he touched the Dep's chest with the

point of the long knife. "You've got five minutes to make up your mind. Otherwise, as soon as those chow lines start moving, you're going to have the goddamndest riot on your hands you ever heard of. Only you won't see much of it because you'll be dead."

Carmichael was aware suddenly that the atmosphere of the room had changed. The non-participant cons were on their feet now, listening avidly. They hadn't wanted the violence when it started, but as they saw authority defied and humiliated their mood was changing.

Carmichael knew he had failed. In less than thirty minutes Shagle would be here, but the riot squad would never handle this bunch—not now, not after Milan had shown them that Authority was just a man, an unarmed man, and helpless in the face of naked revolt.

Rizzo, the gangland executioner, had a shiv in his hands now. At the edge of his vision Carmichael saw some of the previously neutral cons beginning to hunt for makeshift weapons.

"Here's the pitch," said Milan in his staccato monotone. "We go to the main gate and you and the two guards go with us. You tell the tower guards to throw their guns down—inside the walls where we can get them. Then they open the gates and we blow, and any of these boys who have changed their minds can blow with us. Then you can get your gates shut and have everything

under control before the chow lines move."

Carmichael shook his head.

"Don't shake your head at me, you phoney sonofabitch!" Milan shouted. And Carmichael knew that he had been right about one thing, anyway. There was a real Milan under the hard-rock front. It blazed in the con's eyes and trembled in his ragged voice. "You're just a piece of crap to me!" Milan screamed. The knife jerked convulsively.

"Take it easy, Roy!" Jake Gorman cut in sharply.

Milan glared at him. "You keep out of this," he said, his voice amazingly under control again. "You're just along for the ride, slick boy, and don't forget it."

He turned back to Carmichael. "You know what's going to happen you shake your head again?"

The Dep said nothing, watching him.

"We're going over to Segregation and take the keys away from the guards and turn loose Jack Grimes and Izzard and King Kong Morton and Crazy Louie and all the nuts and bad boys you couldn't handle.

"See those cans?" Milan pointed to a row of army-surplus five-gallon cans, used in the penitentiary to transport flammable liquids. There were thirty or forty of them lined up along the wall, and the Dep wondered fleetingly how they had all been smuggled into the chair shop.

"Those cans are full of turpentine,

Mr. Deputy. Now do you want to take us to the main gate or do you want to see how many fires two hundred gallons of turpentine will start?

"As I said, you won't actually see too much of it. 'Cause the first thing I'm going to do is give Crazy Louie a shiv and let him wear it out on you."

Crazy Louie with a shiv would be very bad. But the fire would be worse. The prison was old; many of the buildings were frame. Once the fire got started the walls would enclose a crematory. Carmichael had two choices. And each of them led only to violence and death and horror.

If he could stall for twenty minutes, Shagle would be here with the riot squad . . . Carmichael had a momentary absurd vision of the pleasant office at American Metals. And then he thought of Ruth and the kids, and the thought hurt his mind.

Shagle couldn't save the penitentiary. But maybe, *maybe* Shagle could save the Deputy Warden!

"Come on!" Milan snarled.

Carmichael was shaken by a withering blast of self-contempt. So you're going to let Shagle save you? he sneered at himself. You're not only a coward, you're a fool! But you *have* got one chance. The only chance that was worth a damn from the beginning.

He took a deep breath and let it out and felt, for the first time since

he had entered the chair shop, the solid core of himself come back to him. He turned to the cons on the sidelines and spoke quietly and distinctly and with absolute conviction.

"These men are maniacs. Don't let them make suckers out of you! Don't—"

He heard Jake Gorman yell. A smashing blow, high on his shoulder, knocked him off his feet. Spinning, falling, slamming into the floor; he glimpsed Boynton moving toward him, swinging the length of pipe. Stunned, he twisted to his right, scrambling frantically to evade the next crippling blow.

But Boynton halted in mid stride—wavered—dropped the pipe, and fell. Above the crumpled giant stood Jake Gorman waving his bat in menacing circles.

"You dirty fink bastard!" screamed Milan. "I'll cut your throat for this."

"You ain't got the guts," said Gorman evenly. He was grinning—the same reckless, cynical grin.

Milan and Rizzo, knives low, moved in on Gorman. Gorman slid backward until he met the wall, the bat poised in his hands.

"The Dep told you guys right," he shouted hoarsely. "Aint nobody going to open those front gates. This bunch of goofy bastards 'll burn us alive if we let them."

A rising mutter from the men; and then Babe Jackman, one of the hard-rocks, threw a shiv at Jake Gorman. Gorman ducked. The shiv

clanged against the wall. Rizzo lunged, driving his knife upward at Gorman's belly and Gorman swung the bat with a short shopping motion and hit Rizzo across the nose. The knife wielder straightened abruptly and fell backward, stiff as a tree, blood gushing from his shattered face.

Milan dove at the off-balance Gorman. Carmichael saw the knife flash; saw Gorman, aware too late of his danger, try desperately to block the thrust with the handle of the bat. But the long blade went in. Slid in easily just above Jake Gorman's belt, on his right side below the ribs. It went in all the way.

Carmichael, left arm hanging dead, came off the floor like a man in a dream and hurled himself at the back of Milan's knees.

He opened his eyes to a dimly lighted ceiling.

"How you feel, Dep?" somebody said. He saw the red-headed Klipstein. Everything clicked sharply into place. He tried to sit up.

"Just take it easy, Dep," said Klipstein.

"Where am I?"

Klipstein grinned. "You're in the prison hospital and you've got a broken shoulder, but believe me—you haven't got a thing in the world to worry about."

"What happened?"

"Well, I don't know exactly and I guess I never will. But five minutes before Shagle was set to take off, here come a hundred cons across

the yard and they're herding seventeen other cons who are all pretty much the worse for wear. They're all talking at once, and Shagle gets excited and wants to throw the whole bunch in the Hole.

"By then the guards outside the chair shop had you in the hospital and a couple cons in the morgue and we were starting to get a picture of the action."

Klipstein stopped. He was frowning and his eyes were puzzled and awed. "I never heard of anything like this anywhere, Dep."

"Who's in the morgue?"

"Rizzo and Jake Gorman. These cons are trying to tell me Gorman saved your life. But it doesn't make sense . . ." Klipstein shook his head.

Carmichael closed his eyes. "No. But that's the way it was, Klip." He heard his voice break and he knew there were tears squeezing through his closed lids.

"You're wife's on her way out here," Klipstein said gruffly. "I talked to her on the phone." He paused. "Say, you aren't planning on quitting, are you, Dep?"

"No. I'm not planning on quitting," Carmichael said.

"Well, your wife was pretty upset. I guess I misunderstood her."

Carmichael lay quietly with his eyes closed. He heard the door shut behind Klipstein. After awhile he heard it open again. He smelled Ruth's delicate perfume. He didn't know yet how he was going to tell her, but it would be all right.

"SHAKE you for the juke-box," I said to the barkeep one night, all innocence.

"What are you, *kidding* me?" he squealed. "How do I win? Besides, tossing dice is a loser's game, believe me."

"How do you figure?"

"Believe me! I know what I'm talking! Buy me a beer and I'll tell you about it.

You see that guy at the end of the bar? The one hugging his glass like it's his last friend in the world? Well, his name's Johnny and he wasn't always a lush. He ain't as old as he looks, neither. In fact he was quite a sharp looking guy in his day—maybe fifteen, sixteen years ago.

He started out all right—came home from the war and got this job as a detective in a department store, see, walking around keeping the eye peeled for shoplifters, stuff like that. But the store was only paying him seventy bucks a week and he found out the lifters would raise him a hundred for looking the other way. I mean, what would *you* do?

Anyway, the store finally got suspicious that he wasn't making any grabs while they were being robbed blind almost every day and they gave him his walking papers. He didn't care. He drifted a while then he took the little pile he'd saved, bought himself some loaded dice and started haunting the crap-games around town. He found out he was good at it, too! He could switch them loads in as much as ten, fifteen

Any stakes in a crap game are too high. For instance Johnny, the lush, down there at the end of the bar.

BY BERNARD EPPS

NO DICE!

times a night without being twigged. But to *really* make the wages, he needed a partner.

A crooked game works this way, see. You got to slip in the loads, make a couple passes and then switch them out or the guys you're playing against will be getting the same kind of viggarrish. And it gets pretty warm doing all this sleight-of-hand as well as the betting without somebody tumbling to it. And once you're tumbled in a crap-game, brother, it's a good thing if your insurance is paid up!

Anyway, there was this guy that Johnny had seen hanging around the tables named Sam Kneehigh and Johnny took him on as a partner. Sam was big enough for insurance and just smart enough to be a bust-out man—to switch out the dice after Johnny had made his points and to maybe split with him on the bets so it didn't look as if one guy was doing too much of the winning.

This Sam Kneehigh had a junk-run down to Texas and back maybe once a month and on his off hours he used to like to rattle the cubes. He was about six-three and wide as a barn door, see, and I guess that's why they called him Kneehigh. He'd been knocked about some in the ring back in his younger days, too, so he wasn't much to look at.

They did pretty good together for a while, hitting most of the regular games in town. There was one used to be around the corner, I remem-

ber, run by a guy called 'Limey'! They used to clean that game out regularly every Saturday night and they'd drop in here to celebrate afterwards. Then Sam Kneehigh would make his junk-run to Texas, be back in a few days with a nice roll for his trouble and they'd start all over again.

Until, one night, he brings this twist back with him from one of his runs. I could see right off the partnership was about over—she was that kind of dame.

He said he was driving through some little town in North Carolina when she runs into him with a pick-up truck. Seems it was the twist's fault, straight and clear, and she was pretty shook up about it since she'd borrowed the truck and didn't have a driver's license or anything, and she said, if Sam wouldn't turn her in, she'd pay for the damages.

She was a pretty nice looking twist and—*you* figure—Sam doesn't want the cops nosing around when there's a couple hundred grand of horse under the seat so he takes her up on the offer. He also takes her wining and dining and such for two or three days until the car is fixed. By that time she's begging him to take her along to the big city where the money seems to come so easy. I mean, what would *you* do? For a doll like that, I'd run into every pick-up truck between here and El Paso!

But you could see it coming—a big, shop-worn character well past

his prime and a young sharpie like Johnny. Sam should have figured it but I guess he was kind of inexperienced when it came to fluff. Two days after they hit town she breaks the news to him that Johnny and she have eyes for nothing but each other.

That night he barrels into the Limey's with the girl dragging behind and faces his partner over the table. They don't say a word for a while, just glare at each other. Sam is big enough, he could throw Johnny through the wall but the kid is sharp enough to have a gun or a knife on him somewhere. I figure the price is about even money.

"I tell you what," says Johnny at last. "We'll roll for her."

Sam don't say anything, just stands there.

"I thought you were a gambler," says Johnny.

Sam thinks that over. "What'll you put up?" he says.

Johnny takes out his wallet and spreads a wad on the table for Sam to count. "There's over five grand," he says. "My whole pile."

The girl turns her back and leans into a corner like she can't bear to watch it or something.

"Okay," says Sam. "Five thousand against the girl. High man rolls and anyone who tries the fancy is dead!"

The Limey brings out a box of

new dice—honest ones.—Sam picks two and shoots a nice nine.

Johnny's sweating a little bit but he fires ten and gets the throw. He shakes them up, steps back and makes them bounce.

Five!

Not so easy, five. He looks down at his wad over at the girl where she's hiding her face in the corner, shakes and rolls six!

Everyone's so quiet you can hear the breathing. Johnny picks up the cubes again, shakes them between his palms, whispers a couple words and—bingo!—the neatest, sweetest five you ever saw!

He scoops up his five G's and pushes over to the girl, takes her by the arm and they go out together. Sam is still standing, looking down at the table. Couple days later, he gets the invitation to a wedding.

All that was maybe fifteen, sixteen years ago and now Johnny's in here every night drinking like each glass is his last. He's afraid to go home, see. The dame turned out to be a shrew—a real howser! She even made him go legit. He works in a shoe store someplace!

Sam? He owns this joint. Couple others downtown too. And that's the way it is with crap-shooters. You win, you lose. So don't talk to me about shaking for the juke box! Just stick in a quarter and shut up. Play something cheerful!"



EVEN after sixteen years of police work Det/Sgt Emmet Boylan was still an arrant sentimentalist. He believed, despite the contrary weight of experience, that nobody was wholly bad. Given a helping hand at a critical moment, the very devil might be converted. And on this fine May morning, as he took a seat in the interrogation room, Boylan was prepared again to look for the

NITE WORK

Detective-sergeant Emmet Boylan was a reformer . . . warm and understanding. But, now and then, even the milk of human kindness curdles.

BY FRANK SISK

happy ending he so rarely saw.

The prisoner who was presently to be brought before him was comparatively young. Twenty-three, according to the report on the table. Now that was all to the good. No previous convictions or arrests. So much the better. But, unfortunately, the lad had a tendency toward breaking and entering commercial establishments after business hours. The report said that Officer J. Palmquist had apprehended the suspect redhanded, with a pocketfull of



watches, on the premises of Golding & Company, Fine Jewellers. The time of arrest was a few minutes after midnight. Under preliminary questioning the suspect had confessed to a series of unsolved burglaries as long as a litany.

Well, thought Boylan, lighting his pipe, confession is the first step toward salvation.

He was beginning to re-examine the suspect's personal effects that were littered across the table when the door opened and Palmquist, now in civilian clothes, looked in. "You ready for the bird, Sarge? I got him right here."

"Why, sure, son. Show him to that chair there."

Palmquist jerked his head curtly, causing a skinny, hollow-eyed man to appear at his side. As Palmquist placed his arm on the suspect's shoulder and guided him to the chair, Boylan noted that they both seemed very young and tired, one anxious to get home to bed, the other resigned to his fate. Boylan's speculative turn of mind was dealing with the mysterious quirks of life which had brought these two young men together as law keeper and law breaker, and there but for the grace of God . . .

He heard Palmquist ask, "Will you need me now, Sarge?"

"To be sure I will. Take that other chair and make yourself comfortable. There's always a lesson to be learned from a first offender, me boy."

"If you've read the report," said Palmquist, sitting reluctantly, "this is just the first time he's been caught. He's already admitted twenty-nine breaks, and there's about ten more he's not sure of."

"So I see," said Boylan equably. "But technically the lad's a first offender. Now let's see what makes him tick." He gazed paternally at the suspect. "Your name is Conrad Dibble?"

"Yes, sir," was the polite reply.

"And that's your real name?"

Conrad Dibble nodded.

Palmquist said, "He'd have to be a real lulu to make up a name like that."

"A man's name is his name," said Boylan to Palmquist in mild rebuke. "It was given to him as an innocent baby in good faith and with love. And it's never anything to be ashamed of. Unless as in Connie's case here—" Boylan paused and took an envelope from among the items on the table. "That's what your mother calls you, doesn't she? Connie?"

"That's right, sir. You read that letter then, I guess."

"No, Connie, I didn't. Just gave it a glance to see if it was pertinent to your case."

"Oh, I don't mind, sir. Never anything in Mom's letters to worry about."

"Be that as it may, we'll come back to it in a moment, and perhaps it will give us all a little something to think about." Boylan dropped the

letter back on the desk and picked up a zippered leather case about the size of a wallet. "Well, Connie, this is quite a set of lock-picking tools we have here."

Dibble smiled wanly. "Yes, sir. The best tempered tension picks and key pullers you can get." He spoke with professional pride.

"And in case he came across a pick-proof lock," said the restive Palmquist, "take a gander at that tumbler release gun he's got there. That'll open a mushroom or spool lock. Anything."

"I was noticing it." Boylan drew meditatively at his pipe. "A handy instrument. Made by a reputable company. Sale restricted to law enforcement bodies."

"That's what I always thought," said Palmquist. "Hell, Sarge, if I wanted to borrow one from the department, I'd have to sign six affidavits and just about give blood. But this bird's got one of his very own."

Boylan remained imperturbable. "I've run across the situation before, son. But you've got a good point. Maybe Connie will tell us where he got these things."

"And while he's on the subject," said Palmquist, "he might tell us where he got the brace for opening car windows and the Halligan tool. You don't pick that stuff up in hock shops."

"How about it, Connie?" said Boylan.

"Officer Palmquist named it right,

sir. I picked them things up in hock shops."

Palmquist snorted in disgust.

Boylan quietly puffed his pipe as he placed the lock-picking kit back on the table and again reached for the envelope. "Connie's heard that it's not square to be a squealer. But the truth goes a little deeper than that. Here—" he held the envelope out to Palmquist—"hand him this. Take the letter out and let him read it."

Not bothering to conceal his impatience, Palmquist got up and took the envelope. He extracted two sheets of yellow paper and gave them to Dibble. "Too bad we don't have music," he said, sitting down.

"Go on, Connie," said Boylan. "Read it."

Dibble shrugged his thin shoulders. "I already read it once, sir."

"I mean out loud, Connie. If you don't mind."

Dibble grinned foolishly. He looked first at Palmquist, who sat tapping the envelope against his chin; then at Boylan, who continued to regard him with unwavering benevolence. "Well, okay, sir. It don't make sense, but okay." He cleared his throat, darted a quick glance at the closed door, then read, "Dear Connie, I want to begin by thanking you for the money you sent last week. You're a good boy and as regular as clockwork. It helps me buy the few extras that make life easier to bear."

"There we have it in a nutshell."

"Have what?" asked Palmquist.

"You either see it or you don't," said Boylan. "The underlying instinct. All right, Connie, carry on."

"As a surprise for your next birthday," Dibble read, "I am going to knit you something. I'm not much good with the needles yet, but I'm learning. You know I was always clever with my hands until I got arthritis so bad."

"Give that some thought now, Connie," said Boylan. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Dibble looked embarrassed.

Palmquist said sarcastically, "I bet he's got a lump in his throat."

Boylan struck a match and got his pipe going again.

"You want I should—?" Dibble asked uncertainly.

"Yeah," said Boylan between puffs.

"I hope by now you're rid of your cold," read Connie, turning the sheet of paper. "You been subject to them since you were a baby. Your father and I always worried about that, rest his soul. That's why I hate to think of you working nights. You need as much of the outdoor sunshine as you can get—"

"She probably thinks he's a night watchman," said Palmquist.

"The poor woman," said Boylan. "It's a pity. Doesn't your heart ache, Connie?"

"Yes, sir," said Dibble.

"How would your mother feel if she could see you now?"

"She'd be upset, sir. Real upset."

"No doubt about it, my boy. Well, let's hear the rest of it."

Dibble returned to the letter. "I can't help but remember that it was night work that killed your father."

"Oh, no," said Boylan sadly. "How did it happen, Connie?"

"Well, he slipped on an icy fire escape," said Dibble. "I was just a kid at the time, and I don't remember too much about it."

"Fell to his death, did he?"

"That's what Mom says. Eight floors down, with a typewriter in each hand. Never let go of them, Mom says."

Boylan's eyebrows lifted. "What was he doing on a fire escape at night with two—?" The question answered itself before being completed.

"A family trait," said Palmquist.

"Finish the letter, Connie," Boylan snapped.

"As for myself, I always liked the daylight hours and plenty of people around. It's the healthy way to live. I told this many a time to your poor father and now I'm telling it to you, son. I just wish you'd take my advice and do like I do. Love and kisses, Mother."

Boylan sat back and rubbed his chin. "Well, Connie, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Not much, sir."

"Do you think you could take your mother's advice?"

"I might at that."

"I don't think he should," said Palmquist.

Boylan frowned. "Why not?"

"Did you notice the return address on this envelope, Sarge? Ten twenty Lombard Street, Penfield."

"So what?"

Palmquist smiled coldly. "It happens to be the address of the State Reformatory for Women. And I bet Mrs. Dibble is not a matron."

Boylan slowly removed the pipe from his mouth and gazed in pain

at Dibble. "What's your mother doing there, Connie?"

"Three to five years," said Dibble contritely.

"For what?"

"Because of her arthritis, sir."

"Since when has arthritis been a crime?"

"Well, I mean, sir, that's how she come to be caught," said Dibble.

"Mom is a pickpocket."



MANHUNT'S

Gun Rack



S&W Auto Pistol

The SMITH AND WESSON .22 CALIBER AUTOMATIC PISTOL is one of the most widely used target and match pistols in the world. Finely balanced, its long $7\frac{3}{8}$ inch barrel (shown here with muzzle brake attached) is designed for the ultimate in accurate shooting. It shoots .22 caliber rim-fire long rifle cartridges from a magazine with a ten round capacity. The stock shown here has a modified thumb rest for ease in handling and steady holding.

Keller had no luck. He kicked one bad habit . . . only to acquire another.

bad habit

BY G. F. McLENNAN

THE COP snapped his fingers. "Yeah! I remember you now. That was about six years ago, wasn't it?" Leaning back in his chair, he stared curiously and Keller thought of the expressions he had seen people wearing at the zoo. But he had to expect that.

The cop, young and very sure of himself, cocked an eyebrow. "There's one thing about it, pal. You won't make Q this time. The dingy ward down at Atascadero is where they'll stash you and believe me, brother, they'll throw away the key. Some guys keep losing on the same rap and no one thinks much about it. We just figure it's a bad habit. But this habit *you* got. Wow!" He made a face and reached for the in-

ter-com switch. "You might as well give me a statement now, huh?"

Keller tried to work his numb lips into a smile. "If you don't mind, I'd rather wait until morning. I want to think about it some more."

"If you couldn't come up with anything in two days I doubt—." The cop suddenly shrugged. "Okay. It'll wait."

When the cell door had closed behind him, Keller leaned weakly against it and told himself that this was the last time he would try. Just once more, he would attempt to sort it out in his mind.

Actually, starting with the *end* would be easier. Because no matter what the smart cop thought, Keller could predict the end. Across the

bay, at Quentin, there was a little room.

When he had slammed that against his mind and experienced only a little pain, he discovered that he could see the faint outline of the road, the one back.

In a way, it had started because J. B. Farrell, who himself was an Alcoholic Anonymous alumnus, liked long odds. On a day so blue and bright and golden that Keller had dared hope again, Farrell had hired him as his chauffeur.

Old Farrell's head was shaped like a football, but that meant nothing. He was very smart. After all, he had made at least half of his two million or so selling short in 1929. Where money was concerned, he had a sure touch. He had been very lucky with money too, and sometimes a man will use up all of his luck in one direction or sphere. That apparently had been J. B.'s trouble. He had suffered three extremely difficult marriages, and, of course, there was his daughter, Betty, who made J. B.'s marriages seem almost idyllic by comparison.

Everyone around Scarsdale knew that Martha Wallington, Betty's mother and J. B.'s second-wife, had despised him with particular fervor, and some folks felt that she had borne him Betty out of pure spite.

Betty had tried just about everything at least once. Liquor she had tried more than once. That had been her main problem. That and the odds and ends that go with a drink.

She was tall for a girl but people seldom noticed. She still had a stunning figure and she had not quite reached the point of needing soft lights to look her best in. She was a honey-blonde, as Martha Wallington's daughter just had to be, and from the Farrell side, she had crackling black eyes. She had a restless, rather impudent face.

Propelled by who knows what kind of impulse, she flew back from Santa Barbara three days after Keller got the chauffeuring job. She immediately walked briskly out to the garage, where Keller was polishing J. B.'s Thunderbird, and said, "Hi. Did you know that I came back from the fanciest watering hole in California because of you?"

He had been instantly wary. Smart talking girls like this one meant trouble. And he wanted no trouble. The job only paid two hundred a month, along with his meals and a room over the garage, but he liked the setup. He had gained a little weight and he felt good. He hadn't had a drink in twenty-six days.

The girl started talking a mile a minute. "There's a little errand you can run for me, sweetie. Trot down to the village, down to Ernie's by the theatre, and get me a fifth of gin." She handed him a ten. "Keep the change. You see, father dear has denied me access to the family cellar. So if you'll go down to Ernie's it will make it much easier for everyone."

When he got back with the gin, he found her standing by a drinking fountain in a corner of the garage. She took a drink out of the bottle, followed it with a few sips of water, then handed the bottle to Keller. He declined but in the same instant wondered why he had bothered. Because he knew that this girl was going to push him off the wagon. It probably was just a matter of a day or so. But he would hold out as long as he could.

"Now back to what I said awhile ago," she said. "One of my girl friends saw you tooling Big Daddy around and she wired me that you were even better looking than the T-Bird. So I jetted back to have a look." She took another drink of the gin. "You see, Kel, I've always had this thing about falling in love with one of the last tycoon's hired hands. Who knows? Maybe you and I will get married and live happily ever after on red wine and crackers. But you don't touch the stuff, do you?"

Feeling his insides tighten, Keller nodded. "I take a drink now and then. Right now isn't now and then. Some other—"

"Good! Tomorrow morning, when you drive into the city with the chief, I'll tag along. After we've dumped him off at his grubby little money shop, we'll go over to the Waverly lounge, and I'll tell you all about Betty Farrell," She leaned forward suddenly and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Doesn't that sound like fun, Kel?"

"Yeah. By the way, my name is Larry."

"I know, sweetie. But I want to call you Kel. Okay?" Before she went into the house, she asked him to take the gin up to his room. He did and sat looking at it for a little over two hours. Then he had a drink.

One night three weeks later, Farrell came up to Keller's room. He seemed more tired than angry. "I had an interesting phone call," he began. "This friend said he'd spotted you and Betty in the Plaza bar a couple of times. You two have gotten pretty well acquainted, haven't you?" He kept staring at the bottle of bourbon on the dresser.

"I've met her a few times and we've had a drink or two. It's nothing to get excited about." Already, he was feeling like a trapped rat. Getting another job, any kind of a job, would be the rough part. He had just about run out of AA alumnus.

J. B. poured himself a stiff drink of the bourbon. "I've had a little talk with Betty. Just now. She tried to tell me that she was in love with you. But it sounded like whiskey talk to me."

Keller felt his heart flutter. Nothing he had ever heard had pleased and excited him so much. His mind groped unsuccessfully for something to say. After all, something like that deserved some sort of comment.

"The fact of the matter is you've become a member of a pretty medi-

ocre club, a collection of oddballs and eightballs that Betty has taken up with. Has Betty told you that she's been married a couple of times? Yeah. Once to a cowboy she met at the rodeo in the Garden and once to a crap dealer out in Vegas." J. B. grinned wryly. "Some crap dealer *that* guy must've been. He couldn't even keep track of the wives he had. Right now, he's doing time for bigamy. But before the law had caught up with him I'd bought him off, just like I had the cowboy."

Suddenly, Keller was experiencing a rare exultation. He felt sure that he could fling the money back at the old man. "Are you going to try that with me?" he asked softly.

"No. You see, Keller, I've finally had it. Sometimes you have to know when to quit." He extracted a check from his coat pocket. "Here you go. Two weeks pay. And let me give you some damned good advice along with it. You and Betty are both drunks and you will destroy each other in time. *You* might have a chance if you stay away from her. She is quite hopeless."

They were married in Chicago the next day. To celebrate, they drank three bottles of champagne, several martinis, and passed out in the Palmer House lobby.

Betty had left New York with a thousand dollars. After five days in Chicago, they had barely enough left for two economy class plane tickets to San Francisco.

On the way to the coast, Betty suddenly remembered that they were not riding first class and started to cry. Sitting with eyes half-closed, listening to her whimper, Keller felt the fizz going out of everything. Until now, they had managed to convince each other, if not themselves, that they were romantic wanderers, too imaginative and alive ever to settle down. Let those who were less endowed with poetic instinct and a hunger for adventure settle down in routine jobs and a dull life in the suburbs. That was not for Betty Farrell and Larry Keller. No indeed. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, they were going to take San Francisco by storm, kick up their heels and have a ball. They would scoot up and down the hills on cable cars, watch the fog winnow against the windows of the Top 'o the Mark. They, by God, were going to *live it up!*

Now he felt ashamed, sickened with recalling all of the wild talking and childish dreaming they had done, the whiskey talk. They were just a pair of drunks, as J. B. Farrell had said, a case of the blind leading the blind. They were running away, hungover and almost broke, and where it would all end was anyone's guess.

In San Francisco, they located a pawn shop on lower Market street and Betty hocked some jewelry. From there they took a cab to the Top 'o the Mark and for a few hours there it was just as they had planned.

Two weeks later, by which time Betty had hocked her watch, Keller got a job as counter-man in a cafeteria. He would have preferred pushing a hack but that was out. He did not know the city well enough.

"I guess I've hit bottom." Betty made that declaration after they had been in San Francisco six months. Keller had brought home three bottles of cheap wine, all that he could afford.

Naturally, they both were drunk, sitting in their sixty dollars a month basement apartment, hating each other and themselves. Suddenly she staggered into the kitchen, where he found her crying, dropping tears on a New York Times she had picked up that afternoon.

"I'm going home tomorrow," she told him. "You and I—. Well, it's just no damn good. I'll wire Daddy for the ticket money." She groped for his hand. "You see how it is, honey. Don't you see?"

He laughed at her and went to bed. At five the next morning she awakened him. She was wearing a tailored suit, the last nice thing she had, high heels for the first time in weeks, and she looked nice. She told him again that she was leaving. She had just talked to J. B. He had refused to send her money, but he had wired United and arranged for her ticket. "I've just called a cab," she said, looking away from him. "It never was any good with us, Kel. Too many problems. You had them and I had them and—."

Just a minute," he told her. "My cigarettes are in the kitchen. I'll be right back and we'll talk about it."

He *was* back in a flash—with a butcher-knife in his hand. It made no difference really. He would have killed her then under any circumstances. But just the same he was glad that her back was turned. She never knew what hit her.

He stayed in the apartment with her for two days. He spent much of the time holding her head in his lap and stroking her hair. He told her how much he loved her and how sorry he was.

They gave him five to life. In a way he was relieved and in a way he was not. It made no particular difference then. But after he had dried out in San Quentin and was feeling as good as new, he wanted to go on. He went for the five and made it.

He spent the day of his release walking around downtown San Francisco, vibrant with the glorious knowledge that he could pass a bar without going in. He was like a kid playing a new game. At five-thirty, when he knew the bars would be crowded, he walked into a place on Polk street and ordered a straight coke. Grinning at himself in the mirror, he knew then that he had the liquor problem at least licked and life was as sweet as a man with a rotten conscience could expect.

There was scarcely a moment when the memory of Betty and the fact that he had murdered her was

not in his mind, but he managed to keep it in the fringes. In prison, he had learned a bit of discipline.

He had an instinct for self preservation. A man deathly afraid of height does not fly. And Keller did not let himself suffer a headon collision with the memory of the girl he had murdered. The fact that he had learned to live with the thing in his mind, a carefully controlled monster, gave him a perverse feeling of pride. He was aware that it could have destroyed many men.

At San Quentin, he had studied accounting. And just in case, he had whiled away prison hours studying a map of San Francisco. No one ever again could tell him that he did not know the city well enough to drive a cab.

But he got an office job. It was just a straight bookkeeping job for a medium sized hardware store on Geary owned by a man named Oscar Tully, who had once done time at Q. It paid only four hundred and fifty a month but that was enough. After all, he no longer had to budget booze money.

He found a two room apartment on a street next to a small park. A wise park commission had left it pretty much as God made it, and from his kitchen window, Keller could look down on a block long bank of trees.

He called his place Treetop House. He knew that Betty would have called it something like that and been enchanted with the view.

It was in the park that Keller met Lucille Hudson, who enjoyed sitting on a bench by the lagoon, throwing bits of bread to the sea gulls and ducks. He saw her several times on Sunday mornings before he spoke to her. Then the best he could manage was to nod toward the sea gulls and say, "Busy, aren't they?"

A rather plump woman of about thirty-five, her smile and her voice exuded warmth and suddenly he found it easy to sit beside her on the bench. They talked about the coolness of San Francisco summers and their mutual appreciation of the park. On the following Sunday, he again found her on the bench, and this time he learned that she was a widow. Her husband had died of a heart attack two years before.

He also learned that her hometown was a small place in northern Jersey, less than a hundred miles from where Keller had been born, and she mentioned in passing that she liked beef stroganoff. There was a place in Jersey City that featured it. That made it somewhat easier to ask her for a dinner date. This was the first of about ten dates they had before they were married.

Keller moved his hi-fi set and his books and records into her flat. Oscar Tully raised his salary \$50 almost immediately, and Keller was proud of the fact that Lucille was then able to quit work except for an occasional part-time job.

They settled into a cozy groove, like two rabbits burrowing in a

hutch and Keller loved it. On foggy nights they usually put a stack of records on the player and sat in front of the fireplace reading aloud from a novel. Or they might stroll around the neighborhood, listening to the fog horns braying in the bay. Keller would think then of the cozy apartment they would return to. He had bought a framed motto and hung it in the kitchen, above Lucille's copper kettles.

"A fat barn and a fat wife never hurt any man."

On their first anniversary they took a sack of bread crumbs to the park and fed their feathered friends. Later, after Lucille had put a pot roast in the oven, they went to a first run movie downtown. The movie, a musical, ran a bit longer than usual, and by the time it was over, Lucille was worried about her roast.

"You go on home," Keller suggested. "I'll stop at King Cold's for some ice cream and then I'll be along. What kind you want?"

Lucille thought butter brickle. He kissed her plump cheek and left. Two blocks down Market, he stopped in front of a cocktail lounge and listened.

He could see the bartender, an Irish looking type, mixing a martini for a girl who cried, "Whyja put in so much ice, Mike? Gesus, if I wanted plain ice watuh I woulda awded plain ice watuh."

As Keller watched and smiled, a young couple came out and stood face to face only a few feet away.

The boy cried, "The hell I did! You're nuts!"

They began walking but before they had reached the corner of Fifth, the girl was running. The fellow grabbed her arm, pulled her to him. He got her head in a crude hammerlock, hit her hard twice with the palm of his hand. The girl struggled and cursed him.

Keller knew better than to interfere. No one, least of all the dame, ever thanked anyone for interfering in this kind of beef. All he had to do was walk in the other direction. But despite knowing this, he began running toward the couple.

"What's going on?" he yelled. Already he was out of breath. There had been too much butter brickle, too many brownies.

The kid jerked his thumb toward the Ferry building. "Beat it, Mac. This is a little family growl between me and the wife."

"Well, this is a real poor way to settle an argument." Keller was wondering exactly what he should do now.

He saw it coming, but not in time. It was a short right jab and a pretty good one. As fast as it was, Keller still had time for wondering how he ever would explain all of this to his parole officer. It was quite a bit like being drunk from then on. Tilting at a crazy angle, the sidewalk hit him broadside. When he stopped rolling, he was sprawled half in the gutter. His head had barely missed an empty wine bottle.

The wild-eyed kid looked down at him. "I oughta kick your lousy teeth out."

Keller rolled his eyes, trying to spot the girl. She had gone and he was glad. Without her, his humiliation was blunted a little. Now the boy was drawing back his foot, cocking it like a gun. Keller's hand groped for the wine bottle and found it. With an economy of motion that any fast bartender would have envied, he broke the bottle. He lashed out with a jagged fragment and felt it connect.

The boy screamed and jumped backward. He looked down at the crimson splotch on the leg of his trousers. "You sonofabitch," he quavered. "You lousy sonofabitch I'm gonna call a cop."

The boy started limping toward the bar. Keller scrambled to his feet. He ran down to Fifth and turned right. At the next corner, he hailed a cab.

When the cab had reached his apartment and Keller was fumbling in his pockets for the fare, he discovered the piece of glass still in his hand. Miraculously, the cabby had not noticed. When the cab was gone, Keller looked around for a hiding place. None of the possibilities satisfied him. Finally, he wrapped his handkerchief around the fragment, and carefully placed it in his coat pocket.

The place smelled of roast beef and Grace had a fire going in the tiny fireplace. She took one look and

her plump, pretty hand fluttered to her lips. "My word! What in the world happened, honey?"

Fumbling with matches and cigarette, Keller wondered whether he should tell her. He wanted to spill everything out. He was tired of being alone with so much.

He told her. When he had finished, she looked as relieved as he felt. Her attitude was characteristic, optimistic. "If the police let you go, it couldn't have amounted to much," she pointed out. "I mean it must have been plain to everyone that you were just trying to defend yourself against a nut."

"Lucille, I didn't call the cops. I took off. I ran like a scairt rabbit." The feeling of relief inside him spread. Now she had it. The works.

Lucille's small mouth formed a perfect O. "Larry! You should have. Don't you see, honey? Your running away— Well, the police aren't going to like that at all." She looked over at the telephone. "Honey, you better call them. Right now. Tell them you just got panicky and—."

"I'm doing no such a damn thing. We'll leave it just the way it is, if you don't mind. I'm not getting messed up just because some hood tried to kick my face in."

He leaned back in a chair and closed his eyes. She had failed him, leaving him alone again with his hellish secret. For a moment he had been tempted to go the full route, tell her in plain english that he had done time in Q for murder.

She came over and stroked his hair. "You didn't get the ice cream, did you?"

He shook his head irritably. She could be dumb as hell at times. Here he was with a million worries, and she was talking about butter brickle.

He heard her walk into the bedroom. When she came out she was wearing her coat. Keller licked his dry lips. "Where you going?"

"I just have to have some ice cream, honey. You sit here and relax. I can get some at Lick's. Maybe not butter brickle, but something."

He tried reminding himself that he never had known of her doing anything sneaky. If she intended to call the police, she would tell him. Besides, if he didn't let her go, she might decide that he had held something back. His tongue felt as big as his foot. But he forced the words out. "Okay. Hurry back."

He walked to the window and watched her cross the street. She was walking fast but there still was time. He could yell down for her to come back. But he didn't. He couldn't be sure. Maybe she *was* going after ice cream.

But the thought nagged, the fear leered at him. There were pay phones at the market. He could see her standing at the checkout stand, eyeing the phone, debating with herself, and at last reaching inside her purse for a dime. She had very strong feelings about right and wrong.

Of course, he could follow her.

But what was the use? Tomorrow morning, after he had left for work, she would have plenty of opportunity to call. He began to tremble and thought how very much he needed a drink. Well, that was easy. There was a fifth of bourbon in the kitchen. It had pleased him, made him feel strong, to keep liquor in the house without touching it.

He had a drink. He had another. He stood there by the sink, carefully reading the label on the bottle, feeling the hundred proof blast spread through him. He walked back to the living-room and lighted a cigarette. Five minutes later, he was back in the kitchen. This time he had a really big one.

By the time she got home, a half-hour later, he had about half of the bottle inside him. But his fear had never drowned. It had kept floating.

Lucille sniffed suspiciously the second she came in the room. "It smells like liquor. Larry! Have you been drinking?"

He got up and weaved toward the kitchen. "Yeah, I had a couple. And I'll tell you something else. I'm gonna have another for the road. Soon as I can pack my things, I'm moving out on you. You showed me whose side you're on."

"What kind of crazy talk is this? What in the—"

He stopped in front of her. "Don't lie to me any more, Lucille." He stood there indecisively for a full minute, then went back to the kitchen, his haven. Fumbling with

the bottle, he though fuzzily of the club he had finally joined. The members were all of the guys doing time because of a stupid dame. San Quentin was full of them. And soon he would join them. But in the meantime, it was odd how stubborn a sap could be. He still was trying to tell himself that she had not called, that she never would.

"Larry, honey, please." She was standing behind him with hurt eyes.

He slammed the bottle down, grabbed her arms. "Now you tell me the truth. You called the cops, didn't you? They're on the way out now, aren't they?"

"I swear to god that I didn't. Please, Larry!" She started to cry.

Later, he second guessed himself. He wondered what would have happened if they hadn't heard the buzzer or it never had sounded. Because in the same instant that it

ripped into the room his fear had begun to dissolve. He had begun to believe her.

But there was the sound of the buzzer and Keller's hand found the knife. She wasn't going to get by with it. Here was a meddling dame who was going to pay.

It was over very quickly. He flung the knife into a corner. Then he walked to the front door and jerked it open. No cops were standing there. It was just a tall kid with a long green box. The kid asked, "Is this the Hennegan apartment?"

Keller could not speak. He could only stare, until the kid said, "I got some flowers from Luke's for the Hennegans."

"Across the hall," said Keller. "There in number six."

He walked slowly into the kitchen, laid his head on the dead woman's breast and sobbed.



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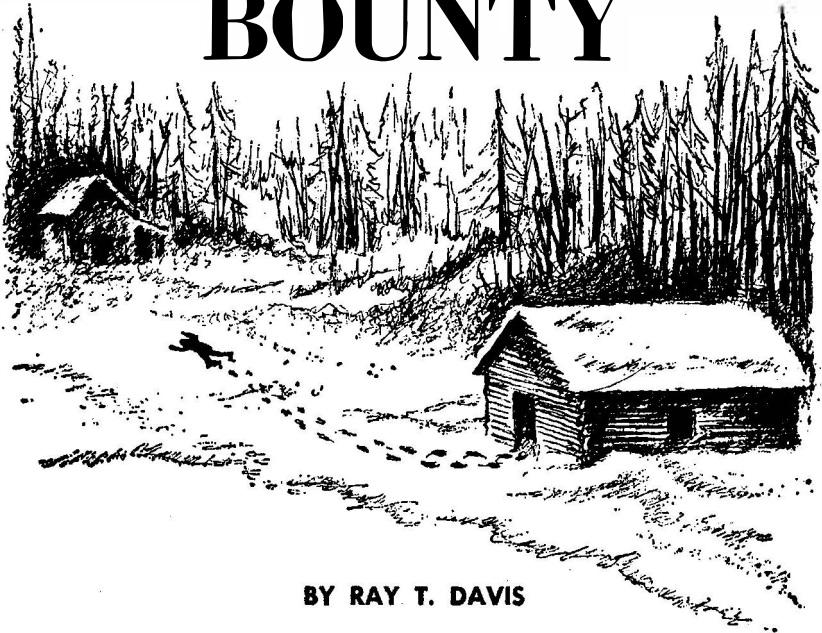
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BOUNTY



BY RAY T. DAVIS

Old Sam Mead had collected the bounty on many a wolf in his day. The bounty on this particular wolf was particularly high.

OLD SAM MEAD lay stretched out on his bunk and stared at the gaunt young man in city clothes who nervously paced the one-room cabin. A real Montana blizzard still howled outside and frost and snow had built up on the windows. Although it was not yet night outside, Sam couldn't see the outline of his barn less than a hundred yards away. Must be eighteen inches on the ground already, he judged.

The cabin, stoutly built with his own hands, hardly trembled when blasts of wind struck it in whistling

fury. And the big stone fireplace, radiating the heat of burning logs, made the place comfortable. A single kerosene lamp hung from the center rafter and placed everything within its radius in yellow light and eerie shadows.

"How the hell do you stand it," the young man said suddenly. "A guy could go nuts locked in like this."

"Most of us trappers have," Sam scowled, showing a few yellowed teeth. "This here's only your second day. Me, I've been snowbound off

and on for forty-fifty years, maybe.”

The young man cursed and slumped down on the other bunk across the room. He adjusted the revolver in his hip pocket to make himself more comfortable and then lay back and closed his eyes.

Watching him, Sam sensed that this man—real name, he'd bet, was Frank Colby, the wanted bank robber—was faking sleep. So Sam lay back and faked too, and he began to think about how he could save his own life, for Colby would surely feel compelled to kill him when the storm let up. He would likely take the horses and supplies and cut across country for the Canadian border while police still watched the hard roads. So he couldn't leave an old man behind to tell lawmen, “He went thataway.”

Sam began to feel sorry for himself, a rare feeling. Why, he wondered, couldn't people leave an old man alone? This was *his* land, these few acres which helped feed him and his stock. This was *his* cabin, built from logs he'd felled and hewn himself. For how many years had he made his own living out here, trapping, farming a little, hauling logs with his team, visiting town only two or three times a year to pick up supplies and get drunk.

Then his old age pension came through and, small as it was, made him independent enough so that he worked hard only when he felt like it. He even indulged in little luxuries now; an automatic rifle, some new

traps, bigger food supply, even a little battery transistor radio that he operated sparingly to hear news broadcasts and chortle over the crazy antics of people outside his own sane world.

Several of those newscasts told of the bank robbery at Billings a week earlier, when three men made off with \$10,000 after killing a guard. Two were shot and captured next day at a roadblock but the third escaped on foot and later stole a car. He was believed now holed up in the back country and townspeople were warned to watch for him.

Sam's involvement had started innocently enough with a scratching at his door. Colby lay there, covered with snow and half dead with cold and exhaustion. He had made a wrong turn from the main highway, he explained, and wound up on the old logging trail. When the snow came down his car had stalled and he started out on foot. He wandered around for hours until he saw the cabin's light.

The story had holes in it, Old Sam saw at once. The old road was barricaded at the highway. A man would have to get out and move the barricade and it was posted with signs warning of a dead end. To make such a blunder a man would have to be a fool—or on the run from the law. That part didn't worry Sam much; there had been times when he wasn't on good terms with game wardens and sheriffs. Without hesitation he had sheltered the helpless

man, wrapped him in blankets and dried his clothes. Colby had been carrying a briefcase, which he shoved underneath the bunk with the remark, "My sample case—I'm a salesman."

It also occurred to Sam that a man lost in a snowstorm would toss away a sample case to lighten his load. But it was after Sam had heard the latest newscast that he slowly began to associate the stranger with Colby, especially when the bank robber's description fitted, even to the briefcase which held the loot. There was mention of a reward offered by the FBI, but Sam didn't hear it all clearly because Colby had jumped up and switched the radio off.

Later, after Sam returned from the wood pile outside the door, he noticed that his rifle had been moved a few inches from its pegs on the wall, and that a box of cartridges on an adjacent shelf was missing. Although he gave no sign of it, Sam knew Colby had unloaded the rifle and hidden all the bullets.

With a flash of anger, Sam suddenly decided it was time to quit feeling sorry for himself and do some scheming. In spite of his age, he figured he still ought to be able to outsmart any city fellow. He'd been in tough spots before; like the time when a big black bear had cornered him outside the barn. Luckily a pitchfork was handy and after a wild battle the bear ran off screaming with a bloody rear end. Of course it had been an old bear

and he himself had been younger then. Now the situation was reversed. Then there was the cunning wolverine which was springing his traps with a stick and stealing the bait. Sam baited one trap with a huge piece of meat, then spread all the rest of his traps along the trail the wolverine usually took in making his escape. It worked; the greedy fellow was so exultant with his loot he got careless and made a fatal step. The boys back in town never did believe him as many times as he retold these tales. They just laughed and winked at one another in a funny way.

Sam sat up abruptly, thinking of his horses. When had he fed them last? His memory wasn't so good any more. He pulled on his boots and reached for his mackinaw.

Colby was staring hard at him from the bunk. "Where you going, old man?"

Sam finished buttoning his coat. "Horses have to be fed." He added dryly, "You don't want anything to happen to them, do you?"

"You won't get lost in the storm out there?"

Sam shook his head. "I keep a guide rope strung between the cabin and the barn."

"Be right back," Colby said menacingly.

The first blast of air in a blizzard is always the worst. Sam stood gasping outside the door, then he drew his collar close around his face and breathed inside his clothing. His

hands found the guide rope and he pulled himself along in the deep snow, like he had done many times before in many other winters.

After he had fed the horses and smashed the ice crust on their water trough, Sam stood for a moment inside the barn, thinking. There was a coil of rope on the floor and several heavy traps. He began to form a plan. If it worked it would save his life. If it didn't—well, Colby would only kill him sooner. But he had to work swiftly before Colby got suspicious and came looking for him.

Sam took the two heaviest traps, ones with sharp ragged jaws and springs almost powerful enough to cripple a small bear. He worked his way back along the guide line to about the halfway mark, where he carefully forced open the traps' jaws and set their trigger mechanism. Then, as he backed up, he set the two traps down into his own deep bootprints.

Breathing heavily now, he retied the guide rope to its hitching post, only this time he used a slip-knot. Next he tied one end of the second coil of rope to the slip-knot. He made the return trip by walking on the opposite side of the guide rope, un-reeling his coil behind him, until he came close enough to see the cabin's light. Then he veered off to the right until he reached the cabin's side. There he leaned exhausted against the wall for shelter and waited with the patience of the professional hunter.

Twice a square of light showed on the snow as Colby opened the door and peered out. At last the door opened wide and Colby emerged, dressed in his ridiculous overcoat and fedora, and made his stumbling way along the guide line. When the figure was out of sight, Sam moved to the door and stood listening. And then it came, above the wind's howl, a thin high scream.

Quickly Sam unhooked the guide rope from its post and tossed it free. Then he pulled hard on his coil of rope until he felt the slip-knot at the other end come free. Colby was out there, leg smashed in a wolf trap, with a limp guide line that wouldn't support a gopher. The snow and the cold would finish the job.

Sam went into the cabin, *his* cabin, bolted the door solidly and shuttered the windows, just in case. He had one more task to do, a letter to those FBI people, but there was no hurry. It would be days before he could ride to the postoffice.

The package, simply addressed "To the FBI Boss in Washington," created quite a stir. Agents were a little pale as they examined the briefcase and its contents, and then read the crudely scrawled letter.

"Sirs," it began. "This wolf Colby accepted my hospitality and then aimed to kill me. I got him instead. Your money is in the case. I hear there's a bounty on this wolf and I aim to collect it. They say you can identify him by his fingerprints. I am enclosing all his fingers . . ."

THE ginmill was named the Pink Parasol.

It squatted in the bleached sand, five hundred yards from the ocean, like a festering growth. Half a dozen small tables, with adjacent chairs shielded by salmon-colored beach umbrellas, were scattered in front of the round building. The outside tables were empty so I stepped

ting alone in the booth next to the door.

"Mrs. Garner?"

"You're Richard Hammond?" she asked, staring at me as if I were something that had crawled out of the sea to sun itself.

Even at my neatest, I won't challenge Cary Grant to any Good Looks and Personality contests.

SISTER'S KEEPER

The bracelet was a gift from her husband. Now her lover had it . . . and she wanted it back.

BY JOHN LOWER

inside. It was dark and quiet, and smelled of liquor and salt-water. Fish netting hung from the ceiling, making a half-hearted attempt at atmosphere. Along the wall opposite the door was the bar. Behind it, a guy with fading black hair parted in the middle and a V.O. complexion was polishing old fashioned glasses with a greasy rag. An aisle separated the bar from the booths, which ran the length of the near wall. A dark-haired girl, wearing a pair of violently violet toreador slacks and matching halter, was sit-

Having come off a four day drunk less than eight hours ago, I could understand her leeriness at my wrinkled slacks and sport coat.

"I just returned from a vacation and didn't have time to change clothes," I said with as much levity as I could muster. "My answering service told me you wished to see me, urgently."

"Sit down," she said with an understanding smile. I slid onto the upholstered seat, which was vomiting its stuffing at the seams, across the table from her.

"Sober?"

"I've got a headache that's working time and half, but I can think and speak straight."

"Drink?"

"Ginger ale."

". . . and?"

"A couple ice cubes."

She shrugged and called, "Ginger ale and another bourbon and water."

My client—hopefully—was in her late twenties with a well-cushioned body. Her face would not have been termed pretty, but it was not unattractive. It was the face of millions of housewives. In a few years the skin would spread into flab.

"I'll get right to the point since I don't have much time," she said. "That's why I told your answering service to have you meet me here, instead of at your office."

The bartender set the drinks on the table and tiredly walked back to the bar, like a turtle crawling under a stone.

"I live near here and my sister's watching my two kids. I've got to get back soon." She sighed and brought it out into the open. "The point is, I've lost a lover."

I scratched the wire-like hair bristling on my cheeks and chin, and waited for her to continue.

"I don't mind losing him—hell, I'm glad really—but he has a bracelet my husband gave me. It's worth almost two hundred dollars. He refused to give it to me when I went and asked him." She described the bracelet. "Maybe he hocked it, I

don't know. I'm afraid if I go to see him . . ."

"It'll start all over again?"

"Yeah." She tossed off the rest of her bourbon and water. "How much will it cost me?"

"Thirty-five if I get back the bracelet; twenty, if I don't."

"Agreed." She opened a black suede pocketbook and handed me a square of paper with a name and address printed on it. "It's in Los Animos. He's usually home in the afternoon, goes out around six. You can come to my house and collect between four and five this afternoon, whether you get the bracelet or not. I can't afford to pay you for more than one day, I'm afraid."

She pushed another scrap of paper across the table. This one had her own name and address scrawled on it.

"It's none of my business, but does your husband know about the bracelet, Mrs. Garner?" I put a quarter on the table.

"It's none of your business, Mr. Hammond, but he does."

I walked slowly across the sand outside, soaking up the broiling warmth of the sun and the smell of dead fish. When I reached the asphalt parking circle, there was a man I had never seen standing next to my sway-back Ford.

"Looking for—" His fist sank into my stomach until I thought it would burst out my back. My vision blurred and I fell back against the fender of the Ford.

"Stay away from my wife," he grated. "And stay away from Bennett."

His fingers tunneled into the skin of my neck, pushing my head against the hood. The metal, which had been cooking in the sunlight, seared my cheek like a hot iron. I raised my right foot and brought it down as hard as I could on his left instep. He relaxed his grip on my neck, grunted, and grabbed for his injured foot. I fastened one arm around his bicep and the other around his lower arm, raising him to his tiptoes when I exerted pressure in opposite directions. He yanked his free arm back to swing at me, leaving him wide open. Releasing his arm, I clenched my fists together and swung them into his gut like a ballpeen hammer. Air wooshed from his open mouth as he sat down hard on the asphalt.

He was as lousy a fighter as he was a husband.

When I pulled past him in the Ford, he yelled something that might have been, "But I love her!"

I glanced into the rearview mirror as I edged onto the highway. He was still sitting there, a lost little boy.

Driving through the heat to Los Animos, I began to take stock of my life—an inevitable aftereffect of my semi-annual benders. To my possession I could claim: a one-room office complete with dust—provided I came up with the rent on the fifteenth of each month, a nine year old

car which acted as if it were going through change of life, and a memory of a woman who had once been my wife but was now someone else's. Also, occasional clients with filthy problems who didn't want to get their hands dirty.

I wriggled out of my sport coat but continued to perspire freely. By the time I reached the Los Animos town limits, my shirt was sopping.

The address Lorna Garner had given me was on the fringe of town, so I avoided the stifling traffic tie-ups in mid-city. The houses on Agar Street were sprawling, frame, obese. All of them cried for a carpenter's hammer and a painter's brush.

I parked the Ford at the curb in front of number 612 and walked up to the door, which stood open. Inside was a closet-sized alcove; paint chips lay at the edges of the floor like dandruff flakes. A row of tarnished brass mail boxes were recessed in one wall.

Lew Bennett—2C

I plodded up an antiquated staircase to the second floor, where it seemed ten degrees hotter than outside. Before knocking on the door of 2-C, I pulled my wallet from the hip pocket of my slacks to show the photostat of my private investigator's license. I knocked. No answer. Again. Still no answer. I decided I should at least try the door before going back to Mrs. Garner and reporting failure. Mr. Bennett might

be out and the bracelet might be in, simplifying my problem immensely. I replaced my wallet in my pocket and tried the knob.

The door was unlocked. I pushed it open slowly and stepped inside. There was no way to tell about the bracelet, but I could see from the doorway that Mr. Bennett was definitely in. I closed the door behind me. At least someone was in. Whoever he was, his picture was on the bureau and he would not be going out again.

He lay face-down on the floor wearing a pair of striped undershorts and two bullets in his left temple.

Stale, gray cigarette smoke floated across a broad sunray which filtered through the room's lone window. Four porcelain mugs, half-full of a scummy liquid, waited on a coffee table to be washed. Sheets of newspaper had been discarded wherever their reader had finished with them. A puddle of blood was ruining the already-flattened nap of the carpet beneath the corpse.

The photograph was an 8½ x 11 black-and-white. The man who now lay on the rug was sitting on a railing, with a stretch of beach and the ocean beyond for background. An inscription read: Lew—In Memory of a Wonderful Month at Carmel—Marla.

I touched the white skin of the late Lew Bennett's hairy leg and found it cold.

There was a scarred mahogany desk on the other side of the corpse.

I stepped across him, wrapped my handkerchief around my hand, and began glancing through the litter of papers on top of the desk.

Five minutes later I figured I had already stayed ten minutes too long. Checking the hall, I found it silent and stepped through the doorway. I was leaving without the bracelet, the reason I had come in the first place. I was leaving without having found the pistol someone had used to eradicate Lew Bennett. I was taking with me only one thing—a note to Bennett, threatening his life if he spoke to the wrong person about his relationship with a married woman. The note was signed—L. G.

Mrs. Lorna Garner's husband, whether he knew it or not, had good reason to warn me away from Lew Bennett.

"Come in."

The door of the ranch house was opened by a woman who looked like Lorna Garner, but wasn't. The woman holding the door open wore a tan cashmere sweater and brown skirt.

"I'm her little sister, Jean," she said, answering my unvoiced question. "You are Mr. Hammond?"

"That's right."

"Come in. Lorna's out in the kitchen fixing supper."

I entered a living room furnished in modern American furniture with a white finish. Several seascape paintings hung on the walls, and a

driftwood ashtray rested on an end-table.

"I'll get Lorna," the sister said. "Make yourself comfortable."

She walked out of the living room, down a short hall, and into another room. The door closed behind her.

I saw the two pocketbooks setting side-by-side on a bookcase. One was the black suede I had seen with Lorna Garner at the Pink Parasol. The other was brown patent leather.

I strode to the bookcase and hurriedly began checking through the black suede. My nose was poked in the brown patent leather when its owner walked into the room.

"Lorna will—" she began, then stopped. "I hope you found what you were looking for," she said coolly.

"I did," I answered in a tone as soft, yet hard, as her own.

"You've found the bracelet?" asked Lorna Garner as she entered the living room from the hall. I could smell meat and french-fried potatoes cooking in the kitchen.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Garner. Lew Bennett is dead. He was shot in the head, several hours ago."

"No," she said in a voice which seemed unable to accept what I had told her. "Who?"

"I don't know and care less. But the Los Animos Police Department is going to care very much. Have you ever seen this, Mrs. Garner?"

I pulled the note from my coat pocket and handed it to her. Her face expressed no recognition.

"Mr. Hammond, I never wrote this note. I never wrote any notes to Lew."

"Do you recognize the handwriting?"

"No."

I nodded. "It's too forced to be natural." I felt tired and hungry. And sick to my stomach of people who live in nice houses, have nice manners, and get mixed up in things that aren't a damn bit nice, at all. I pulled a cigarette from my own pocket and fired it with a match, which I tossed in the driftwood ashtray.

"Excuse me, Lorna, but I've got to be going," the sister said, breaking the silence.

"Thanks for watching the kids, Sis," Lorna Garner said absently.

"May I drop you somewhere, Mrs. . . ."

"Miss Greer. I'm the sister who never married, Mr. Hammond." She smiled. She was thinner than her sister, and better looking. "I'd accept a ride to Los Animos, if you're going in that direction."

I nodded, affirmatively. "Mrs. Garner, I'd advise you to have a firm alibi in your mind when the Los Animos Police call you, which they will. Cops have a way of finding these things out." Thank God. "Incidentally, you might also sit down and have a long talk with your husband. He seems to love you, so you may be able to salvage your marriage."

She pulled a folder of checks from

the black suede pocketbook, wrote one for twenty dollars, and handed it to me. I glanced at the check, then at the note I held in my other hand, before stuffing them both in my coat pocket.

"Thank you, Mr. Hammond."

Two young boys came running around the corner of the house and laughing, as we walked down the sidewalk to the Ford. They stopped laughing abruptly and stared at me.

"Goodbye, Aunt Linda," they said as if being prompted.

I could hear Lorna Garner sobbing inside the ranch house.

"Why did you shoot him, Linda?"

We were driving along the two-lane Cliff Road. Far below us the waves lapped contentedly at the beach in the sunlight.

"Lorna and Linda," she said, in a voice which spoke to something far beyond the Pacific. "Mom and Daddy always wanted us to be so close. Now we're closer than they ever dreamed of." She turned to look at me. "Thanks for not saying anything back at Lorna's."

She stared silently at the sand and gulls for a mile, then asked, "How did you know?"

"You told me your name was Jean, but all the registration cards in your wallet were signed, Linda Greer. The initials on the note, which your sister said she never saw, could have been either hers or yours. The handwriting on the note was nothing like that on the addresses or the check she gave me. One thing

climbed it—the odor of gunpowder in your pocketbook. What did you do with the pistol?"

She pointed at the ocean.

"If you'd like to talk about it . . ."

"After I killed him, I was going to take that note with me. But I heard someone in the hall outside his room, and I panicked. All I could think of was getting out without being seen. Which I did."

"You were having an affair with him?"

"Yes."

"Did your sister know?"

"No."

"But you knew about her."

"From the first. I was the younger sister, Mr. Hammond, in age only. Lorna got married, had kids, did the whole suburban bit. But she always came running to me when she needed help. She couldn't do a thing for herself."

"I met Lew Bennett at Carmel. He went there quite frequently, he said. We were immediately attracted to each other. At first, I thought this might be it for me. Then, several weeks later, I found a bracelet in Lew's apartment. I recognized it as one Fred had given to Lorna—he really does love her so much. Fred, I mean. Anyway, Lew admitted he had been seeing Lorna. He seemed to think it was funny, our being sisters."

"Three days ago, Lew came to me and wanted money to bail him out of some debts. He knew how close I was to Lorna—that I'd do any-

thing for her—so he threatened to tell her about himself and me. He said he'd tell her husband everything. Poor Lorna. She always had a habit of getting involved in things without knowing their ramifications. So, I went to his apartment, this morning, and killed him with the gun he kept in his desk."

She lighted a cigarette and smoked wordlessly. I concentrated on keeping the Ford on the road, which wound constantly near the edge of the promontory. Linda wasn't crying or anything, just sitting there, smoking. I braked going into a turn and accelerated slightly, coming out of it.

A pressure seemed to grab the right side of the car and push it away from the cliff. The door hung open for a second, then blew shut

with a thud. I pumped the brakes and pulled off the road onto the narrow shoulder. Looking over the edge of the cliff, I could see her far down below. She was draped over the edge of a large rock like clothing which someone had laid there to dry in the sun. The only thing moving was the quiet surf, which was edging up to meet her. In another hour, the tide would be high.

I phoned the Los Animos Homicide from the Pink Parasol. The bartender was still polishing glasses with his greasy rag. For ten minutes, I tried to think of a way to tell Lorna Garner that her sister had jumped from my car and smashed herself all over a rock. There was no easy way, so instead of phoning, I left the news for the cops to break, and drove home.



The sheriff believed there was a reason for everything. There was a strange reason for the way he acted.



Suspect

BY JOHN JAKES

THEY MET for breakfast at a place called the Good Morning Cafe. He hadn't felt such expectancy for a long time. Nor such fear of loss, the coin's other side.

He shouldn't have enjoyed it. The orange juice had a tin taste, the toast was burnt, the eggs swam in a translucent grease as they did, it seemed, in every burg west of Ohio. He worried about having her pay the check.

Yet such irritations didn't matter. He'd known her less than twenty-four hours. It seemed like ten years.

He put down his coffee. "How did you make out last night?"

Her smile was relieved. "My husband wasn't home. I gather his important customers demanded service in Des Moines." Her eyes scarred over briefly. "Or maybe it was the girl. The one he doesn't bother to lie about any more."

She stared at him steadily. Her face was thin, not overwhelmingly pretty, framed by rather straight

brown hair with a sun-platinumed forelock. Her eyes, gray, tore holes in him without hurting.

"Did you wait?" she asked.

"I told you I would. Till around eleven. Then I went to bed."

"The boy, Bill Jr., was sick. Just a summer cold. But I had to stay. He's just six and a half. I almost called. But with that idiotic party line we have—anyway, I thought a lot about what might happen to Bill Jr., Tom. Later, if we—if this goes on. Now I know something'll work out."

She flushed. When the waitress left after refilling their cups, she gripped his hand, there in the hot sunlight on the tablecloth, between the menu rack and the front window.

"Tom, I feel absolutely idiotic. Do I sound it? I'm thirty-one and acting half that. It's like—being born all over again."

"Jenny?" She looked up. He smiled. "I was just getting used to it."

They sat perfectly still a moment, talking but saying nothing. He took it for another good sign that she was wearing a white shirt patterned after a man's, throat open, much like his except very much whiter. He felt incredibly good. The acid coffee tasted rich and fine.

The door of a low square building across the sun-dazzled street opened. Two men came out.

Jenny Daley noticed. "Must be something unusual, this early."

He looked out. The two men in uniform waited for a semi rig to pass in the four lane main street. Then they started across. A dusty Ford with a farmer's co-op decal on its bumper pulled up near the men, in the middle of the block. The driver waved.

The first of the two, big, sloppy-bellied and looking about fifty-five, tipped his hat to acknowledge the driver letting them proceed. The big man's eyes were in shadow under his broad hat brim. The one behind him, lean, younger, with buck teeth, looked tough.

Jenny Daley showed surprise. "I do believe they're coming in here."

"Who is it?" Tom asked. The sheriff?"

"Yes. Frank Grimm. The other one's his deputy, Perry. Follows him like a dog. But then Frank is planning early retirement. Perry's hoping for the nomination next spring. You hardly ever see Frank out this early. I wonder what they're after."

On the curb the pair stopped to confer. For no reason, Tom's back-bone crawled.

Nonsense.

But he was more than a thousand miles from Manhattan, a genuine stranger to these people, their talk, their whole way of life. And there was that trouble at the bank late yesterday.

Tom frowned. "Is that some kind of bad joke? Everything around here is Grimm."

"Stay long enough and you'll find

out." Her smile was wan. "Actually, Frank's a descendant of the Grimms who settled this town. The hotel where you stayed last night was named for his grandfather. His brother Roy runs the undertaking parlor. His wife is president of the church Ladies' Mission Board. They — good Lord, Tom, look. Perry's pointing at us."

The deputy was. Frank Grimm's fat fingers fiddled on the belt around his heavy belly. He nodded. The two men headed for the cafe door.

The half dozen patrons at the counter kept quiet. The waitress turned off the gurgling coffee urn spigot. The silence crushed down.

Panic gripped Tom. He tried to figure out what the hell the deputy meant, pointing that way. But his thoughts were chaos. The only clear image in his head was crazy, an image of a grotesque gingerbreaded frame manse he'd seen through the dusty windshield of Jenny Daley's Triumph yesterday, just after they passed the village limit coming in out of the hot, flat brass and green eternity of corn, whizzing by the tin sign that read, *You Are Now Entering Grimm*.

The cafe door opened. The two officers walked over. Perry had ugly eyes. They slid over Jenny Daley's white blouse.

"Bill, he's still out of town, huh Miz Daley?"

"Keep quiet, Perry," said the beefy man. "We didn't come to socialize. You, mister. What's your name?"

"Ford, Thomas Ford. Anything wrong with that?"

"It won't do no good to take that snotty tone," Frank Grimm said. "Let's stroll across the street and talk." He touched his hat brim to the counter girl. "Morning, Lavinia. Sorry to bother you. We had to pick up this feller. Judd Tamerink was found about six A.M. on—"

"Judson?" Jenny Daley said. "Found?" Sheriff, what—"

"Dead," Perry said. "Get up, mister." He grabbed Tom's arm.

"Wait just a damn minute," Tom said, half rising.

Jenny Daley leaned forward. "Tom, Judson Tamerink is vice president of the First Iowa Bank down the street."

"I know," Tom said. "Yesterday I tried to borrow money from him."

"And when he said no, you got sore," Frank Grimm said. "Plenty of people saw. I already called some of 'em on the phone. Perry here was cruising around in the prowler car early. He found Judd smashed up and robbed."

"And we know who smashed him," Perry said. "Don't we, huh."

Tom was about to blurt that it was a lousy dirty farce. Then he saw it through their eyes. A bright blue metal sign kitty-corner across the street caught his attention. *Babcock's I.G.A. Foodliner*. The thought hit him that this Frank Grimm, this mud-eyed, heavy-breathing farmer would know Babcock by first name, and everybody else in town too.

Also, Jenny drove a Triumph among Chevys and Fords. She was obviously on rotten terms with her husband. She'd picked Tom up and driven him to Grimm. His own voice, with its nasal Manhattan tinge, in itself was accusing:

"Let me get my jacket and we'll go straighten this—"

Perry jerked his arm. "You don't need no coat." He glanced at Tom's dusty, threadbare summer blazer hanging on the wooden corner tree. "Expensive, looks like. How you get money to buy things like that, Ford?" Perry was gripping both arms now, forcing him toward the street. "Robbing people late at night? Busting their heads in afterwards?"

Jenny Daley threw bills on the table. "I'm coming too."

Frank Grimm blocked the door. "No, Miz Daley. People saw you come barrelin' in with this feller yesterday. Like he was all of a sudden a real good friend. I guess I know what kind of story you'd tell to help your—friend—out."

"That's a cheap remark, Frank. And you have no right to lock him up."

"Begging your pardon, I got every right. He killed Judd Tamerink."

Two farm women on the sidewalk in the blazing white heat turned to stare at Tom. Frank Grimm carefully removed both hands from the doorframe, turned, leaving Jenny behind. What had been grotesque, strictly rube, focused

down to a needle that went all the way into Tom's bowels and hurt. Frank Grimm's face ran with sweat. He looked flushed. Flushed and victorious.

The main street of Grimm was also a broad national highway straight through Iowa. Jenny's call drifted among the horns of farm cars and heavy semis: "Tom, I'll get a lawyer. Harve Whitelow is the best. He'll come over and—"

"Get going," Frank Grimm said, pushing Tom hard.

Only Perry's hand on Tom's arm prevented him toppling forward. The driver of the lumbering semi, barely going 25 but running a lethal weapon nevertheless, howled his airbrakes. Tom jerked back just in time.

A reek of oil and rubber swam off the sizzling pavement, turning his guts runny with fear. The semi driver swore. Perry scowled, waved him on. Tom stared into Frank Grimm's beet face.

"Watch your feet," said the Sheriff. "You could of been killed."

In Grimm's small, aging eyes Tom saw something he failed to understand as yet. But it was bright as a sword, and it scared him. At both ends of the main street the cornfields glittered along the horizon in a yellow sun haze, pretty as a Technicolor just-folks musical.

The three men entered the one story office and jail. Sheriff Grimm said:

"I wouldn't count on Harve

Whitelow. He can stall around okay, like last year when he defended that Commie English teacher we had at the high school. He lost, though. Up front of a jury of decent folks, he always loses. Maybe folks in Grimm aren't very smart but they understand." He jammed Tom against the wall. "They understand filth and murder, mister."

Perry pushed Tom into a chair. Then the deputy, buck teeth white and wet with his saliva, folded his arms.

Sheriff Grimm sat down. On one corner of the desk rested a cracked leather picture frame. It held a photo of a bright-faced boy in basketball uniform. Sheriff Grimm took out a form, uncapped a dime-store ballpoint.

"Want to make a statement about Tamerink?"

"About what? Killing him? You guys are crazy."

"You deny you went to the bank yesterday when you got into town?"

"No. I was broke. I had just enough money to cover my hotel room. I wanted a little extra to—"

Tom stopped. Why the hell was he telling them? These rubes, these jerks?

But he knew: he was operating in their frame of reference, not his. He was nobody. They somehow made him feel guilty. He must stop feeling so. He couldn't. He wondered what Sheriff Grimm's strange eyes meant.

"You wanted money so's you

could entertain your girlfriend?" Perry prompted. "That Miz Daley, she sure plays around."

"Listen, she told me her husband treats her like—"

"Okay, okay," Sheriff Grimm interrupted. "You wanted a short loan from the bank."

"Only fifty dollars for God's sake!" Tom exclaimed. "That stuffed shi—that Tamerink, they sent me to him. I asked him to wire some people I know in New York, collect. He wouldn't. Just folded his hand and said no."

"So you decided to get tough?"

"Well, I admit I lost my temper. Christ, it was hot. I'd been rolled the night before, and—"

"Rolled?" Perry said. "This New York guy gets around, huh, Frank?"

"What the hell kind of town is this?" Tom shouted.

Perry shoved him back down into the chair while Sheriff Grimm leaned forward, talking low: "A decent town, friend. Maybe in New York types like you can hide. Out here, you probably think we're hicks, but we see a dead body, we know there's a good cause. We're small enough to find that cause, too. Judd Tamerink's lying down at my brother's undertaking place this minute. And you're the cause."

Tom had the uncanny feeling that Grimm was speaking to him but somehow looking at the framed picture on the desk even though Grimm's eyes never left Tom's face:

"The cause was, Judd Tamerink

wouldn't fall for your grifting pitch. So you waited until he walked home from Rotary after dark. You jumped him, killed him, took the money you needed to sport around with that loose Miz Daley—"

"God damn it, she never came to the hotel!" Tom yelled.

"So," Perry said, "you admit you were waiting for her."

"Only for dinner. We were just going to eat dinner."

Perry snickered. "What were you gonna have for a little appetizer, huh?"

"Enough, Perry," Grimm said sharply. "You know I don't like a foul mouth." To Tom: "See? There it is again. There's always a good cause. You needed money for an evening with that woman. So you took it from Judd Tamerink by force. Killed him with your fists when he tried to struggle." Grimm's eyes shone brightly as he added, "I know for a fact you did."

Another semi growling outside gave Tom an idea. He tried to sound reasonable:

"Look, Sheriff, I did argue with the man, okay? But a big highway runs right through this town. How do you know somebody driving through didn't kill him? Some hobo, maybe?"

"Because someone killing a fine man like Judd Tamerink in cold blood don't make sense. You had good cause. There's always a good cause."

A tiny intimation of what evil was

here began to bedevil Tom's mind.

"You're saying that—"

"No stranger would just kill Judd Tamerink outright."

At that moment Tom Ford wanted to throw back his head and heehaw. He thought of frequent headlines in Manhattan. Old men stomped in Central Park, just for fun. The needle of fear went an inch deeper into him because he sensed, without knowing the reason, that Sheriff Grimm wouldn't see.

The Sheriff waved his pen. "A few more questions."

Tom decided his only course was to stall for time, for the appearance of the lawyer Jenny Daley had mentioned.

Name? Thomas Ford.

Occupation? Photographer.

For whom? Well, no one.

He'd been working for a commercial studio in Manhattan, he explained. For a real son-of-a-bitch boss. He finally got fed up and quit. He decided to take a trip, bumming and hitching with his camera, with an eye to maybe selling some of the resulting spec work to some big magazine. He left his apartment when the lease lapsed and just started west. After twelve years of shooting idiots at trade conventions, he wanted some different air.

And my God how he'd gotten it. But he didn't say that.

"If you're a photographer," said Perry, "where's your gear at?"

"I told you, I got rolled night before last. I was in this bar on the out-

skirts of—I think the town was named Roycemore.”

Grimm nodded. “Forty miles down the pike. Go on.”

“I woke up next day—yesterday—in a ditch outside the town. All my stuff was gone.”

“So you can’t prove you’re a photographer.”

“No. My wallet’s gone, with all my cards. I had just ten bucks left in my pants pocket. I started walking on the highway. Mrs. Daley was kind enough to pick me up. And—”

The rest choked in his mouth. Why tell them? Of what her gray eyes meant, said, as they talked driving into this damned burg? Of what suddenly appeared in her face—a promise, born of chance meeting, that finally there was a way out of his mediocrity, failure, endless futile boozing.

A way out for her, too. An escape from her own trap. Why tell them and cheapen it?

“Drunk. Got rolled. Threatened to slug the vice president of the local bank—my, that’s a swell record,” said Sheriff Grimm. “And murder for dessert.”

“And Miz Daley,” said Perry. She just did you a favor. Just out of the goodness of her heart. Nothing in return. That’s rich.”

“You dirty - minded sons of bitches!” Tom yelled, jumping up.

Perry chopped him across the back of the neck, hard. Tom pitched over.

He watched the leg of Grimm’s

desk blur, in and out, in and out, like the image in a rangefinder. Grimm clumped around the desk. His voice drifted from afar:

“There’s not one blessed thing to prove what you say, Ford. But I get it plain enough. You’re a bum. You killed Judd Tamerink for the money he had on him so you could make time with that cheap woman. It all makes a good, logical cause. There’s always a good cause for a filthy thing like you did, always.”

Lying on the floor, Tom had the dizzy impression that Sheriff Grimm wasn’t talking to him, wasn’t explaining to him, but to someone else. Who?

“Put him in the cell, Perry. We got ourselves a killer.”

Limp and hurting, Tom didn’t struggle as Perry manhandled him across the office. The iron door clanged.

A few minutes later Sheriff Grimm went out for lunch. Tom sat on the bunk with his head in his hands. Perry propped up his feet and opened a Yogi Bear comic.

Wait, Tom said to himself. She’ll bring the lawyer.

But when Jenny Daley appeared, toward mid-afternoon, she was alone. Perry grudgingly let her talk to Tom for ten minutes. Tom stared at her through the bars:

“Wouldn’t he help me out?”

“Yes, but he’s trying a case over in the next county. He can’t be back until late tonight. I talked to him on the phone. As soon as he re-

turns, he'll get a court order and have you released."

When Tom looked at her through the bars, her face although reddened from dried tears, seemed even prettier than before. Maybe bars did that. Her sadness hurt him because, after eight years, after all the time since his wife ran out on him, there was something hard and solidified inside that *felt* again.

"I have to wait until tonight?" he managed to say.

"Yes." Hiding the gesture with her body, she touched his fingers. No words passed between them, but much else did.

"God," he said softly after a long interval. "Who'd think it?"

"Yes. And in this place. This stupid, red-necked place."

"Jenny, aren't there any other lawyers in town?"

"Three. They're all friends of Frank Grimm. Harve Whitelow isn't anybody's friend, really. It would be pointless to phone the others. They're not bad men, anything so sinister. But they are, basically, on Frank's side. They'd talk to him first. It's an awfully small town."

"That's sure as hell apparent. The Sheriff is positive I'm guilty."

Quickly, despite Perry obviously listening for whatever he could catch, Tom described the Sheriff's almost frenzied certainty. At the end he said, "He's the only one who really scares me, Jenny, old and fat as he is. He's so damned sure."

"He's not as old as he looks. And he hasn't been himself since his boy got killed."

Tom stared toward the desk photo. "The kid in the basketball suit?"

Jenny nodded. "Frank had a—well, in public they just said he was ill. It was some sort of breakdown. He's a devout church man. It hit him pretty hard. Charlie was sixteen, Frank's and Mabel's only child. He played for the high school. Had his tuition promised from one of the state universities. In January the team was on its way back from Clair after winning a night game. It was snowing. The bus brakes failed on a curve. The driver and Charlie were killed. Another boy's still recovering from a broken neck. For a time I guess Frank couldn't get over it. Then he put on his uniform again and seemed all right."

The fear needle went down in Tom all the way. "Maybe he didn't get over it, Jenny."

"What?"

"Nothing. I keep forgetting how silly this is."

"Of course. You were in the hotel all last night."

"Yes, Jenny. But all by myself."

She bit her lip. "They'd have to prove you weren't."

"I was there." He stared as deep into her as he could. "Jenny, I was."

"I know." She bent, kissing his hand. "I do know."

"Awright," Perry said, slamming his boots loudly on the floor. "That's

enough for right now. Next time you come back, Miz Daley—" Perry tried to touch her arm as she passed. Jenny drew back. His eyes were raw with more than anger. "—be sure you bring that lawyer."

From the doorway Jenny blew Tom a kiss. Her eyes were filled with tears.

After the door closed Tom leaned on the bars, smiling. No matter what else happened, that kiss said the crazy hope he'd felt after she picked him up was correct. With the gesture she'd made her choice, and publicly.

How it would work out exactly, he couldn't foresee. But he felt better than he had in years, despite the situation.

At last Sheriff Grimm returned. A gravy stain decorated his shirt front. Perry reported about lawyer Whitelow's delay in returning to town. Grimm mumbled to himself, sat down, started rocking back and forth, the swivel chair squeaking. Occasionally he glanced at his watch, then at Tom. His breathing seemed to grow rapid, and louder.

The air darkened in the building as night came on.

Pacing the cell, Tom suddenly stiffened. "Sheriff?" He yelled it. "Sheriff!"

"Keep your voice down!" For some reason Grimm's cheeks were purple. "What do you want?"

"I just remembered something. I can prove I'm a photographer. Remember my jacket that I left in the

cafe? I forgot when you hustled me out so fast." Tom's voice was free of rancor, confident though not smart-alecky. He wanted to play it right since he had much to live for now, and the means as well: "In the pocket of the coat there's a lens, a wide-angle lens wrapped in tissue inside a plastic box. The guy that rolled me missed that too."

Sheriff Grimm stared at him a long moment, his cheeks more purple than ever. His eyes were hot, strange.

"Perry, go pick up the coat."

Perry left. He returned in about ten minutes. Tom saw, disbelieving, both side pockets turned inside out like little cloth mountains.

Perry slung the jacket on the desk. He stared at the coat, rather than the Sheriff, as though embarrassed. "Wasn't anything in the pockets, Frank. I guess he was lying."

"Good, Perry. Thanks very much for checking up."

For a moment Tom hung on the bars, too shocked to shout. When he did, it was at the top of his voice:

"What the hell's going on here? He took that lens and hid it! It was in the coat, dammit! What's going on in this crazy place?"

"Just a little justice," Grimm said. "Just a little simple small town justice. We know you had good cause to Kill Judd Tamerink. Don't we know that, Perry?"

"Yes, I guess we do," said Perry in a low voice.

Then Tom began to yell in earn-

est. Loudly as he could, because he wasn't confident any more, and because he'd recalled Jenny's words about Sheriff Grimm taking early retirement and Perry wishing to stand for nomination to what must be a lucrative lifetime post.

"We can't have this kind of fuss," Tom heard Sheriff Grimm saying. "Perry, quiet him down." Tom was so enraged he hardly heard the cell door open. He saw Perry looming in the half light.

Knowing he wasn't a fighter, Tom threw a punch. Perry grinned and began to work him systematically and brutally, blow after blow. Tom was mumbling Jenny's name through a froth of blood when he blacked out.

There was a peculiar jolting rhythm to wake him. His mouth tasted of salt stuff he assumed was blood. His belly turned over. He shook his head. Bodies wedged on either side of him. When he tried to move, the bulky blackness on his right—it had the voice of the Sheriff—said:

"Watch him, Perry, he's awake. Don't let him jostle you any."

Perry's voice sounded oddly feeble: "Yes, sir."

"Where—what is—?" Tom began. His eyes focused.

He was in the front seat of what must be the Sheriff's car, judging from the silvery bulge of dark spotlights on either side of the windshield. His hands were trussed with clothesline and so were his ankles.

The police radio band crackled low. A distant official voice droned about some farmer's lost child. The dash clock said after nine.

Tom shook, smelling his own fearful sweat. "Where are we going?"

"Too much fuss if that college snot Whitelow gets back," said Sheriff Grimm, staring ahead. The car was travelling about ten miles an hour along an alley. To the left, between buildings, Tom made out dim lamps in old fashioned parlors of frame houses on an elm-heavy street. "We're getting you out of town for the good of the community. We'll tell Whitelow we drove you over the county line and told you to keep going because we found the lens and it supported your story. It don't, though. I know it don't. Perry, you'll have to take the last block straight down Main. Else you can't get into the drive that leads to the garage."

Perry's voice sounded pained: "Yes, that's right, I forgot."

The car turned, still between buildings. Another alley. Ahead, streetlamps glowed.

"You're letting me go?" Tom said.

"We're getting you out of town." said the Sheriff.

Perry swallowed audibly. "Sheriff, I dunno whether—"

"What, Perry?"

"I dunno whether we—"

"You don't know what, Perry?" Sheriff Grimm leaned forward to

stare around Tom. His eyes were like little melons. His lower lip shone with spit. "You don't know whether you want to run next spring, Perry, on my recommendation naturally, that's the only way, or whether you want to go back to that no good piece of farmland and try to make a living for Ruthie and the five little ones? Is that what you don't know, Perry?"

After a silence Perry said, "I-guess I don't know what I meant to say, Sheriff. But Roy—"

"He's down at the lodge. This is Tuesday."

"Oh yeah, sure."

"I've got a key, don't you worry. Now take her easy, Perry."

The front bumper of the car was nearly to the sidewalk when Perry stiffened. He cocked his head. Sheriff Grimm seemed to be staring at nothing, his eyes faintly moist. Perry braked, levered the car into neutral, then turned a dial.

"Sheriff?" he said. "That's Roycemore."

"—Malcom Lee Bigelow, age eighteen, address box two, County Line Road, wanted for questioning in connection with a murder in Grimm last night. Luke, you read me? Okay, here's the rest. Carload of boys out joyriding. Drinking beer. Said they were passing through Grimm, saw a man walking along a side street after dark. One boy confessed to his mother this morning. She reported to us here tonight. Bigelow is the one we want.

He struck the blows, the boy said. What? He said the killing was for no special reason. Luke? You reading this okay? Over—"

A scratchy voice in faraway Roycemore responded. The first voice said, "You pick up this Bigelow and talk to him on the way in, Luke."

"Any report on it from Grimm?" said the other voice.

"Nope, nothing today. They only have a weekly paper, though. I'll see whether I can raise the office tonight."

"Mistake," said the Sheriff. He turned the switch.

There was silence, except for the hum of the gas pedal waiting under Perry's foot. Grimm said:

"Killing for no special reason? Why, that's a mistake. A plain lie. Drive, Perry."

"Sheriff, Jesus Almighty, we oughtn't to—"

"I said drive, Perry."

Tom started to speak. But his head ached. He was cold all over and he felt he was beyond all power to scream. The official car nosed carefully into the main thoroughfare. It turned left and picked up speed, racing for the city limits. Far behind, the lights of another automobile glimmered in the rear mirror. It was obvious the Sheriff's car would outdistance the other vehicle handily.

"Those boys," Tom began, voice barely audible. Then he went wild, began to thrash.

“Those boys—you heard, Sheriff—you heard—”

“A mistake. They had no good cause. There’s always a good cause. Always.” Sheriff Grimm stared ahead through the windshield, his voice firm, decisive. “Perry? No turn signal. Just get over.”

The car went left, across the highway toward a dark driveway beside a dark gingerbreaded building Tom remembered. Tears started at the corner of his eyes. Full of hate, full of pity, full of incomprehensible

terror, Tom watched the headlights sweep across the road during the turn. He saw the beams wash across the reverse side of the tin signboard he’d noticed coming into town with Jenny Daley. Black letters on the back of the sign said, *You Are Now Leaving Grimm.*

Then the car finished the turn, the legend was gone, quick as an illusion, and as Perry killed the lights, the car coasted easily down the drive of the darkened funeral home and into the black garage.



THE tension set as Mr. O. B. sauntered into the room. His almond shaped eyes forced the three youths to forget about dinner. The snowy haired woman shook her head sadly. Mr. O. B. remained impassive. In cracked tones the old woman said, "Mr. O. B., you know supper sets at six, no need keepin' the whole household waitin'." The three youths glared at the late arrival. Mr. O. B. stared them down. "Now you just set yourself in your usual place, and we'll begin the serving," said Mrs. Zurn, pointing to a

corner chair. The dinner was a silent affair.

Occasionally Mrs. Zurn would turn to question Mr. O. B., but his orange-red face said nothing. After a few false starts at conversation, the elderly woman quietly returned to serving the dessert. The frosted light bulb cast a sombre shade to the trio of youthful faces. They ate as quickly as they could. Once, the short, pale looking boy dropped the peach from his spoon. The other boys glared sharply at him. He retrieved it and gulped it down.

THE STAR BOARDER

BY

CHARLES MIRON

It was disgusting . . . the favoritism Mrs. Zurn showed toward Mr. O. B. The boys decided they had some rights too.

Near the close of the meal, Mrs. Zurn smiled at Mr. O. B. The others noticed this and were unnerved, particularly the husky, blonde boy who began to scratch sharply at his close cropped scalp. Mr. O. B. lowered his immense head and noisily drank the peach juice.

"Seems you like the peach juice tonight, Mr. O. B." He ignored the old woman and her attempts at conversation. Four pairs of eyes watched him, and then he watched them for a moment. The frail looking boy frantically looked away. The late Mr. Chad Zurn stared down at him from a sepia toned print. The heavy beard, and the beady eyes momentarily frightened the pale lad, though he'd seen the expression many times before. From Chad Zurn, he proceeded to steadfastly stare at the scarred wooden table before him. The husky youth alternately picked at his irritated scalp and sharply cracked his knuckles. The almond shaped green eyes finally rested upon close spaced, nasty thin, blue eyes. Mr. O. B. saw the sneer take shape. Craig Healey.

"How's for some nice, hot coffee for a finale?"

The young men nodded. Mrs. Zurn rose. Her black high topped shoes shuffled heavily along the dark stain floor. She wrapped her puffy hands in a cloth rag and jerked the pot from the high flame oven. She turned to the table and her stiff corset strained against the faded brown print dress. She reached the

table and began to pour for the group.

"First, Mr. O. B.; your usual, milk, no sugar."

She filled the remaining cups. The frail young man drank coffee black. Bob, the husky one, took milk. Craig Healey held three sugar lumps aloft, then dropped them casually into his cup. Cocoa droplets sprinkled the white linen tablecloth. Mrs. Zurn paled.

The young men drank their coffee as quickly as possible. They rose almost in unison. Howie and Bob looked toward Craig. Craig looked toward Mr. O. B., who in turn looked toward Mrs. Zurn. She reminded the boys that the rent was due the following day. Howie hastily nodded. Bob jibberishly declared his approval of the evenings' meal. Mrs. Zurn beamed. Craig bowed his head in Mr. O. B.'s direction, smiled, then strode from the room. The other two followed. An almost eerie, squeaking sound filled the room as they departed.

"Nice quiet group of boys, eh Mr. O. B.?" The latter merely narrowed his storming eyes, then quietly left the parlor-dining room.

Craig climbed the rickety stairs, with Bob and Howie close behind him. Howie tripped slightly on the torn floral carpeting. Craig snickered. The dim stairway forced them to clutch the wine colored railing until they reached the next landing. Three doors appeared before them. They filed into the room to the right

of the stairway. Craig sat on the lone bed. He kicked his tassel loafers off, then stretched out on the army blanket atop the hard mattress. Bob slumped into the splintered rocker. Howie began to rub his palms while pacing the floor.

"Sit down, you fool," snapped Craig. Howie hastily moved towards a red hassock in the corner of the room. Feeling the puffed leather first, he proceeded to seat himself.

"Now," said Craig, pausing, let's review our plan." The others hesitated. Craig jumped to his feet. "What's the matter, cat got your tongue?"

His anger was apparent.

"It's not that, Craig."

"Then what is it, Howie?"

"It's just that . . . well, maybe the time isn't quite right."

"And you, Bob?"

"Whatever you say goes, Craig, only . . . only let's be careful, huh."

"A pair of old women, that's what, now stop worrying, you ninnies." "Okay, okay, Craig, only I just wouldn't want to get expelled, that's all."

"You sicken me sometimes, stop being so melodramatic, Miss Bernhardt."

Howie turned ash white. His facial muscles tensed then began to twitch uncontrollably. Craig frowned. Howie turned towards the window, and stared out into the darkened garden.

"Well?" demanded Craig.

"I'm in," mumbled Howie.

"Make sure," came the sorrowful reply.

"I'll bet!"

"I am, I am," came the almost hysterical reply.

"Good, now we're set to operate."

They became silent, and listened. Wavering tones drifted up the stairway in endless tale. An occasional pause, apparently for emphasis more than voice fatigue, caught them, then the monotone continued.

"It's enough to give me the creeps, listenin' to 'em."

"There's only one answer, Bob."

"I think you're right, Craig."

"Of course, I'm right."

They listened again. It was the same as before.

"Convinced?"

"Yes, Craig, yes."

"Splendid, Howie, now give me the stuff."

Howie flinched. In faltering moves, he rose, walked to the door, opened it, looked about searchingly, then left the room. Craig and Bob eagerly listened. They heard another door open, close sharply, then a few shuffling footsteps, then silence. Bob's eyes became glazed. Craig walked to the wash basin and soaped the sweat off his hands. He rinsed them, shook them in the stifled room air, then dried them with a towel initialed B.

Footsteps suddenly approached their door. The door knob turned quickly, and they tensed. Howie stepped inside, closed the door

quickly, then slumped against the door, and sighed heavily.

"You got it?"

"Yes, Bob, I've got it."

"I thought maybe you forgot it."

"Well I didn't."

"No fighting, you two."

"Who is he to challenge, Craig?"

"Stop it, you two, nobody's challenging you, Howie."

"Well, he insinuated that—"

"Nobody did anything—now let's have it."

Howie reached into his pocket. He hesitated momentarily. The others looked at him impatiently. He slowly brought his hand from his pocket. His fist tightly balled up, he loosened his grip deliberately. One by one, his fingers released, till they saw it in the palm of his hand. Craig's eyes eagerly took in every curve of the thin vial. Bob bit at his nails. Howie's hand began to tremble. Craig snatched the fragile container, from Howie, then held it to the light.

"Beautiful," he huskily said, "just beautiful."

"Looks a little eerie to me."

"It's a little of that, too, Bob."

Howie remained silent. He closed his eyes, but he heard Craig's words.

"Open the door, Howie."

He obeyed. The conversation was the same. Bob became somewhat numb, as the methodic phrases seeped inside him. Craig tapped him, and he became aware once again.

"Is it the best stuff, Howie?"

"Yes, Craig, it is."

"Good—now stop being so nervous."

"Suppose someone discovers it's missing?"

"Not a chance, too many people handle it all day."

"But suppose . . ."

"Stop supposing . . . and relax, huh."

A whistling sound suddenly blasted forth. Bob suddenly lunged forward. Craig grabbed him with his free hand, and held Bob.

"Ease up, it's only the tea kettle."

"Sure, Craig, I know, I know."

"Okay, it means we're on schedule; close the door, Howie."

The door was slowly closed. The shades were drawn. Craig motioned the others to sit. They quickly seated themselves.

Craig held the vial between his index finger and his thumb quite firmly. He held it aloft, and looked cautiously at the contents within. He lowered the vial, then glanced at his watch.

"Two more minutes."

"You sure about the timing?"

"We've checked it often enough, haven't we?"

"Yes, but maybe . . ."

"Maybe, nothing, Howie."

Bob walked to the window, and raised the shades. He peered out. Shortly afterward, he lowered the shades, and returned to the rocker.

"You sure of what has to be done?"

"Sure, Craig, I know."

"Good, now do your job, Bob."

Bob walked to the closet, and rummaged through some jackets. Pulling out a maroon colored windbreaker, he tossed it over his shoulders. Craig motioned for him to put the jacket on, and to button it. He followed his instructions. Opening the door, he noisily slammed it shut, and lumbered down the stairs. Craig and Howie listened as Bob reached the bottom of the stairs. Craig opened the door just enough to let a crack of light escape the room. He heard the front door open. Suddenly, there came a pause, and Craig chuckled. Howie smiled as best he could.

"You goin' out now, Bob?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wait up, I think Mr. O. B. mentioned somethin' about wantin' to go out."

"Well . . . I . . . that is . . ."

"I hope you don't object to Mr. O. B. strollin' with you."

"Oh no, no not atall, ma'am."

"Good then, but only fifteen minutes now."

"Surely, ma'am."

"Lights out, you know."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mr. O. B. quickly walked ahead of Bob, and Bob closed the door behind them.

Craig closed the door. He handed the vial to Howie, who fumbled it slightly. Craig glowered at him, and Howie held the vial tighter. Craig glanced at his watch again. He nodded, and Howie followed him to

the door. They tip toed as silently as they could down the stairs.

Below, Mrs. Zurn was busily engaged in conversation with the late Chad Zurn.

"Like I was tellin' you Chad about that Parker woman it's for sure she's carryin' on with one of them boardin' students she's been so snooty about 'cause they're from rich folks from the east and I can't see what difference that makes 'cause that woman always had loose ways long before her Elwood passed away God rest his soul but not reason for her to be so open about it 'cause Lord knows it won't be me does no talkin' 'gainst that hussy come her day to be found out . . ."

Craig heard nothing as he descended slowly. Howie paused, held hard to the bannister, then began to moan. Craig turned to grab him, but Howie had lowered his head and begun to puke along the stairway. Craig wrenched the vial from Howie's shaking fingers. Snarling at the convulsing figure before him, Craig drove his fist into Howie's heaving stomach. Howie groaned in wounded agony, and doubled over, then slid numbly onto the mess he had created. His mind sensed a soft wetness enveloping him, but he could do nothing but cough and sob.

"Anything wrong up there?"

"It's nothing, Mrs. Zurn, Howie just don't feel so good."

"That you, Craig?"

"Yes, Mrs. Zurn, just helping Howie out."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Just an upset stomach, that's all, Mrs. Zurn."

"That's an awful lot of racket up there."

"He'll be okay in a minute, Mrs. Zurn, soon as I get him medicine."

"Well, hurry it up, then, I don't want no noise when Mr. O. B. gets back."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Zurn, don't worry for Mr. O. B."

Hurrying down the remaining stairs, Craig came to a side door. He opened it, and slowly stepped forward. The darkness of the room held him still for a moment, then shadows began to focus. He felt along the wall, stopped, then felt along the floor. Finally his fingers bumped against a round object. He sighed, then took the vial from his other hand and swiftly poured out the contents. He heard a splashing sound, then hurried from the room. He climbed the stairs, and grabbed Howie by the shirt-collar. Yanking the sobbing Howie to his feet, he half dragged him to his room. Opening the door to Howie's room, he pitched him forward and heard the body fall to the floor. He waited momentarily, then heard the sobbing continue. He stepped hurriedly into his own room.

The front door rattled. The old woman hobbled to the door as fast as she could. She peered through the lace curtains, then unlatched the door. The pair entered.

"Just on time, Bob."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, you best hurry to bed, I've got inspection in five minutes."

"Right away, ma'am."

"How was your stroll this evening, Mr. O. B.?"

Bob doubled stepped along the stairway. He turned and saw Mr. O. B. casually stroll inside.

He changed hurriedly into his pajamas, and slid into bed. Craig puffed on a cigarette, and watched the circles of smoke slowly rise. He pushed his finger through the rings, and smiled. Crushing the cigarette, he turned over on his side, and waited. Howie's room became silent.

The large hall clock doled the minutes out. Then came the familiar ascendancy, the three young men had come to expect. Finally, they reached the landing, and a wheezing could be heard. The door to Craig's room was opened, then closed. The same procedure took place at Bob's room.

Mrs. Zurn opened the third door.

"You awake, Howie?"

"Yes, Mrs. Zurn."

"How's your stomach feelin' now?"

"Much better now, thank you."

"Good, but you'll have to scrub the floor down tomorrow."

"Yes, Mrs. Zurn, I'll do that . . . tomorrow."

"I don't want no complaints from Mr. O. B. about the stairs."

Howie did not reply.

The plodding, methodical half walk was echoing once again.

Slowly, slowly the descendency was recorded. A door was heard to open. Bob strained to hear. Mrs. Zurn questioned Mr. O. B. His orange-red face was lit against a headboard. The almond shaped green eyes peered at her. The outer street light which had been turned on a few moments before, guided her steps.

She reached him, and touched his whiskered face. A sudden shriek filled the once fashionable old house. Howie twisted sharply. The hoarse crackling throb echoed again. Craig turned, and smiled into his sleep.

He imagined Mrs. Zurn's feeble fingers brushing against the stiff, bushy tail of Mr. O. B.



She was a newspaper reporter . . . a very desirable woman who'd do anything for a story. And . . . he had more than one story to tell.



The Scoop

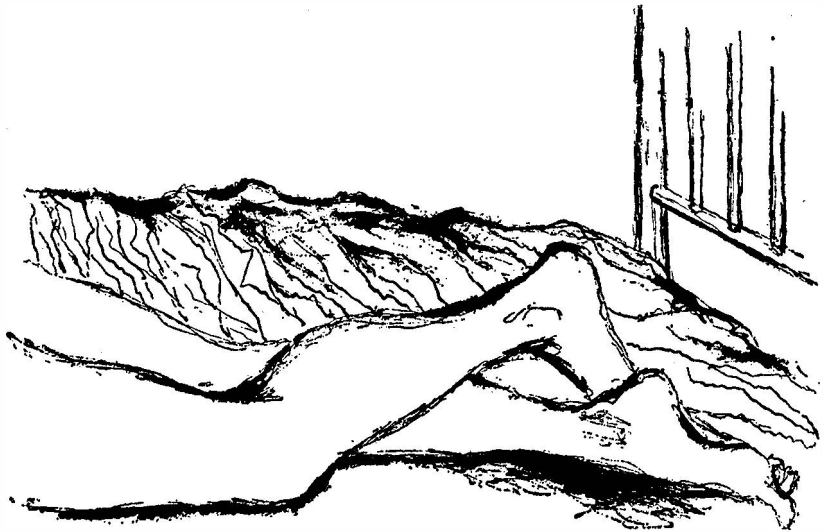
A Novelette

BY ORT LOUIS

I SWERVED, then yanked to a stop inches short of a tree silhouetted black against a rain-filled sky. The girl who'd run in front of me on the highway pulled the door open and moved in beside me. She was young—maybe 18, and her overly made-up lips trembled as she spoke. "Please keep driving. Please get me away from here . . ."

I hesitated, but her terror seemed genuine so I stepped on the gas. "What's wrong?"

She swung around on the seat and watched as the lights of the city behind us faded away like dying fireflies. She turned back to the front of the car and stared through the rain-splattered windshield, her fingers clutching the collar of her unbut-



toned raincoat. It was a long minute before she looked at me; tentatively—self consciously. “Hi . . .” She almost managed a smile, but gave up. I nodded. “Hi.”

Her face seemed to relax and this time, the smile made it. “Thanks.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Think nothing of it.”

“I . . . I’m sorry.”

“What happened?”

She hesitated, then dropped her hands to her lap. “Someone tried to kill me.”

“There should be a bar or a gas station pretty near. You can call the police.”

“No!”

I took my time. “Why not?”

“Got a cigarette?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you want to call the police?”

“Give me the cigarette.”

It came out like an order and I couldn’t quite keep my face straight. “No.”

Then she was practically on my lap, her hands reaching for every pocket and I pulled to the side of the road and stopped, grabbing her wrists as soon as I could let go of the wheel. “Now *look*—” Her teeth sank into the side of my hand and I slapped her face—hard. She let out a yell, then sank back onto the seat. “*May* I have a cigarette, *sir*?” It came out sarcastic.

“Honey, you *may* get out and walk.”

“No—” Suddenly she sounded scared again, but somehow she

seemed to have missed the main idea because she finished with, “It’s all-right. I don’t really *need* a cigarette.”

I took a deep breath, then reached over and opened the door for her. She looked startled and it was fully half a second before she closed it. “Don’t.”

“Do I have to physically *throw* you out? I mean, it seems a little silly. I’m a little bigger than you are.”

She smiled. “Yeah. You must be over six feet. Am I right?”

“Six-two. So long.”

“Are you married?”

“That’s got nothing to do . . .”

“Don’t be mad. Wanna kiss me?”

It was a good question and one I hadn’t thought of—at least not consciously. “I don’t know,” I answered finally. “Take off some of the makeup so I can see what you look like.”

She took off the coat instead. She was wearing a tight green sweater that just about matched her eyes and a gray skirt. “How old are you?”

“Too old for you,” I answered reluctantly.

“*How* old?” she persisted

“Thirty-six. How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

I started the car.

“What’s wrong?” she asked quickly.

“Come off it, Honey. You’re not *that* naive.”

She tried to keep her face straight, then broke into a grin. “Maybe I was lying.”

"I still could be your father."

The grin broadened. "But you're not. What's your name?"

I shrugged by shoulders. "Mike Chanin."

Her face brightened. "Oh! I used to go with a guy named Mike. He's in the army now!"

"What a coincidence," I answered drily.

"But he was blonde," she continued seriously. "He had blue eyes like yours, but that's all. I like black hair." Her hand moved onto my head. I took her wrist, gently, and gave it back to her.

She was quiet for almost a minute. Then: "I don't suppose it would be a good idea to ask for a cigarette."

I reached into my raincoat pocket and handed her the pack. She ripped at it greedily, then shoved in on a cigarette lighter. "How far are you going?"

"I turn off in about ten minutes."

"You live around here?"

"I've got a cabin outside Moortown."

She lit the cigarette and nodded her head. "Great!"

"What do you mean, 'Great'?"

The rain was letting up and the splash on the windshield had turned to streams.

She shrugged her shoulders like it was obvious. "I mean I can stay there tonight then hitch a ride back in the morning. You got a phone?"

The lights of a roadside bar glinted ahead and I pulled into the parking lot.

"What are you stopping for?"

I shut off the motor and faced her. "Honey, you are not coming with me. Now this is a nice lighted place with lots of people and I'm sure you can get yourself another ride."

"No, don't! I'm afraid." It came out fast and, again, it sounded genuine. I took one of the cigarettes from the pack she was still holding and lit it. I was warming up for my next sentence when a look like sudden comprehension came into those wide green eyes. "I *was* lying," she blurted out. "Honest. I'm eighteen. My driver's license . . . I . . ." She reached automatically onto the seat beside her, then turned back hesitantly. "I dropped my purse . . . back there . . . when you picked me up."

I shook my head. "No good . . ."

"I *am* eighteen."

"I mean that's not the point." I climbed out, then walked around and opened the door for her, holding my collar closed against the rain. She didn't move. I grabbed her arm and yanked.

"All right, all right!!" Then she was standing beside me, hanging onto my arm. "Buy me a drink," she pleaded, "Just one."

"No."

She threw both arms around me, laying her head against my chest, her thighs moving against mine with an effectiveness I resented. "Please buy me a drink, Mike . . ."

I shoved her away. "Honey, if you're trying to get raped, I'll give odds on your chances."

She laughed. "By you?"
"No thanks." I started for the car and she got between me and the door. Both of us were getting soaked.

"Mike—"

"No."

She held her ground. "Give me a dollar."

"*Huh?*"

"I . . . I told you, I dropped my purse. I don't have any money."

I hesitated, then pulled out my wallet. "For a buck I can get rid of you?"

Her face broke into a grin. "For a buck and a drink."

"No deal."

She threw herself against me and this time, when I shoved, she landed on her tail in the wet gravel. I climbed into the car and reached for the ignition keys in my pocket. They were gone. Then my black-haired former traveling companion was knocking against the window—with the keys. I opened the door. She started running—out of the shadows and into the lighted area of the bar's entrance, laughing and checking over her shoulder to make sure I was following. I was.

When she reached the doorway, she stopped and waited, hands on her hips, head thrown back. The rain had washed off most of her makeup and the cheapness which had been my first impression was gone. She seemed even younger and somehow strangely virginal; a vulnerable little kid ready to take on the

whole wide world including and starting with me. I held out my hand. "Give me the keys."

"No."

I took a step towards her and she backed off—fast. "You try anything, and I'll scream. I'll yell bloody murder, and there's a hell of a lot of people in there." She indicated the bar. I could hear the voices above the jukebox.

I let my arms fall to my sides. "What do you want from me?"

"I want to stay with you at your cabin." It came out matter-of-fact.

"Why?"

"I told you. Somebody tried to kill me. Tomorrow I'll be safe."

"Why?"

"I . . . I have to reach somebody. I've been calling him, but I can't reach him. Tomorrow he'll be at his office."

I shook my head. "No good." I started away from her and she caught my arm. "Hey—I still have your keys."

"I can start the car without them. I'd *like* to have them. It'll be a hell of a mess having new ones made so I can lock the door."

She looked like she didn't quite believe it. "Honest?" She asked finally.

I nodded. "Honest," I answered quietly.

She hesitated, then: "All right. Buy me a drink and I'll give them back. It'll cost you more than a drink to have new ones made."

I held out my hand.

"How . . . how do I know you won't take them and walk away?"

I smiled. "I guess you'll just have to trust me."

It was a good five seconds before she reached into her pocket and presented me with my keys.

"Thank you." It came out dry. I nodded towards the bar. "Let's go."

She grinned and fell in beside me like a cheerful puppy.

The jukebox had seemed loud from outside. From inside, "blaring" was more descriptive. The whole place was noisy and more crowded than I would have expected for a rainy Wednesday night at 10 p.m. We found a booth near the back; away from the jukebox, and I found myself wondering half-consciously how many of the clientele were from Moortown. Moortown was about ten miles ahead; a small place of about 50,000 people; the shopping center Saturday-night-movie focal point for at least a dozen isolated fringe cabins like mine. The cabin was one thing my wife had never liked; it was too simple. Just four rooms and an open fireplace on 20 acres of land complete with fish-filled stream and ancient cooking facilities. I suppose its greatest virtue was indoor plumbing.

"What are you thinking?" The voice came from the black-haired green-eyed teenager across from me.

"My wife," I answered quietly.

Her face fell. "You're married?"
"Divorced."

"Oh. How come?"

I laughed. "None of your business."

The waiter was a skinny guy with small, dark eyes and a protruding adam's apple.

My companion opened her mouth and I cut her off. "Double Scotch for me and gingerale for my daughter."

Her outraged "Hey!" failed to disrupt his attention which was now directed to the orders of two overly madeup blondes at the next table.

She pulled out the cigarette pack I'd given her earlier and lit one before I got the chance. "Gingerale," she began with scathing intensity, "is not exactly a 'drink'."

"And *you*," I continued with the same overly drawn-out tones, "may or may not be exactly eighteen."

She turned away and I still couldn't figure out at which point she'd been lying.

"Since I can't stay with you, can I have a dime?"

I 'borrowed' one of my cigarettes and lit it. "What for?"

"So what do you want? A requisition?"

"Not at all. A 'please' will do."

"*Please.*" It came out sarcastic.

I handed her one, feeling like a damn fool.

She stood up. "I want to make a phone call. Maybe Larry's home. If I can just reach him, I'll be all right."

"Larry?" She missed the sarcasm and volunteered a last name as though it explained everything.

"Bridge," she snapped, then looked at me like I was supposed to be impressed. I shrugged my shoulders and she walked away.

She was back less than a minute later. Her face was chalk white and her hands were trembling. "Mike—get me out of here."

I looked at her for a long minute then came to a momentous decision. "Go to hell."

She looked like I'd just stabbed her. "Huh?"

"Somebody wants to kill you," I began with forced calm, "but you don't want to go to the cops. You say if I'll buy you one drink—"

"The cops are in on it," she whispered. "I can't trust anybody but Larry."

I took a long drag on my cigarette and snubbed it out. Maybe she was a psychopath. And maybe she was really in trouble.

"Please," she whispered. Her lips were trembling and she barely got the words out. "That man at the bar with the green raincoat—no, don't look—he's one of them. I don't know whether he's seen me yet."

I hesitated, then stood up. "Okay, okay—"

I left enough on the table to pay for the wasted drinks, then followed her to the door. The rain had slowed to a thin drizzle as we stepped from the lighted asphalt bordering the gravel parking lot. I suppose if it hadn't been for the gravel, I wouldn't have heard the footsteps behind me. I gave it about two

seconds, then swung around. The guy had a green raincoat. I lashed out with a right and a pig-like grunt yelled from his bowels. A left to his jaw followed. He staggered backwards and I moved in swinging, getting one good look at his face before he crumpled into a wet heap. It was a fleshy face with thick lips and small, dark eyes. Maybe it was the face of a guy trying to kill a well-stacked teenage brat but maybe it was a cop, a representative of a funny farm or a bill collector. I had no desire to stick around and find out.

She grabbed my arm and pulled towards the car.

"Mike, I—" She never finished the sentence. I swung around to see why and heard the beginnings of a scream that never made it. She slumped to my feet, thin rain diluting the blood that poured from her nose and mouth where the guy's fist had landed. He was standing over her; a tall shadow statue waiting for the next move from the second guy—the one with the snub-nosed automatic aimed at my stomach. He nodded from me to my car. "Put the girl in back."

"Where's Hunk?" It came from shadow man.

"Find him" was the terse reply, and I had a sudden feeling like 'Hunk' was wearing a green raincoat and just about regaining consciousness.

Shadow man nodded and started back towards the bar. The guy with

the gun gave me a long look. His collar was turned up and all I could see were grey eyes and part of a sharply-chiseled nose. "I said put the girl in back."

Wetness ran into my eyes and it was hard to tell whether it was rain or sweat. My voice seemed to be coming from somewhere else; somewhere in the past—I was a kid in the marines and for the first time in my life, I'd really known what fear is; someone was shooting at me. Only I wasn't a kid anymore. And this wasn't a memory, it was real; it was now.

"Move!"

"I . . . I have to unlock the back door."

"So unlock it."

I lifted the keys, then dropped them. I stooped, swinging back up with everything I could muster in one fast punch and I could feel the guy's jaw cracking under my knuckles. His hat fell far behind him and he staggered off balance, eyes white and wide. I grabbed the hand with the gun; the 45; the one that blows *all* your insides out, not just some of them. I swung him over my shoulder and he landed on his back, still conscious, his lips emitting surprised animal-like unintelligible grunts, blood pouring from his nose and mouth. The gun had fallen about four feet away and it was almost in my hands when a heavy voice sliced through the rain, "Hold it . . ."

I debated about trying anyway,

then gave up and turned around. Green raincoat, alias Hunk, had returned with the guy who'd gone looking for him and was holding another 45, only this one had a silencer. He looked ready to use it when the girl groaned and Hunk's companion broke the silence. "She's conscious!"

"So make her unconscious."

I saw him raise his foot and a loud "No" was out before I could stop it. My answer was the gun with the silencer jammed into my stomach and the crunch of her skull as Hunk's foot landed again and again and I tried to forget she'd ever been pretty; that she'd ever been alive.

The third guy had pulled himself onto his knees, both hands covering his jaw—or what was left of it. Shadow man tried to help him and got shoved almost off balance for his trouble. The other man stumbled to his feet and staggered towards me. His face was pasty white; blonde curly hair, gray eyes—and I couldn't help thinking that once upon a time, like about five minutes ago, he must have been good looking; a regular shirt-ad model.

He kept his chin covered with his left hand and made a quick gesture to Hunk with his right. Then Hunk's gun was in Shadow man's hand and Hunk was behind me, pinning my arms. The guy with the broken jaw was holding the gun I'd knocked out of his hands and he flipped it, grabbing it by the barrel.

He raised his arm and I closed my eyes, but opened them to the sound of a girl's laugh from somewhere near the bar. He stepped back—fast, and Hunk whispered, “One word—” he indicated with the gun, “One word and you get it right in the belly.” The other guy had already opened the front door of the car; the ‘broken jaw for a broken jaw’ had been neglected—for the moment.

There were more voices now; a large group heading for their cars. The girl—or what was left of her—was dumped into the back seat by Shadow man who motioned for me to follow. I started, then something hard—like the butt of a 45—smashed against the back of my skull and all I remembered afterwards was wet gravel against my face and somebody's arms lifting; shoving.

CHAPTER TWO

I couldn't have been out long because water was still dripping from my coat when I came to. I opened my eyes, strongly aware of one hell of a headache, then closed them again.

I was in the back seat of the car, propped up between the third guy and the girl's faceless, blood-covered corpse. Hunk was driving and the guy with the broken jaw was turned around in the front seat, gun aimed at my chest, his face a mask of agony and hatred. I figured he'd missed it when I'd opened my eyes because his gun-hand was still relaxed. The

rain had picked up and waves of water periodically sprayed past the window, slamming, then subsiding into uneven streams trickling gently and continually. The whole thing seemed fantastic and unreal. I suppose if it hadn't seemed so unreal, I wouldn't have had the guts to try anything.

A horn shrieked out of nowhere and a car was suddenly in front of us; probably from one of the side-roads; one of the cabins like mine had sent a resident towards Moortown, and the jolt as Hunk jerked to a slower pace sent the girl onto the floor like a discarded rag doll. I rolled with the confusion, but did a lousey job of it. The guy beside me let out a loud yell and the guy with the broken jaw raised his gun. I grabbed the guy beside me, shoving him in front of me and made a grab for the lock on the door.

Then a gun went off and I could feel warm blood washing over my face and hands, only it wasn't *my* blood; it belonged to the sudden corpse besides me. I gave one desperate yank; the door opened and the ground slammed up to greet me; weeds and mud; soft mud in the rain. On a sunny day, I'd probably have broken a few bones. I got onto my hands and knees in time to see the car swerve and skid, water spraying over the top. I was still watching as a pair of headlights did a risky 'U' turn and the car was speeding back on the opposite side of the highway.

I made a fast dive for taller weeds, then ran. Something sharp whizzed by my arm, slicing a hole in my raincoat and I fell to the ground, shedding my khaki perfect-target raincoat in the same second.

"He's over here!" came a loud voice and it's closeness startled me. At least the benefits of the rain were equal; I couldn't hear his breathing or footsteps, but neither could he hear mine. I crawled about six feet; crawled in the protection of shadows and a dark suit, then waited, trying to blend in with a clump of black trees. I waited until Hunk was clearly visible. He lifted my raincoat and yelled for his companion to hurry. He started towards where I was standing. I held my breath until he was almost on top of me, then lit into a flying tackle. He went down. The gun was still in his hand and I might have gotten it if the mud hadn't given way under my rubber-soled shoes and cost me my balance. The extra second was all he needed; he was back on his feet and I was running; running away from the highway wondering what came next, a house, more trees, people, or an open field where a dark suit wouldn't help.

"Over here," yelled Hunk.

The trees ended and I was standing at the edge of some sort of embankment with fog rising from below. A shot rang out and I ducked back, realizing Hunk was no longer alone; Hunk's gun had a silencer and I'd heard the shot.

They were close enough now that I could hear footsteps and I knew it was a matter of seconds. I made a dive for the embankment and rolled over the edge. Hunk followed, both of us trying to maintain some semblance of balanced footing in the mud. I could see him clearly; I could have touched him, but neither of us were steady enough for him to get a good shot and I guess he figured there wouldn't be time to reload if he missed with these.

Level ground; the level ground we'd both be on in a matter of seconds was another story. I could see it now, coming clear in the rain and fog—solid, level ground, and I knew Hunk saw it too.

Then I heard something else—water! Lots of water, like a lake or a river. I hit the bank seconds before Hunk and ran. A loud shot rang out and I knew his friend had joined him. I fell to my stomach and rolled. It was only seconds more until I felt water against me. Then it was deep enough to cover me. I grabbed a long breath and went under, moving out to where it was deeper; to where I could swim without kicking bottom.

Tiny zings broke out behind me and a sudden touch of warmth in the cold water told me my head was bleeding. There was a strong current and I went against it, figuring they'd probably think I went *with* it. I stayed under, my shoes like cement weights, lungs ready to explode. I came up fast. They might

have been only a few feet away—it was hard to tell in the fog, but at least nobody was shooting at me. I checked for the outline of some trees—anything that would tell me where the shore was, then took another breath and went under again.

I don't know what time it was when I crawled onto the bank; my waterproof watch had gone cock-eyed, but the sky was still dark. I figured I was pretty near Moortown and, hopefully, Hunk and his carload of corpses were half-way back to the city in the opposite direction.

I looked for the highway, but something kept getting into my right eye. I tried to clear it away and saw it was blood coming from a cut on my forehead. I sat down, then lay on my back and tried to think, but nothing was clear; nothing made sense except that I was alive and could feel the rain on my face and touch the mud and know I had one hell of a headache.

The headache was what worried me. I could either lie there until the cut got infected and Hunk's crew returned, or I could get up and try for the highway.

I pulled myself onto my feet and started along a path that wound upwards along a hill. I figured since I'd come down to get here, the highway was probably up.

I figured right; there it was, stretching wet and welcome beyond some scattered trees and weeds. I made it to the edge and held up my hand which is the last thing I re-

membered before everything went black.

I woke up with a stifling consciousness of heat; engulfing and sticky. A gray ceiling that cried for a paint job came into focus and it seemed to be covered with darker gray parallel stripes. I turned my head, slightly, and saw that the stripes on the ceiling were reflections of bars.

A heavily-sweating fat guy was sitting at a desk parallel to the cell, his attention absorbed in a pulp detective-story magazine.

I closed my eyes and tried to think. Apparently I was in some kind of a small-town jail, probably Moortown. A city jail would have the cells separated from the offices.

Clear memories of last night came flooding back and the headache got worse.

Then I remembered the letter; it was in the glove compartment of my car. I'd meant to answer it when I got to the cabin, then destroy it. It was from a 17-year-old kid in New York whose recent trial and acquittal for the murder of his father had made the front pages of every paper in town. My job was in insurance-agency administration, but I'd been spending a lot of evenings working with kids in one of the tougher youth centers. I'd more or less drifted into it after my wife had told me she was sick of waiting for the day I'd be making the kind of money she'd always wanted, there was someone else who wanted to

marry her and he had it, give her a divorce.

The kid who'd held the front pages for so many weeks had been one of the kids I'd gotten to know at the center. He'd hated his father; it was like an obsession with him, mainly because of the way the guy kept hurting his mother—physically and through carefully-chosen words. The story that swung the acquittal, backed up by his mother, was that they'd struggled for the gun and it went off.

The story, according to the kid's letter, went a little different.

He'd written to me, he said, because I was the only guy he knew who'd really given a damn about him and he didn't want me to think he'd deliberately shot his father. It went on to explain how his father had been goading his mother, as usual, and she'd walked over to her husband, gun in hand, and calmly pulled the trigger.

He'd said he hated putting it in a letter and please burn it, but he hadn't been able to reach me and he'd heard I was leaving town and—well, he just wanted me to know the truth; I was the only person he'd told.

I remembered how long it had been before he'd even begun trusting me and knew that anything even resembling a breach of confidence on that letter would foul him up beyond repair. He was a nice kid; he'd trusted me. That trust and everything good that had come

out of it was hanging by a small thread; a letter in the glove compartment of my missing car.

Probably, whoever had stolen the car hadn't read it, or if they had, they might not have particularly cared, but the cops would care. And if I reported what had happened and the cops found the car, they would sure as hell go over it with a fine-tooth comb.

I pulled myself into a sitting position and groaned, involuntarily.

The fat guy swung around, facing me. "Mornin'."

"Good morning. Where the hell am I?"

He stretched, his enormous hulk quivering like jelly.

"Moortown jail. You looked like you'd been beat up, but not bad enough for a hospital. We don't have no hospital anyway, so rather than send you over to the one in the city, we put you in jail. Door's not locked. Come on out."

"Thanks," I answered drily. I touched my finger against where I'd been shot last night and discovered it had been covered by a bandage.

I stood up. Sure enough, the door was open. I walked over and sat on a chair next to his desk.

"We got your name and everything from your wallet. What happened?"

I wiped some of the sweat off my forehead. There was a fan in the corner of the room, but it didn't help much. "I've got a cabin right outside of Moortown," I answered tiredly.

"And I was hitchhiking a ride. My Samaritan friend suddenly slowed down and shoved me out of the car. He drove off with the suitcase." I touched the bandage. "I must have scraped my head."

He let out a deep breath. "Hitchhiking's stupid. It's also illegal around here."

"You going to press charges?"

He hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders. "Can't see as there'd be any point to it. I doubt whether we'll get the guy—highway's a main drag, you know. Folks come from all over the country." He pulled out a white, printed form. "Give me a description."

I made up a real dandy, even down to the make and color of the nonexistent car.

I stood up and almost lost my balance.

"You okay?"

I leaned against the desk until things got a little clearer. "I'm hungry, I'm tired, I got quite a knock on the head. I'll make it."

He handed me my wallet. "You must be crazy—hitchhiking with that kind of money on you."

Almost a hundred bucks; I'd forgotten.

I found a luncheonette, then bought some slacks and clean clothes. I checked in at the local hotel.

I showered and changed, feeling a hell of a lot better. Off hand, there were only two guys I could think of who might be able to tell me where

my car was; Hunk and the blond with a broken jaw.

The broken jaw was probably my best lead. He'd been in pretty bad shape—and that meant hospitalization.

I told myself I was nuts for even thinking of trying to contact either one of them. Still, it seemed worth a try. I could meet him in a public place or maybe take a post office box and have him mail it to me. He might think it was worth it; he could have the car and my silence in exchange for a letter that meant nothing to him. And after I had the letter, I'd be out of town so fast he'd never have to give it a second thought. I knew they'd both figure a bullet would be safer than my word, but I knew it just as well as they did—and I intended to keep it in mind.

Broken jaw; hospitalization. No hospital in Moortown.

The city handled Moortown's needs.

I took a bus and even the open window was not relief from the heat. My shirt was soaked by the time I got off and headed for the nearest phone booth.

It was in a drug store and the air conditioning felt great. I dialed information; there were three public hospitals, four supported mainly by religious institutions and several smaller, private ones.

It was disappointing, but still seemed worth a try.

I called the first one on my list and

explained that I'd witnessed an accident where a tall, blond man had had his jaw broken—that I'd be willing to testify for him in any kind of law suit, but didn't have his name and wondered whether they might be able to help me locate him.

The gal who'd answered said she didn't have the records on the cases immediately available, but would I be good enough to leave my name and where could she reach me?

I hung up.

Maybe she'd been on the level and maybe she'd been suspicious. In any case, I'd hate to have anyone telling the guy that the man who'd witnessed the 'accident' had called and was staying at the Moortown Hotel.

I went to the counter, ordered a coke and lit a cigarette.

I thought of the kid with a woman's body and blood all over her smashed face. I felt almost like I was running out on her by keeping quiet, but in her case, it was too late for it to make any difference.

The kid in New York was another story.

I tried again to remember everything that had happened last night; some clue—some remark that might give me some other starting point.

Larry!

She'd said if she could just reach Larry, she'd be okay.

Great. Larry *who*?

Briggs? Bridge? Bridges! Larry Briggs.

I went back to the phone booth and pulled out the directory.

It listed two numbers; home and business. I checked my watch; three fifteen. I went back into the booth and dialed the business number.

"Herald-Chronicle," announced a tired female voice on the other end. "Good afternoon."

Herald-Chronicle; sounded like a newspaper. "I'd like to speak to Larry Bridges." I figured I'd set it up to see him, then decide just how much I wanted to say.

The silence on the other end was so long I thought I'd been cut off. "Hello?" I repeated.

The voice that came back on was not the same as I'd heard before. "Larry's not here at the moment."

It was the kind of voice I used to dream about when I was in the marines; soft and sensual—female, through and through.

"If you'd like to leave your name," she continued, "and where he could reach you—or maybe you'd like to drop over. My name's Jill Bartlett. I'm Larry's assistant."

Lucky Larry, I thought, and hung up on Jill Bartlett, trying to figure - what the hell was going on.

I checked the directory again and got the address of the paper. Since nothing else seemed to be working, I decided I just might take Miss Bartlett up on her offer.

I checked with the cashier on where the paper was and it turned out to be only four blocks.

I hiked it, feeling dizzy and lousey from the heat.

I picked up a copy of the paper

from a newsstand outside the building, and was almost in the elevator before the headline I'd just read suddenly hit me.

I stepped back and read it again; CHRONICLE REPORTER AND TEEN-AGE GIRL KILLED IN AUTO CRASH.

There was a portrait-studio photo of Mr. Bridges on the front page with a note that pictures of the accident could be found in the photo section. Larry Bridges, I decided, had been one hell of a good-looking guy.

I stepped outside, leaned against the wall of the building and read the whole thing.

The girl's face had been smashed beyond recognition, but the height, weight and hair-color sure as hell fit the kid who'd jumped into my car last night.

The car had belonged to Larry Bridges, it had crashed off the road onto some rocks that would have been covered at high tide, the police were still investigating possible causes, the girl's fingerprints were being checked out, as of press time, no identification had been made.

I lit a cigarette and thought of catching the next bus back to Moor-town so I could pay the hotel bill, pack up what was left of my suit and leave.

Then I was thinking of the letter in the glove-compartment and, suddenly, it was all I could think of.

I skimmed the rest of the paper, looking for any mention of a mis-

cellaneous blue Chevy with blood-stains in the back seat. Nothing.

I stepped on the cigarette, tossed the paper into the waste can, then went back into the building and asked the elevator operator where I could locate Miss Jill Bartlett.

CHAPTER THREE

Jill Bartlett was about twenty-eight with shoulder-length blonde-hair and cat-green eyes behind harlequin-rimmed glasses. Her body stirred fantasies that made me think of the word 'adultery'; I was too used to being married.

My eyes moved to the third finger of her left hand; no ring. A guy at the door had pointed her out to me; she was one of many in a room full of desks.

She took a final sip from a cardboard container of what looked like iced tea and glanced up. Her expression was curious, pleasant and sharp. Most of her lipstick was worn off, her forehead was damp with perspiration and her hair could have used a comb, but she didn't seem particularly concerned.

I parked on a chair beside her desk. "You invited me to come over—"

The look of sharpness increased—suddenly. "Mr.—?"

"Chanin. Mike Chanin. Why didn't you tell me the guy was dead?"

"I thought everyone knew."

"Obviously I didn't."

Her smile was unpleasant. "Obviously."

I let it go. "You said you were his assistant."

She nodded. The phone on her desk rang. She lifted the receiver and kept the conversation short with a promise to call them back.

"I worked with him on several stories," she resumed. "Were you a friend of his?"

A tired-looking kid in khakis and a sweat-soaked shirt came over to her desk. "Ed wants to know if you—"

She cut him off, "Later—okay?" She turned back to me. "Can I buy you a drink? Air-conditioned and free from interruptions. There's a bar right across the street."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Sure."

The bar across the street was pleasant and the drinks were cold. We sat at one of the booths.

"You still haven't told me whether you were a friend of Larry's."

I hesitated. The girl last night had said the police were in on it—whatever *it* was, it had also killed Larry Bridges. That put Jill Bartlett and me on the same side—assuming *it* hadn't also been part of the paper. It was a gamble, but better than nothing as a starting point.

"Never met him," I answered finally. "Only the girl who was with him in the car when they found the wreck. She hitched a ride with me—said she had a date to meet Larry in a roadside bar outside of Moor-town. She seemed scared. I thought she was nuts. She said she didn't

have anybody left she could trust, so she'd take a chance on me. She gave me a letter addressed to Larry Bridges and asked me to deliver it if anything happened to her before she got a chance to see him. As I said, I thought she was crazy, but I felt sorry for her, so I stuck it in the glove compartment of my car and agreed to call Larry today and see if he'd met her okay."

Whatever her reaction was, she covered it well. "Could I see it—the letter?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Haven't got it. My car was stolen. I was all set to report it when I remembered the letter and the girl saying the cops were part of it—whatever the hell *it* may be, so I held off. I figured Larry would probably know the ropes around here a lot better than I do and maybe there'd be some way to manage it so the cops wouldn't have to see the letter."

The tone of her voice was calling me a liar. "That's awfully noble of you, Mr. Chanin—gambling on never seeing your car again by holding off reporting the theft and giving whoever took it a chance to get half-way across the country. And all for some poor little kid you didn't even know."

I laughed. "Miss Bartlett, you have a highly suspicious nature."

She smiled. "Mr. Chanin, I've been a reporter for a long time and I've met one hell of a lot of people. Sometimes they come through fine

and clear, and sometimes there's something about them that just isn't quite right."

I nodded. "Okay—I'll level with you. Everything I've told you is true—except that I left out one thing. There's another letter in that glove compartment—addressed to me. It's personal."

She looked like she might be beginning to believe me. "Cherchez la femme?"

I shook my head. "Nothing like that."

"It must be very personal if you're willing to risk never seeing your car again. You married?"

"Divorced. Became final last week. Want to see the papers?"

"That won't be necessary." She looked as though she were trying hard to keep her face straight. "You seem pretty banged up. What happened?"

"Some dame ran out on the road looking like she needed help. I fell for it. I stopped, and that was when the present owners of my car descended."

She nodded, but I still couldn't be sure. "Did the girl who was meeting Larry give you her name?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I don't think I even asked. I told you—I thought she was a lunatic."

She seemed extremely interested. "Because she seemed worried, or was there anything else?"

I didn't get it. "Like what?"

I ordered a second round on the drinks.

She went on talking, "Anything about the way she looked? Anything unusual about her eyes? Anything you might have noticed that was—well, unusual."

I got it—suddenly. "You mean was she on narcotics?"

She pulled out a cigarette. I lit it for her and she sat back, her eyes never leaving mine. "That was pretty fast analysis—for a layman, you do okay."

"Thanks. I'm not exactly a layman. No, she wasn't hopped up. I'd have known right away if she were." I went on, answering her unspoken question, "I worked in a youth center in New York that was loaded with addicts. Some of them were trying to kick it and some of them were beyond caring, but when they'd just come from a fix—I knew." I smiled at her continuing suspiciousness. "Want to check? I'll give you the address."

She hesitated, then pulled out a pencil and note pad. "Okay." It came out half-kidding and strictly female. I wouldn't say she exactly used her sex, but neither would I say she pretended it wasn't there. "Give me the spelling on your name."

I did and she followed with how could she contact the youth center and where did I work.

I gave her the youth-center number, then explained that after my wife had put in for the divorce, I'd put in for a transfer and had a job waiting for me in California, start-

ing next month. "Too many memories—all that jazz," I concluded. "I know I won't forget, but at least I won't have the subways and the skyline reminding me every minute of every day."

"You sound pretty crazy about her."

"Past tense." It felt good to be able to say it and mean it; there'd been a time when I'd wondered whether I'd ever be able to get her out of my system.

She stood up and it was obvious she intended to check what I'd just given her. "I'll probably be about twenty minutes," she announced pleasantly. "If it checks out, I'll be back. Otherwise, it'll be one hell of a long wait."

She left and was back again in even less than twenty minutes. "Okay, Mr. Chanin, let's go."

"Where?"

"My apartment."

To say I was startled would be an understatement. "Miss Bartlett, you're shocking me."

"If you're thinking what apparently you are thinking, forget it. Come on."

I shrugged my shoulders and fell into step with her.

Her apartment was six blocks from the paper—and air-conditioned. She turned it on as soon as we walked in.

It was an attractive place, overlooking the river. The furniture was comfortable. I parked on the couch and she sat on a chair, facing me.

"I've got an idea," she began tentatively, "but before I tell you, I want to know more about you. Okay?"

"What about my car?"

"Maybe it can be managed."

"The girl said the cops were 'in on it'. How can you locate a car without the help of the police?"

"Some are, some aren't. I'm not making any promises, but we'll do the best we can."

I nodded. "What makes you think she was an addict?"

"I never said I did," she answered carefully, "but since it's something you could find out anyway, the Chronicle's been slapped with a million-dollar libel suit for a story Larry wrote on an influx of heroin on our local teen-age population. The complainant on the suit—get this—is none other than the mayor. He's up for re-election and swears the whole thing came right out of Larry's handsome head—that this city, on that score, is one of the cleanest in the country. When Larry heard about the suit, he licked his chops like a fat cat and told us he'd be able to confirm everything he'd said in the story within two weeks. Unfortunately—" it came out dry, "he died in the meantime."

"You don't sound very fond of him."

"Something else you could find out is that Larry Bridges was the world's champion bastard. If whoever wanted him dead—" She broke off, as though suddenly conscious of what she'd just said.

I smiled. "You've already said what you didn't want to. Finish the sentence."

"If whoever wanted him dead had simply left him in his apartment with a bullet in his head, no one would ever have even tried narrowing it down as to which female had finally had enough and put out the light in Larry's bright little brain. I'm not used to drinking in the middle of the afternoon. Want some coffee?"

"Sure."

I followed her into the kitchen and she plugged in an electric pot. "It's left over from this morning, but it'll still be better than instant."

"Were you—" I broke off. "Hell, it's none of my business."

"What?"

"One of Larry's girls?"

She laughed. "Lord, no. Oh, not that he never tried—and not that he wasn't completely charming about it. It was just that I worked with him and I'd seen him too often when he forgot to use that charm. Larry was the kind of guy a woman could really fall for—if she let herself." She looked at me curiously. "You're a nice-looking guy, Mr. Chanin. Do women fall hard for you?"

I smiled. "Apparently my wife didn't. The others were so far in the past I've forgotten."

"You mean there was nobody since—" She broke off. "Oh brother, I shouldn't drink during the day."

"Go ahead—say it."

"Nobody since your marriage went on the rocks? Must have gotten uncomfortable."

"There was someone—my wife." I smiled. "I had an 'affair' with her right up until the last. Oh, we were very careful not to let anyone know—neither of us wanted to mess up the divorce. No, there'd never been any trouble between us in that department—the problem was, I didn't make enough money. She met somebody who did."

"Ouch." She poured the coffee and we carried it back into the livingroom. This time, she sat beside me. I felt like I should at least try a pass, but I was out of practice.

She sat back and looked at me. I leaned over and kissed her. She smiled. "That was nice—whole-some."

I kissed her again. It wasn't whole-some, but it was certainly nice.

She moved back onto the chair and changed the subject. "Okay, Mr. Chanin, you already know we think Larry was murdered. So far, that's all it is. An opinion. Can you think of anything the girl said or did that might help?"

Yeah, I thought, she got herself murdered long before she got into that car with Larry.

"Incidentally," she continued, "She's been identified. Barbara Katonick. Had a record for shoplifting."

I shrugged my shoulders. "She might very well have been an addict."

"But you said—"

"I said she wasn't high when she was with me, but the personality pattern was typical of a teen-age addict." I remembered the way she'd acted when she'd wanted the cigarette and wondered why I hadn't thought of it sooner. "A definite infantile need for immediate gratification. She was only a kid, but even for her age, she was immature; unstable. Also, you just said she had a record for shiplifting. If she were an addict, she'd need extra money—and the usual pattern is non-violent crimes."

"That's what Larry said," she answered musingly. "There's been a whole rash of shoplifting, petty thefts and burglaries. It was one thing that started him on the first story—the one that got us the libel suit."

I nodded. "The concept of the raving, screaming addict knocking people over the head—it rarely happens that way. The addict is usually—basically, non-violent. Marijuana's different, of course. I'm talking about heroin."

"So was Larry." She shook her head. "Teen-age kids. Whoever's pushing it should be hanged in the public square at sunrise."

I smiled. "You know who's probably pushing it?"

"Huh?"

"That kid—the one who was with Larry, assuming she was an addict. That kid and how many others like her? They reach a point where they need it so badly themselves they're

more than willing to introduce it to someone else. It's an excellent non-violent way of feeding their own habit. You want to hang her at sunrise?"

"Okay then, the suppliers. The ones who supply it to the pushers."

I shrugged my shoulders. "If, by suppliers, you mean the ones at the very top—sure. But how many of those are ever picked up?"

Her lips tightened. "If the city would just admit that the problem exists. What about all the people who've been robbed? What about all the taxpayer's money that goes into police investigations leading nowhere? What about the decent kids who get sucked into it because some other kid needs new customers or they'll lose their own supply? Oh, I know it exists, some of the hospitals know—but the police? Nothing. No, I can't say 'nothing'. I'll say 'only occasionally', and that's the way it really was up until about a year ago. That's when the serious shoplifting really began."

"You know, I can understand why our loud little mayor thinks that story was worth a million-dollar suit. If we could prove it—anything to at least make it seem possibly credible—he'd be out of office so fast—and then maybe there'd be a chance to do something about it before it gets worse."

She shook her head, then continued. "It's like a cancer on the whole community—and Larry said he could prove it was growing right

here. Honest to God, he was absolutely gleeful when he heard about the suit."

"You're very intense," I answered quietly.

She smiled. "I'm a good reporter—and I like causes. I don't mean I'm any kind of idealist, I like the excitement of a good story. It gets into my blood. Larry and I had that much in common."

"You want to make it a life-time career?"

"You mean what about marriage? Oh, I tried the marriage bit. He was a hell of a nice guy too. It worked for about two years, then I was climbing up the walls to get back to the paper. He said he wanted a home and his wife in that home. It was the end of a lovely marriage."

"You don't want kids?"

She looked like I'd hit a soft spot. "Yeah," she answered quietly. "I wish I'd had one while we were still married. I wanted both—kids and the job, and I still don't think it wouldn't have been possible."

"You put it in the past tense. Have you given up?"

She smiled. "Mr. Chanin, I'm twenty-nine. I'm not a kid anymore."

"You're an attractive senior citizen."

She laughed. "That a proposal?"

I felt uncomfortable. "No."

She came over and sat beside me. "Mr. Chanin, you are typical of the unmarried American male over thirty. You're scared stiff that some

female is going to sneak up and marry you. Don't worry. If I'd really wanted to marry again, I've had offers."

"I believe it."

"You're not only handsome, you're tactful." She said it like she was ribbing me and I laughed.

I kissed her, and she seemed to approve of the idea. I held her close against me, my tongue filling her mouth and her reaction was encouraging. I moved my hand onto her breast, over the white blouse she was wearing, then inside the open neck and over her bra. Her eyes were closed and I reached around her back, yanking the blouse out of her skirt, then reaching up and unhooking her bra. The softness of her breast filled my hand.

She tried to pull away. "Don't—" "Why not?"

She struggled, and I let go. She hooked the bra again, then tucked in the blouse. "I may not be a virgin, but I'm not that easy. I don't know you. I just met you."

I let out a deep breath and lit a cigarette. "I didn't think you were 'easy'."

"That was the right answer." It came out dry.

"Was it? It's been so long since I've made a pass at anybody, I'd forgotten."

She looked at me—curiously. "Mr. Chanin—"

"Can it. The name's Mike."

"Mike. I'm beginning to think you're a very honest guy and I'm

beginning to like you a hell of a lot.”

I thought of the non-existent letter to Larry Bridges. “Thanks.”

She started to move away, but I caught her shoulder. Her body tensed. I pulled her close to me, my arm around her, hand resting on her breast.

She caught my wrist and tried to move it.

“Take it easy,” I said quietly, “Just let me hold you. I’ll behave.”

“But maybe I won’t. Move your hand.”

I laughed and complied, still leaving my arm around her. “You said you asked me up here because you had an idea. What was it?”

Her body seemed to relax against mine. “One of Larry’s girls,” she answered finally. “The one he’d been sleeping with up until the time he was killed. He came in one morning with a hangover and kept bitching about telling her too much because he was drunk. I tried to talk to her, but she seemed to think I’d been her competition for Larry. Apparently she’d wanted to marry him and he’d called her a slut—told her he had lots of sluts, including half the girls in the office. Anyway, she hung up on me. Maybe you could do better.”

And maybe I’d run right into Hunk in the process. “Why me? Hasn’t your paper got any male reporters?”

She sat back and looked at me. “This is *my* story,” she answered evenly.

I laughed. “Larry didn’t share the wealth and neither do you, huh?”

She hesitated, then settled back against me. “Not exactly—it’s just that Larry was a real bastard to her and she told me she hoped whatever had meant so much to him had died with him. If somebody else from the paper tried and failed, it might be the end of any hope she’d ever open up.”

I shook my head. “Good luck, but no thanks. All I want is that letter—the one addressed to me.”

She looked at me and I didn’t like the way she was smiling. “Suppose we put it this way. If you want that letter back—unread and unprinted, assuming it might be of some news value, then you’ll pay a little visit on Larry’s girl.”

CHAPTER FOUR

My mouth fell open, then closed—tight. “You lousey little bitch.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

I hesitated, then nodded. “Give me the name and address.”

She did. I made a note of it, then looked at her and returned the smile. “Thanks. I’ll talk to her and I’ll see what else I can come up with. Then I’ll put it all in a neat little package and give it to you—when you give me the letter.”

“Well wait a minute—I can’t promise I’ll be able to get it. I mean, I can’t make any guarantees on locating a stolen car.”

“And supposing that letter did

nave news value—the one addressed to me? Supposing it could carry you right out of this city and into a top job with any paper in New York? What then?" It was a sudden, ugly thought.

She looked interested — too interested.

"That's what I figured," I answered drily.

"You can trust me," she insisted, but she couldn't even keep her face straight.

I shook my head. "You and Mr. Bridges must have made quite a team."

"Lousey bastard. He'd never tell me anything."

I laughed. "I wonder why!"

"Shut up."

I sat back and closed my eyes. I was back where I'd started; find Hunk and the guy with the broken jaw. How? I figured I'd pretty damn well better come up with a way before my eager little career-girl got to the glove compartment.

Her hand touched my cheek. "Look, that's the way it is. I can't see that it's any reason for hating each other."

I looked at her body in frank appraisal. "Just how 'easy' are you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Depends on the guy."

"Or the value of a story he might be able to give you?"

Her face was suddenly scarlet, eyes blazing. "I'm not a—" She broke off. "When can I expect to hear from you?"

I stood up and stretched. "I'll send you a post card when I get to California."

"Huh?"

I stuck the girlfriend's address in my pocket. "Oh, don't worry—I'll talk to her." I'll talk to her and the family of the girl who was murdered, I thought. If I keep at it long enough, chances are, I'll be seeing Hunk again. Maybe it wouldn't work, but at that moment, it was the best I could think of. "I'll get everything I can," I continued, "and then I'll put it all in a little envelope and hand it to your editor." I snapped my fingers, as though in sudden realization of what I'd just said. "But then it wouldn't be your story, would it?"

"But — but that letter — the one addressed to you—"

"If you got to it before I did, you wouldn't read it—would you?"

She bit her lip. "I give you my word."

"Oh, well in *that* case—" It came out sarcastic and she looked ready to start throwing things.

Her face was suddenly tense and suspicious. "Hey, wait a minute. What can *you* do towards getting that car back? What happened? What *really* happened? Mike—"

"So long." I walked out.

She caught up to me, falling into step beside me. We rode down in the elevator together and were on the street before I turned around and faced her. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Sticking with you," she answered calmly.

"Might be embarrassing for you if I had to go to a men's room."

"It's also pretty damn hot standing here in the sun."

I shrugged my shoulders and started walking in the direction of the paper.

"Where are we going?"

I let out a deep breath. "I'm going back to your paper and find another reporter and tell him I was with Barbara Katoneck before she was killed. That ought to be worth about a paragraph or two."

I was bluffing, but she fell for it. No sense in having anything in print that wouldn't jibe with what I'd told the Moortown sheriff or whatever the hell he was.

"No, you mustn't do that," she insisted. "If Larry's girl thinks you're co-operating with the paper, she won't talk to you. Even if it's got somebody else's byline, she'll think I sent you."

"Then get lost, will you?"

"If I do, will you give me the story?"

"Is that the best you've got to offer? Getting lost? Surely you can do better than that—"

"Like what?" She sounded uncomfortable.

"Well, you might suggest we go back to your apartment and hop into bed."

"Yeah—I might. Except that I don't think it would work. Would it?"

"No. It might have, but not anymore. Your timing's off."

"Yeah, I know. If I get lost, you'll give me the story?"

I hesitated, then nodded.

"Swear it?"

"In blood," I answered drily.

She looked at me for a long minute, then turned and walked away.

I got a cab and gave the address Miss Bartlett had given me about twenty minutes ago.

'Larry's girlfriend' was soused. At first, she told me to get the hell out, then she kept getting me mixed up with Larry, then she wanted me to start all over again and tell her who I was.

She couldn't decide whether she'd loved him or hated him and, at times, kept forgetting he was dead. I felt sorry for her and like I should do what she'd told me and get the hell out, but not yet.

I waited until she thought he was alive and hated him, then pointed out what a fine way it would be to get even if she gave another reporter—me, Larry's story. She agreed—emphatically, and told me he'd said he had two witnesses ready to testify, and that he planned to handle it with so much sympathy for the blind kid that both of them would get off. No, the blind kid was not going to testify, no, the blind kid was not an addict, as a matter of fact, he knew nothing about it, no there wasn't anything else—that was all he'd said.

I thanked her and left. The fresh air, even with the heat, felt good. I decided that, had I known Larry Bridges, I would probably have disliked him intensely.

"Hey—"

The voice was familiar. I turned around and looked at her; Jill Bartlett. She'd combed her hair, put on fresh makeup and changed into a low-necked green dress that did wonderful things for her eyes. The rest of her looked even better than I'd remembered.

I let out a deep breath. "I thought you were going to let me alone."

"I knew where you were going. I went home and changed, then came back and waited."

"Why? I said I'd give you the story."

"I know. I—I came back simply to apologize."

I broke into a grin. "Yeah?"

The serious look vanished. "Well, there *was* something else. I'm assuming you haven't eaten—"

"Let me guess. A cozy little dinner while you pump me on what makes me think I can find my car. As a matter of fact, I was planning to take my chances with the police."

She looked like the idea was unappealing. "Hold off—please. And no—that wasn't what I'd had in mind. There's a kind of coffee-shop restaurant about six blocks from here. The food's good and you wouldn't need a jacket."

"I wouldn't need a jacket for a drugstore either."

She slipped her arm through mine. "Shut up."

We took a booth near the back and I spent about twenty minutes convincing her that Larry's girlfriend had been drunk and incoherent and hadn't told me a thing.

The food was in front of us before she finally got down to what was on her mind. "If whatever Larry had comes out, it'll be front-page news for every paper in the city. Also, it'll mean articles and editorials on the whole subject of drug addiction and what to do about it. It'll also be on short notice—and I'd like to be prepared. You seemed to know what you were talking about. What I need is a slant for a series of articles."

"What kind of slant?"

"Hell, I don't know. Drug addiction; what's the solution?"

I laughed. "Honey, if you can come up with that one, you'll be the most famous sociologist in America."

"No, come on. You know what I mean. How about the British system?"

"Make it legal and dispense it free?" I shook my head. "It's only an opinion, but I don't think it would work here. In the first place, most of the addicts in England got that way through drugs administered for war injuries—and those drugs were not heroin. In this country, the big seller is heroin—and heroin is cumulatively destructive to the body. Sure—you could

line them up and give them heroin—and, eventually, it would kill them. Or, you could let them have some other drug—maybe morphine, but morphine isn't strong enough. They're still going to want heroin."

"Dammit. Then what *is* the answer?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I've seen only one with any degree of effectiveness—hospitalized detoxification, then psychological after-care. Addicts aren't criminals by choice—they're sick people with a desperate need for money. They come out of the jails and hospitals and right back into the same circumstances where they got the stuff in the first place—the same families, the same streets, the same psychological tensions that made them addicts in the first place. They need help—continuing psychological help."

She nodded, her face bright and enthusiastic. "More money for after-care centers. It'll make quite a crusade! Maybe the Chronicle can spearhead a fundraising campaign—as a monument to Larry. Hey, that's great!"

I laughed. "As if you gave a damn—about the kids, I mean."

"If the campaign's effective, who cares?"

I shook my head. "It won't be that easy. The statistics favoring this kind of 'cure' are pretty bad, and people want proof that their money's being used effectively. No, unfortunately, the definition of 'cure' is more black and white than the

problem. An addict can't really be pronounced 'cured' until he's dead—because there's no way of saying he won't go back and, on or off, he's still considered an addict.

"If previous to after-care analysis, a guy was only able to go a week without a fix and, afterwards, he's able to go two weeks—or three, or maybe a whole year—this is tremendous. The trouble is, statistically speaking, he wasn't 'cured'; he went back. The length of time before he went back doesn't count. If your paper can sell people on giving money for aftercare, in spite of the statistics—congratulations!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "At least it's an angle. I'll find out more about it before I write anything—"

I paid the check—after she'd offered to, and I believed her, then both of us walked onto the street.

It was around nine thirty and comparatively cool.

"Where are you going now?" she asked quietly.

"You still sticking with me?"

"Depends—"

"I'm going back to my hotel and then I'm going to bed."

She smiled. "Good night. If anything worth knowing comes up, call me. I'll be home. The number's in the book."

I nodded, then asked her where I could catch the bus back to Moor-town. She told me, then waited with me until I got on it.

I rode two stops, then got off.

I went into the nearest drugstore

and checked the phone book. Kato-neck. I was glad she'd had an unusual name; there was only one.

I scribbled the address on an empty cigarette pack, then hailed a cab. It seemed like as logical a place as any to let Hunk know I was still around. A sympathy call; tell her family I'd seen her before she died and I was sorry.

I felt like a bastard. Then I reminded myself that Barbara Kato-neck was dead and the kid who'd written me that letter wasn't.

The driver pulled to a stop in front of the address. He seemed bored and tired and didn't even look at me as I paid him and climbed out. The heat was gone; fatigue from the constant discomfort it had created remained.

I stood in front of the address and looked. It was a house near the river, set way back from its neighbors on both sides. Even in the moonlight, it was obvious that repairs on the roof and steps were badly needed. A dead vine clung to one of the pillars supporting the porch roof, but as I got closer, I saw that it had been tied with a piece of string. There was something awesomely pathetic about it; as though a piece of string could make it bloom again; could bring the house back to what it must have been a long time ago when the house—and the plant, were new.

The floor of the porch creaked under my footsteps and I noticed how rotted and splintered the boards were. It had been painted gray and

either the dampness from the river had taken a heavy toll, or the paint had been too cheap in the first place.

I knocked on the door.

It was a long minute before it opened.

The kid who opened it was maybe eight or nine. The dim livingroom-light was behind him and I couldn't see his face.

"Who is it?" he asked politely, his voice high and rather frail.

"Is your mother home? Or your father—?"

"My father's dead. Come in. I'll call my mother."

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. Everything about the place said that once there'd been money, but not anymore.

The boy held his hand straight out and turned around.

I didn't get it.

"Mother?" It was soft—almost like a question. He turned back to me, the light now on his face, and I was stunned.

He was blind.

He planned to handle it with so much sympathy for the blind kid that both of them would get off; the slurred words of Larry Bridges' drunken girlfriend.

"She's here," he announced suddenly, "but she's ill." He held out his hand and pointed behind me.

I swung around.

She was sitting on the couch, the light of one dim lamp spilling over her face; a woman in her late forties wearing a faded house dress and

worn out slippers. Her eyes stared blankly; her expression told of peaceful yet soaring raptures and I realized at once that she was about as hopped up as anybody could get.

I turned back to the kid in eerie curiosity. "How did you—?"

"I heard her breathing. At first I thought you were Barbara. I thought she'd lost her keys again. I forgot, Barbara's dead."

"Yeah," I answered quietly. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm not." He held out his hand and fumbled for the railing by the stairs. He found it, then turned back and faced me. "Then I thought you were the other man—"

"What other man?" My body was suddenly tense, heart pounding and I told myself it was crazy to assume it might have been Hunk. It also might have been the cops about the accident or maybe a reporter.

The kid started to answer but was cut off by a deeper voice telling him to go on upstairs.

I swung around—fast, and found myself staring into the wrong end of the silencer on Hunk's gun.

He was wearing the familiar green raincoat, hanging open, and his forehead was dripping sweat. His mouth fell open in almost unbelieving recognition.

We stared at each other for a long minute, and his face seemed to relax in the realization that a serious problem was about to be solved.

The palms of my hands were sweating and I wiped them on my

slacks. "Where's my car?" I asked quietly.

He looked at me like I was totally nuts. "You hung around because of your car?"

"Where is it?" I repeated.

"In the river," he answered drily. "With the license plates removed, the serial numbers filled off and everything that was inside, we took out and burned. You ain't never gonna see that car again—and if anybody does, they ain't gonna know it was yours."

"What about the papers—the ones in the glove compartment?" It was insane; it was like something I'd dreamed, standing there with his gun aimed at my stomach, asking him everything I wanted to know as calmly as if we were sitting in a drugstore having lunch.

He looked curious; as though I were some sort of peculiar animal in a zoo, dangerous but amusing enough to humor. "Burned," he answered with traces of a smile. "Everything."

"Where's your friend?"

"Huh? Oh, he's dead. Yeah, he had an accident. He wanted to go to a hospital, but hospitals can be checked and you was runnin' around knowin' what he looked like and knowin' his jaw was busted, so he had an accident."

He glanced at his watch, and his face told me that playtime was over. "Hey kid," he yelled, "Come on down here."

I didn't get it.

CHAPTER FIVE

I noticed a black object, partially visible through the kitchen doorway and realized it was a camera. "What the—?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. That reporter had the whole basement set up with cameras—seems he caught one of Mrs. Katoneck's parties for the local teen-agers."

He didn't have to tell me what kind of parties. "Any of the stuff still around?"

"Yeah, but it won't be." He took a step towards the staircase. "Hey kid, hurry up. Your mother wants you."

The woman on the couch let out a sigh of unseen pleasure.

Hunk faced her, raised the gun and pulled the trigger. Her eyes seemed suddenly alive and back in this world; her face like that of an animal who's just been kicked and doesn't understand why. Her body twisted and jerked spasmodically then fell into a heap on the floor.

All of it had happened so fast, I found myself staring at the corpse, still trying to believe it. Her eyes were still open and vacant and she might have still been only drugged except for the deep red stain spreading rapidly over the front of her faded dress.

"Hey kid—" he repeated loudly—and suddenly I got it! I felt the color draining out of my face, my stomach churning and twisting as her body had twisted when the bullet hit.

My God! They were thorough . . . brutally thorough.

My hands were trembling. I raised my arm and wiped some of the sweat off my forehead. "Not the kid," I said quietly.

"Shut up."

A frail form appeared at the top of the staircase, his left hand gripping the railing.

"Why?" I kept it low, almost a whisper. "He's blind. He never saw you. What could he say?"

"He's got ears." It came out with sharp annoyance.

His body was still facing me, but he turned his head towards the top of the stairs and raised the gun.

I made a flying leap and knocked him off balance, onto the floor, but that was all. His gun-hand was still free and he was in control of it. I fell flat on my face and the bullet shattered a lamp on the far side of the room.

"What's happening?" The voice was high and frightened, coming from the top of the stairs.

Hunk tried to get onto his feet again, and it was a mistake. He used the elbow of the arm holding the gun to help balance himself and, for a split second, his control of the gun was gone. I made a grab for it and caught his wrist, but the grip was still firm.

"Mother?" It was weak and tentative, then—suddenly, hysterical. "Mother, *Mother*—what's happening?"

The side of his other hand

smashed down on my wrist and a sharp, heavy pain shot all the way up to my shoulder, but I hung on. Then both of his hands were on the gun, forcing the barrel towards my chest with deadly effectiveness.

I held both of my hands over his, then brought my elbow up hard against his chin. He jerked, the gun swung around and went off, a spurting, pulsating, then evenly-flowing red stain covering both of us.

His body fell limp beside me, his face a twisted mask of pain and disbelief.

I stood up and staggered backwards, hitting my head against the wall. I decided I could use the support, so I stayed there.

I looked at the staircase; the kid was gone.

I glanced around for the phone and saw it on a table near Mrs. Katoneck's blood-soaked corpse.

I lifted the receiver and realized there must be an upstairs extension because the trembling voice of a child was trying to explain that he wasn't making anything up, he was really blind and someone was really trying to hurt his mother.

I cut in. "This the police?"

It was.

I told them someone had tried to kill me and was now dead. The kid was still on the extension, so I left it out about his old lady.

Let somebody else tell him.

I heard a click as the cop hung up, followed closely by another click, and I knew the kid was off the line.

I dialed information and got Jill Bartlett's number. I called her, and it rang ten times.

I shrugged my shoulders and hung up. I called the Chronicle; she wasn't there, so I asked for the editor.

The cops arrived within seven minutes and I was taken to headquarters. I made it real good about how I'd been hitching rides from New York to Moortown and had been picked up by Larry and the girl—the hitching rides bit would check with what I'd told the Moortown sheriff. I said Larry had invited me to stop in at the paper and say hello to him, and that I'd taken him up on it without knowing he was dead. I said I'd talked to Jill Bartlett who'd given me the name of the dead girl—and that I'd gone to see her family because I'd liked her and wanted to know if there was anything I could do for them.

I said that when I got there, this man I'd never seen before had tried to kill me.

Yes, I was sure I'd never seen him before, no, I'd never been arrested, yes I'd be willing to co-operate in any way I could, yes I would appreciate a clean shirt, of course I could understand the blood-soaked one I was wearing might be necessary evidence in the case. They took my fingerprints and hoped I didn't mind, no I didn't mind.

I signed a statement, and they let me go.

The front of the building was

buzzing with reporters. It was too big now; too big for anybody to kill it. I singled out the guy from the Chronicle and repeated everything I'd just told the cops.

I splurged four bucks and took a cab back to the Moortown Hotel.

Jill Bartlett was sitting in the lobby, looking even prettier than I'd remembered. She glanced up at me, lips thin, green-eyes blazing. "Where were you?"

I picked up my key at the desk and started for the stairs. She was right behind me. I turned around and looked at her. "Aren't you worried about your reputation?"

"Not particularly. You said you were coming right back here. I called about two hours ago, and the clerk said he hadn't seen you since this afternoon."

"So you came out here and waited," I answered drily. I unlocked the door to my room and walked inside. She was still with me.

"You went back and saw Larry's girlfriend—and she told you something."

I kicked off my shoes and stretched out on the bed. "What do you want, Jill?"

"I—I wanted to tell you, I've got the letters—the ones that were in your car."

At first I was startled, then I could hardly keep my face straight. "Honey—never try to out-lie a liar." She seemed uncomfortable. "Huh?"

I patted the bed beside me. "Come on over—we'll discuss it."

She leaned against the dresser and smiled. "Go to hell. All you'll get from me is that letter—after you tell me where you've been, and *if* it's worth anything to me."

I pulled out a cigarette. "Close the door on your way out."

She glanced from me to the door, then back again, visibly upset. She hesitated, then walked to the bed and sat beside me. "I'm sorry," she began petulantly. "I—I was just worried about you."

I stubbed out the cigarette, then put my hands on her shoulders, drawing her down beside me. "Oh, I know you were." I kissed her, running my tongue over her lips, then inside of her mouth and the taste was good.

She moved her arms around me, running her fingers through my hair. "You know I care about you," she whispered.

My hands closed over the softness of her breasts, then down—opening the zipper of her dress. "Oh, I've never doubted it."

"You sound like you don't believe me."

"Nonsense!" I undressed her, taking my time; thoroughly enjoying the whole process. Her naked body was everything I'd imagined from the first moment I saw her. She stretched and smiled, making sure I could see all of it, then reached up and flipped off the light.

My hands found the full, warm

wonder of her breasts and thighs in the darkness, and then she was against me, straining, caressing, telling me to hurry.

I did, and it was wonderful; I wasn't married anymore, there was a whole world of females I'd almost forgotten existed, the whole game of will-she-or-won't-she—the rules came flooding back, and the feeling was good.

The light flipped on again, and she touched my cheek in the process of drawing her hand away. Her face was flushed—and beautiful.

She reached for her clothes and I stopped her. "It's a good story," I offered quietly.

Her eyes were practically glowing

with intensity and excitement. "Then let me go."

"I will, but you'll want to make some kind of notes. Don't get dressed until you're finished. I like to look at you."

She hesitated, then got up and returned to the bed with a note pad. She rolled onto her stomach, propping herself up on her elbows and touched the pencil to the paper. "Okay—shoot."

I swatted her tail, then began telling her everything I'd told the other reporter.

After all, I had promised I'd give her the story.

She'd never specified that it be an exclusive.



THE lights floated out of Riker's mirror when he came off the bridge. But they were still there—he had seen them coming up on the bridge and had inched down a little more on the gas, his palms clammy at the prospect of a bumping contest on the narrow high span.

The highway knitted its way through the warehouse district, bright lights on the faceless brick walls and black emptiness beyond the broken sidewalks. A sharp right took him under a blackened rail-

speedtrap

BY DAVID EDGAR

He was a gambler, so he took the chance. But the odds were heavy against him.

road overpass and he strained his eyes at the shadows cast by a single sooty bulb hanging over the street. It was the kind of place where one of them could be waiting.

Beyond, in the slums, there were people asleep behind the tumble-down gingerbread porches of the row houses, and the street carrying the highway signs was white with light. Also, there was a police cruiser, inching along at five miles an hour, the two uniformed patrolmen in the front seat scanning the side-

walks and alley entrances with practiced eyes. Riker waited a moment and then eased around.

He held just under the legal twenty miles an hour to keep them in sight a few seconds longer. His tail was not that easy to discourage, but as long as the cop car was in plain view he had a few moments to relax in.

The police cruiser took a side street and a traffic signal glowed amber and then red at a brightly lit intersection. Riker eased to a stop, watching the mirror while he fished his cigarettes off the dash and pushed in the lighter. No sign yet, and there should be. If they didn't show it might mean they were changing shifts again. That meant he would have to spend the next twenty miles identifying them.

The lighter popped and he touched it to his cigarette. The paper stuck to his parched lip and he eased it free, running his tongue over them to moisten them. His shoulders ached and his butt felt numb. The blinking dots of a savings and loan sign across the intersection changed. "Time 3:05," then "Temperature 50" again. At least he had made it far enough south to begin to feel warm.

Four or five cars waited for the light now. One of them was easing alongside. His back tightened, prepared to hit the seat and roll off into the floor at the first ugly sign of a black muzzle in the window. But it was a middle-aged Chevy

driven by a pimply kid who tapped his fingers on the wheel in tune to an unheard radio.

The light clicked and the kid clutched out. Riker waited until it was full green and then made his turn. About half the other cars followed. He switched to a faster lane, around a truck that popped and spat as the driver shifted up. The popping was bad—it covered shots too well.

Motel signs, bright and beckoning, lined both sides of the highway now, and a "Steak, Seafood" sign flashed just ahead. It was a drive-in, with a deep parking lot among bearded oaks, and a dozen or more cars were scattered across it.

For a moment Riker considered it—his gut was too knotted for food, but coffee and maybe orange juice would cut some of the crud in his mouth. It was chancy, though—if he parked in the back lot they could cut him off from the highway. Better keep rolling. He fished in his pocket and brought out a stick of gum.

This was Georgia. Daylight would find him over the Florida line and there was a possibility of shaking them when he dropped down through the center of the state. They would figure him to take the west coast—Miami. It was possible — barely — that they didn't know about his connection in Tampa, where he could get on a boat and make it to some backwater port on the Mexican Gulf coast or may-

be further down. There he would wait a year, make a few changes in his appearance, and cut out for Europe. Maybe he would go back to the East again, what he had seen out there during the war he had liked. The hundred and fifty grand waiting for him General Delivery in Tampa would let him write his own ticket.

If he made Tampa. Riker was no coward—a box of medals collected during the Korean war was proof enough, even if taking both Nemo brothers on one point—shaved basketball game didn't count. He was a gambler, one who figured his odds carefully and didn't mind taking a long shot if the payoff was big enough. This one was, even when you figured he had maybe a hundred to one chance of getting aboard that boat.

He might have gotten better odds if he'd had a little more time to plan, made flight reservations in advance or even arranged to be taken aboard something in New York. But this had been one of those breaks you couldn't plan in advance—a casual conversation overheard in a bar about the team's first string forward having a sick kid, a couple of phone calls to feel him out and set up the meet, the payoff and then laying the bets fast and quiet before anyone tumbled. Afterwards, barely time to mail the package, throw a few things in a suitcase and turn the car south.

But this was practically their

home turf—U. S. 1 and 301 and 17. They had contacts all along all three routes. Others had crossed them and failed to make the Florida line—an auto accident or a guy found with the gas on in a motel, or simply an abandoned car and the silent swamp.

Riker had realized his mistake while he was still on the Turnpike. A black Chrysler came on at the Trenton entrance and hugged his tail all the way to the Delaware bridge. He had lost them after that.

The full gravity of the situation had been impressed on him when he stopped for lunch in Maryland. The waitress gave him the onceover while he ordered, but did not even wait to turn the order in before beating it to a pay phone.

He had stopped early at a motel on U. S. 1 in Virginia, and showered and shaved before walking out to eat at the adjoining restaurant. One of Joey Nemo's boys was sitting behind the wheel, grinning humorlessly at him as he passed.

The happy accident of the rental trailer with the car attached to it still running in front of the motel office had saved him that time. It was a simple matter to slip behind the wheel, maneuver the car and trailer into a jackknife directly behind the Nemo car, and then walk away with the key in his own pocket. By the time they got things unsnarled he had drifted over to 301 and was crossing the North Carolina line. They had picked him up

just outside of Rocky Mount; he had shaken them by cutting over to 17, and spotted them on his tail again not long after leaving Charleston.

They were in no hurry to close in—Riker's name for toughness made them think—but they would not miss many more opportunities.

He had passed the last of the big motels. Now there were mostly cheap, no-questions places and half-dark roadhouses. A service station gleamed at a crossroads and he glanced at his gauge. It would be safe; the lights behind him had thinned out. But the popper was still coming up fast, and there was enough for another hour, time to put the diesel far behind him.

The road was a flat empty ribbon ahead. He went off dims and onto brights, bringing flashes of wire fence and behind it the vague shapes of grazing cattle. There were still lights behind—too far back to tell if there were one or two cars.

He passed a house with a spotlight on the lawn. The fences ended and the road became a tunnel of his own headlights through pine woods. There were two of them behind and one was coming up fast.

He mashed a little harder on the gas, watching the needle creep slowly around and then feeling the slight vibration of the wheel as the car reached near its top limit. But the lights continued to draw closer.

He watched them get bigger and brighter in his mirror almost with

anticipation, taking one hand from the wheel and fingering the hard ribbed steel of the GI issue .45 on the seat beside him.

At these speeds there would be no funny business like trying to force him off the road, and if they pulled alongside, he had an even chance of getting off the first snap shot.

The lights were almost on top of him now, a blinding glare in his mirror. They blinked down then up and down again. The car moved into the other lane, and seconds later came whooshing past.

As it cut back ahead of him he automatically dimmed his own lights, letting his grip on the wheel loosen a little. As the four-eyed red glow of the taillights continued to move away, he loosened his foot on the pedal a little.

The other set of headlights were still back there, however, and they inched closer when he slowed, then dropped back.

But the red glow in the road ahead was no longer going away. In fact, it remained steady. He eased off on the gas a little more. The lights in the mirror crept up again, then dropped back. The taillights moved away for a moment before they steadied.

"Boxed," he said aloud. Somewhere between here and the Florida line, it would come. An empty road. The front car would swing across the road, blocking it. Before he could U-turn and beat it back, the other one would be on him.

There would be no choice but to dive into the woods, and Riker, who had trained in this part of the country before going to Korea, had just enough respect for diamondbacks and quicksand to know that he probably wouldn't last until morning.

That, or stand and slug it out. And there were probably five men in each car. Even with a miracle like making each shot score, the .45 contained only nine rounds.

A dirt track leading off into the woods came up and swished past. No need to even think about that—it could lead nowhere, and the two cars would be waiting for him to find out. Even if his luck held and it went through to another road, at least one car had a crew who knew the country.

A sudden flurry of oncoming traffic gave him a few moments to think. But the lights were still there, ahead and behind. They were taking their time about closing, but they could afford to. It was their game all the way.

A luminous sign gave him the name of a town and the miles to it. Then there was a momentary glimpse of a mailbox beside the road, first in miles. Then another and another. His mind raced. There had to be another way out of town, probably a paved state road. If he could risk a quick turn—but even as he rehearsed the move in his mind they closed the gap just enough to discourage it.

"Welcome to Wallins. Population 8,453. Speed electrically timed." a spot-illuminated billboard said. Riker let off on the gas pedal. This was speed trap country and all he needed now was a delay while he fixed some rube constable.

Wallins, where the highway widened to four spacious lanes lined by straggly palm trees and then dusty-window stores fronted by a roofed-over sidewalk, probably wasn't exactly Times Square even in the daylight, Riker decided. But in the early morning darkness it was as if the last resident had packed up and departed. The only sign of life was the traffic signal that blinked methodically red and green.

Taillights apparently didn't take the probability of speed traps seriously. He caught the green signal and was gone, nothing but a dot on the far edge of town by the time Riker braked to avoid the quick change, his tail had slowed, however, either to keep from coming too close or because he knew the score.

The police station, a brightly-lighted white shack on the curb of the courthouse square, was directly in front of the traffic signal, but it was as deserted as everything else. The cops—or cop—would be waiting somewhere ahead, letting the suckers think they were home free before pouncing.

While Riker waited for the green signal, he removed his wallet from the inside pocket of his coat. He

opened it and took out the \$500 in travel money, leaving behind a five and three ones. Taking his chewing gum, he sealed the bills into a roll and reached under the dash to stick it to the top of the steering column. A routine search would overlook it there.

He replaced the wallet and threw the coat back over the .45, leaving a half inch of the butt protruding. Then he dug off with a squeal of tires.

The cop car was about where he had expected, a good half dozen blocks from the courthouse, half-hidden in the shadows of a side street. Even at the accelerating fifty miles an hour at which he shot past, he could see the shadowy forms of two of them in the front seat.

Evidently they had the engine running, for the red blinker was going behind him before he covered a hundred yards. He let the needle creep up to sixty-five to make the chase look real.

They let him get completely out of town. Then they came around, cutting recklessly in front of him, forcing him to stop. Both of them piled out and came back. They could have been brothers, thin with narrow, sharp faces and small mean eyes. One of them wore a wrinkled and faded purplish uniform and a badge announcing he was chief of police. The other had on khakis and a snapbrim hat. His badge said "Deputy Sheriff."

"Don't you guys believe in

sirens?" Riker demanded. "One beep and I'd have pulled over."

"No sense in wakin' up th' town," the chief said. "You seen our blinker."

"You got a license?" the deputy demanded. Riker, moving carefully, took out his wallet and tossed it to him.

"You was doin' sixty in a school zone back there, Mister," the police chief continued. "That kind of thing's dangerous."

"School zone?" Riker demanded. "At four a.m.? Who're you kidding?"

"It ain't no joke," the deputy said. "Goin' to Florida?"

"If my dough holds out." Riker told him. "I got cleaned in a poker game just before I left. Didn't have time to cash a check."

The deputy had opened the wallet and was counting the five and three ones. "This all you got?" he asked.

Riker nodded. "I could give you a check."

"No checks," the chief said. "Checks bounce."

Riker laughed. "Checks you guys can't pocket," he said.

"Mind yo' mouth, mister," the blue uniformed one said.

The lights of the tail were coming up now. They shot past, slowing only slightly.

"Why don't you catch that one?" Riker asked.

"We got you," the policeman said. "How'd you like to have us put you up for th' night?"

Riker let his eyes drop to the coat. The butt of the .45 was plainly visible. "Try it, hick copper," he said, his voice hard.

The police chief fell for the bait. A heavy revolver was in his hand in a second. "Keep yo' hands way up high, Mister," he said, "an' hit th' ground."

Riker took his time in obeying, and the policeman reached inside and scooped up his .45.

"I've got a permit for that," Riker told him.

The deputy finished going through his wallet. "Yo' name Riker?" he demanded.

"You know if you can read," Riker told him.

The deputy appeared not to hear. He took two steps backward. "Let him have his gun back," he told the other one.

"He th' one?" the police chief asked.

The deputy nodded, shifting the holster of his own gun on his belt. The police chief returned the .45, holding it by the barrel.

"You letting me go?" Riker asked, taking it.

The deputy grinned. "Sure, Riker," he said, softly.

Too late, Riker saw the stubby .38 in the deputy's hand. He started to fall and roll, bringing the .45 in his hand into firing position. But before he got it to waist level, something heavy, like a two by four, struck him in the chest. A second

later there was a blinding flash of light off to one side, where the police chief stood, and an explosion in his temple. Then the lights went out.

The two cars, running close together as they came from the south slowed and then stopped.

"What seems to be the trouble, officer?" someone asked from the first one.

"Stopped him for speedin' an' he tried to shoot it out," the deputy said, nodding to Riker's crumpled figure beside his car.

A short round man with a smooth baby face got out of the back seat of the second vehicle and came forward. The deputy held a light while he looked down at the figure on the ground.

"That yo' man, Mr. Nemo?" the police chief asked.

The short man nodded. "It's Riker, all right. Any trouble?"

The deputy shook his head. "Smooth as silk," he said. "Gun in his hand just like he was tryin' to use it on us. He did give us some lip—looked like he was tryin' to get picked up."

The heavysset, baby-faced man shrugged. "Maybe he figured he could shake us that way," he said.

He withdrew a thick envelope from his pocket and passed it to the deputy. "Here you are," he said. "Good job."

The deputy took the envelope. "Much obliged," he said. "Any time you all need us, just holler."





0328569
County Prison
Crook City, Ill.

Dear Sgt. Schroeder,

Well, you did it. Congratulations! You wouldn't have made the pinch without the help of that story in the August Manhunt. And if I'd paid more attention to that piece in the June issue I wouldn't be here now... remember? Well, that's life.

How about you boys at the precinct renewing my subscription? Kind of put things even again for when I get out.

See you in a dime store with good behavior.

*Your good buddy,
Second Story Sam*

P.S.

See inside back cover.

The Laney's had done an awful lot for the county. After all, it was only right that they should expect . . .

a little loyalty

BY
LARRY
POWELL

ON TUESDAY, at about 9 p.m., Sheriff Phil Johnson received the call from the Laney place. With a strange kind of fear clawing away at him, he listened to the doctor's words, then voiced soft profanity as he replaced the receiver.

"I'm driving up to the Laney lodge," he said when he felt Deputy Tod Bierce's glance. "I'll be gone for a while."

"The Laney's may put the breath of life into this county," Bierce said as the sheriff donned his holster and hat, "but they certainly get service for their money."

Johnson looked up quickly. His features were brown and hard and

wearily, like the hill country from which he sprang. His eyes were dark and resentful.

The deputy's grin slipped away. "Don't tell me there has been another accident."

"What do you mean by that?" Johnson's words were charged with anger.

Bierce protested. "Just what I said. It's a natural enough question. You're getting touchy, Phil."

Touchy is right, Johnson thought tiredly. "I should never have run for the sheriff's office eight years ago," he said. "I should have stayed on that hill farm where I was born. I should have worked myself to an

early grave, the same as my father."

"I'm sorry I said anything," Bierce put all four chair legs on the floor. He was ten years older than the sheriff and he took life as it came.

"Look, Phil, for three decades, sheriffs around here have puckered every time a Laney said whistle. Your case is no exception and no reason for you to be ashamed. There are some things no one can change."

Johnson slammed the door as he went out. He wanted to hear no more. Following the private road that struggled up through tall pines to Flat Top Mountain and the Laney lodge, he could still feel that claw of fear.

It was unusual, three accidents in the same family within the period of one year, and since the Laney family were involved, it was something for people to talk about. What were they saying when they were not within earshot of the sheriff?

"Of course, he's covering up. Laney money elected him, didn't it?"

"A man has to look out for himself. Phil Johnson isn't the only one hopping to the Laney tune. This whole county is Laney property, plain and simple, and we may as well recognize the fact."

"I used to think Phil Johnson was different. But I guess no man is different when you get down to the tap root. Every man protects himself and holds on to what he has."

"Why should the Laney family receive special treatment just because their

factories keep this county going? What makes them better than any one else?"

Johnson blinked his eyes, trying to force those ghost voices from his mind and concentrate on the winding road. A moment's inattention could send him plunging off into the chasms below. At least, he thought, that would save him the decisions with which he grappled.

He had told Tod Bierce that he should have stayed on his father's farm. But he would have done anything to get a reprieve from that life's sentence to hard labor, anything.

There had been one more choice open to him. He could have taken a job in the Laney factories. He could have lived in town, making a little more money than a farmer, lasting a little longer. Still he would have been a part of that vast machine kept going by Laney wealth, a robot moving when a button was pushed.

Phil Johnson had done better. He had climbed to a higher level, where there was some freedom of choice, some respect and stature. Only occasionally was he forced to pay the price of a favor to the family that had put him there. Was that too great a price or too much for the Laney family to ask?

Only now, Johnson thought, only now. And the lodge's lights blazed out before him, bright squares on the checkerboard of night, and he saw Dr. Giles Oliver's car in the drive.

He parked and stood for a moment as the cold, clean air hit his face, waiting for his mind to clear. Or was he postponing the ordeal that waited inside?

He heard crickets converse in the shadows beyond. The breeze carried the heavy scent of pine needles and honeysuckle and from a distance, an owl asked, "Who?" Johnson's throat felt tight and sore.

The door to the lodge opened. Light sprang out and Dr. Oliver called, "That you, Phil?"

Johnson sighed and walked on up, passing the doctor's car, a black sedan that belonged to Richard Laney, and the convertible Laney had given his wife Elaine. Johnson could remember when Elaine's future had been no brighter than his, but fortune and Richard Laney had smiled on her, had lifted her from a factory house to a mansion and a mountain lodge, from cotton seconds rejected by the factory and sold at half-price to fashions from New York and Paris.

That thought tore at him, too, and he walked inside and blinked in the bright light. The doctor was packing his bag. A cigarette hung from Oliver's mouth, sending smoke signals past his narrow face.

"Mrs. Laney is upstairs," he said. "I gave her a sedative. Laney is in that bedroom." He jerked his head toward a door.

"Laney is all right. The shot just grazed his ribs. Tore away some high-priced beef and that's all."

Johnson did not miss the sarcasm in Oliver's voice. The doctor considered himself independent. He could practice medicine elsewhere; he could live with or without the Laney.

"It was an accident, you said." Johnson did not like to yield up the words.

"I said Richard Laney called it an accident. I don't know. I wasn't here." Ashes fell down the front of the doctor's coat. He snapped his bag shut.

"Laney is either the luckiest or the unluckiest man alive. I'll say that and leave the rest for you to figure out."

Johnson heard the doctor's car start as he knocked at Laney's door. "Mr. Laney?" He went in and found the factory owner sitting up in bed, his back supported by a pillow.

"Phil," Laney smiled. "Glad you could come."

Johnson uneasily fingered his hat. "I'm glad you're all right, Mr. Laney." He did not know how to begin; he wished that he could get that tone of subservience out of his voice.

"These things happen. Nothing to get excited about." But Laney's face was white and drawn.

"Elaine's gun fired by accident. It happened to get in the way." Laney smiled weakly. "You'll see that this is kept out of the paper, I hope."

"Yes, sir." Why couldn't he stop saying that?

"Mr. Laney," Johnson plunged in,

"It looks a little bad, your having so many accidents. This is the fourth close shave for you within a year."

Color came into Laney's face, but he spoke slowly and patiently. "I appreciate your concern. Anyone can come near to drowning or fall down a flight of stairs. And you know the facts of that other occasion."

"Yes, sir." Laney and Elaine had come home from a party, both drinking heavily, and Laney had passed out. Elaine had staggered from the garage and left her husband there with the motor running. Understandable, perhaps, but why had she closed the garage doors?

"If there were more to this, you would tell me, wouldn't you, Mr. Laney?"

"What are you saying, Johnson? That my wife is trying to kill me?" Laney sat up straight. The friendliness and patience left his voice. "I don't understand some of you people. I put you into office and I made you somebody. All I ask in return is a little loyalty and you act as if you're making a great sacrifice."

"Try to understand my position. If people start to talk. . . ."

"Talk. That never hurt anyone. Proof is what counts. Do you have any proof that these were not accidents?"

"You're not fair, Mr. Laney. I'm concerned about your safety as well as the protection of your name—and my own."

Laney settled back. He spoke

more calmly. "Of course. But all I ask is that you keep this accident out of the papers." His voice underlined the word accident.

"Yes, sir."

"Phil." Johnson paused with his hand on the doorknob. "You've been a good sheriff. I wouldn't want to deprive the county of your continued services."

Johnson did not reply to that. He walked out, trembling, angry, afraid, and Elaine was standing smiling at him.

"I thought that you were asleep, Mrs. Laney."

"The doctor gave me some pills. I told him I'd take them but I didn't." She held a drink in her hand. "You look as if you need a sedative more than I do."

"You're trying to kill your husband. Why?"

Elaine fell back on the couch. She was so lovely that it hurt Johnson to look at her. Once he had wanted her so much. No, he still did.

"I can't stand him," Elaine said succinctly. "But the Laney's don't get divorces, you know."

"Is his permission necessary?"

"You can't defeat the Laney's legally. I would wind up with nothing but a return ticket to Factory Row. I think he owes me a little in exchange for the best years of my life."

"Do you realize that this amounts to a confession of attempted murder?" Johnson was aware that he sounded like a young boy voicing a threat he could not enforce.

Elaine laughed. "You wouldn't dare do anything about it. You know that my husband would ruin you. And you want to keep that badge. You're just like I am—you hate the Laney brand but you don't want to surrender what it's given you."

"I wouldn't kill to keep it," Johnson said hoarsely.

Elaine regarded him thoughtfully. "Perhaps you don't have the nerve."

Johnson could feel warmth edging into his cheeks. "If anything happens to your husband, Mrs. Laney, I promise that you'll be arrested."

She chased him to the door. She caught his arm. "Big, brave words," she spat. "You don't care about Richard Laney. You don't want to lose your meal ticket. Without Richard Laney, you're nothing, you're no better than you were helping your father grub a living out of . . ."

Johnson slapped her. Her head rocked back, so hard was the blow. Her glass fell to the floor and whisky leaked across the rug.

He reached out helplessly. "Elaine, I'm sorry." Her first name slipped out.

"It's all right." Her words cut into him like knives. He could see the red print of his palm on her cheek. "I won't tell my husband."

On Wednesday morning, she came into his office. "I'd like to talk to you," she said, "if we are alone."

"We're alone." He played with a

letter opener. "But what do we have to talk about?"

"There was a time when you seemed to enjoy talking to me. Do you remember those days?"

"Too often."

"What we've become, you and I, is not our fault. It's Richard's. Isn't that right?"

"He didn't force you to marry him. He didn't force me to run for sheriff."

She touched his hand and stilled its movements. He felt closed in and helpless, unable to cope with what was about to happen.

"Do you know why I hate him? Because he acts as if I were an animal on a leash. Because he never lets me forget what I was before he married me or what I would be if it weren't for Laney money."

"He treats you the same way. Don't you get tired of yes, sir and no, sir, Mr. Laney, and just as you say, Mr. Laney?"

"Yes," Johnson said loudly and pulled his hand away from her. "Now what do you want?"

"Last night, after you left, he called his attorney. They're together now. He's changing his will. I won't get a thing if he dies."

"I don't blame him." Johnson smiled a bitter smile. "And that solves all our problems. Now you've no reason to kill him."

"I still have the reason. I just explained it to you. I hate him." She leaned forward. Her eyes burned like faraway torches in the night.

"And there is still an insurance policy. He hasn't changed that yet."

Johnson slammed his palm on the desk so hard that it caused him to wince. "Why in Heaven's name are you telling me? I warned you. If he dies, I'll arrest you for murder."

She arose. "Until yesterday, he was never certain that I was trying to kill him. I could see the doubt and suspicion in his eyes, but he couldn't really believe that anyone would dare. It was inconceivable that anyone would rebel against a Laney."

She stepped around the desk. "Now he knows. Yesterday was my last chance and I failed. Now he's watching me. But you could do it."

Johnson started to rise but her hands were on his shoulders, her face moving close to his.

"You could do it tonight. And there would be a hundred thousand dollars for the two of us."

She kissed him quickly, then stepped back. His hands, moving on their own, reached out for her.

"You could come up to the lodge tonight. Drain the fluid from the brakes on the sedan. He'll be driving down tomorrow. He'll go off the road and no one will ever know it wasn't an accident. You can see to that."

"You're crazy, Elaine."

"I'll see that he doesn't know you're there. It will be so easy." She kissed him again. "Tonight, darling."

Then she was gone and Johnson stood on the edge of a chasm deeper

than any along that winding mountain road. He wavered and then he pulled himself back and he reached for the telephone. When the connection was made, he said, "Mr. Laney?"

Thursday dawned cold and grey and he lay in a bed damp with the perspiration of bad dreams and he wondered what Elaine would do now. "You were right to call me," Richard Laney had said. "Don't worry any more about it. I'll be careful."

The telephone. Johnson realized that it was ringing. He walked slowly and fearfully across the room and picked up the receiver.

"This is Tod. I'm at the office and the State Patrol just came in with an accident report. An ambulance and Doc Oliver are on their way out and I'm right behind them. You'd better come along as soon as you get dressed."

"The accident," the words boomed in Johnson's ears, "Where was the accident?"

"On the road to the Laney lodge."

They were bringing up the body as he parked beside the State Patrol car and threw on his emergency brakes. A white sheet shrouded the still form.

"Too late for me," Dr. Oliver met him as the body slid into the ambulance. "One way or the other, I guess this ends it."

Johnson moved on heavy legs to the edge of the road and looked down at the mangled remains of the

automobile. Tod Bierce climbed up from the wreckage.

"The brakes gave way," he said, "and the car failed to take the curve."

"Did you check the brake drums?" Each word came out separately, like a single piece being fitted into a puzzle.

"You can do that later, Bierce." Richard Laney came striding up. "If the sheriff thinks it's necessary. Right now I'd like to talk to him alone."

"Yes, sir." Bierce went away.

Johnson lifted his eyes from the wreckage of the convertible. "Why did you do it?" he said. "It wasn't necessary for you to kill her."

"It was one or the other of us," Laney said calmly. "Her plan was a good one. It worked perfectly, although with the wrong victim."

"You'll see that this is handled discreetly, with as little publicity as possible."

Their eyes locked. Anger churned up in Johnson, a bitter anger that

clenched his fists and turned his face hot.

"Do you understand, Johnson? You understand how it is to be handled?"

Johnson's eyes were damp and red-hazed. He was thinking of that hilly farm and the factories with the tendrils of smoke wreathing up and Elaine's kiss upon his lips and Tod Bierce saying: "There are some things that no one can change."

I can change them, his mind chanted. I can reach out and grab his arm and say, "Richard Laney, I arrest you for the murder of your wife." He could see the surprise smash into Laney's face like a fist; he could taste his triumph.

"Well, Johnson?"

Then finally the words came up from deep in his throat. He knew they were the most important he would ever voice. It was a labor bringing them out and then they hung there in the air between them, never to be erased.

"Yes, Mr. Laney."



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