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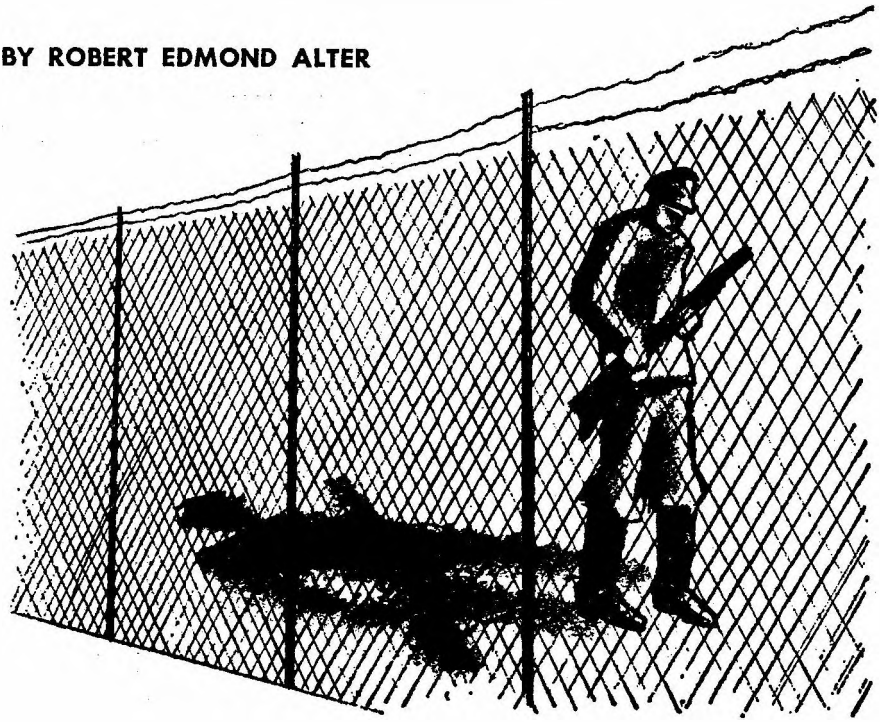
MEANS TO AN END

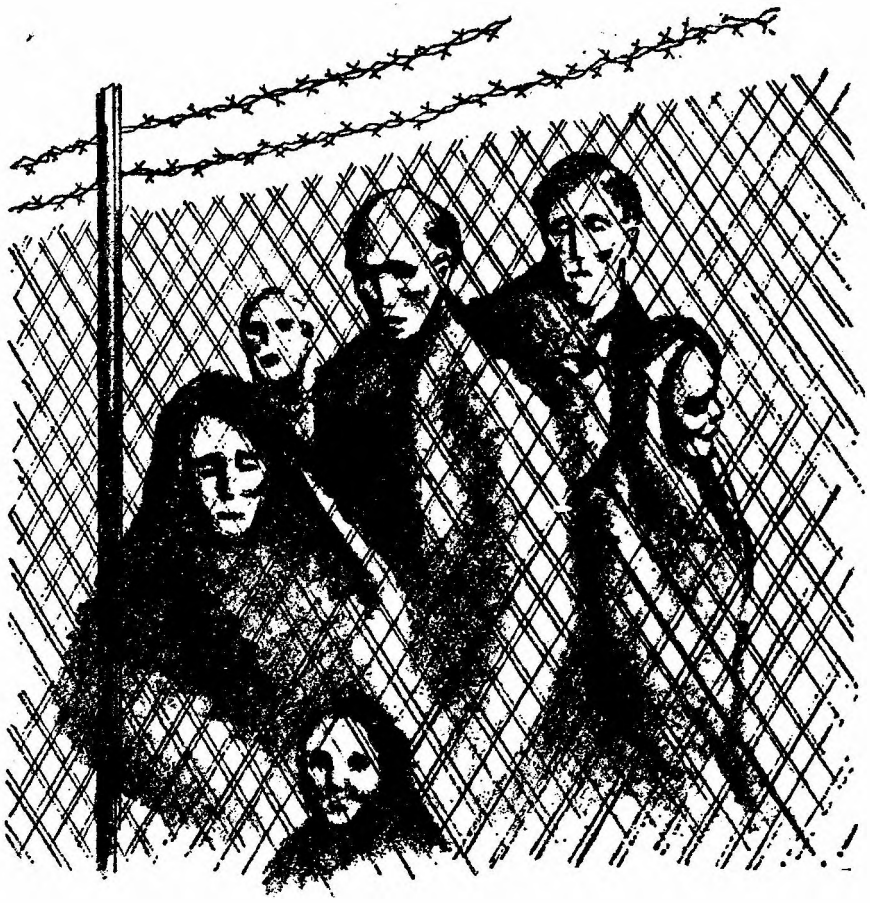
A fence is as insurmountable as the man who guards it.

BY ROBERT EDMOND ALTER



EACH DAY the same people appeared at the stretch of fence along Ernst's guardpost. The same faces. Many came, he was sure, simply to heckle him: others came with hopeful longing, and some with apathetic understanding. But whatever reasons they might have, he began to find their daily reappearance annoying, as though they were somehow in league against him, against his conscience. And the trouble was he couldn't tell whether he felt a sense of guilt for the crime he had committed against them, or if for the crimes they—by their mute or declamatory presence—had committed against him.

There was the young bearded poet in sandals, with the young beat-looking girl who wore no make-up except for heavy eye shadow. The



poet referred to the beat girl as his wife, though Ernst had his doubts because the girl had no wedding ring. They were usually the first to appear at the fence during Ernst's afternoon tour of sentry-go.

They came down the same narrow, rubble-cluttered street each afternoon and walked across the boulevard which was no longer used for commercial traffic, and stepped boldly up to the fence, there to wait determinedly for Ernst to come chase them away.

The fence was five-foot high and made of link wire, supported by wooden posts every twelve feet. Above the fence were strung three strands of barbed wire running from post to post.

Each day the poet and the beat girl would stand facing the fence

and stare over it at the busy west side with fiercely active eyes. Then the poet would raise his head and look at the lower strand of barbed wire, and finally reach up and take it savagely in his long, delicate hand. He would shake it as an angry man hammers upon a door.

When Ernst approached them unwillingly, they would turn to him with identical right-sided smiles and look him over with studied care, as if for flaws. Always their amused perusal made him feel clumsy and archaic in his thick uniform, heavy boots, steel helmet, and burp gun strapped butt-up over his right shoulder.

"Hail the warrior!" was the poet's usual greeting, and he would give the mocking old *heil*-salute with his stiff right arm. The beat girl would seem to laugh but never make any noise doing it.

"All right," Ernst would murmur. "Move along now."

Then the bitter heckling would commence, and the poet would present brilliant and irrefutable arguments proving that Ernst was nothing but a mindless lackey who belonged wholly to the Reds: until finally Ernst would have to resort to the burp gun to drive them off—which only made matters worse because the poet and the girl deplored any show of physical force. In the end they would retreat on their dignity, leaving Ernst alone on the pavement and feeling embarrassingly absurd with the heavy, ugly submachine gun in his trembling hands.

Then there was the young widow who appeared every day at the same hour to meet her little daughter. The child lived on the west side with her aunt.

There they would be, the aunt standing back from the child after the first greeting, staring somberly into the middle distance, the little girl standing on the west side of the fence with wet, uncomprehending eyes, and the young widow crouching to her on the east side of the fence, her fingers talon-like in the link wire.

"Are you going to come home today, mama?"

"No—no, not today, darling. Soon. Soon, though. I promise . . ."

Ernst hated the scene. Hated his rigid duty that made him order the young widow away. But he was laggardly about it, knowing how precious each second was to the mother and her daughter. He took his time getting there. And each day when the young widow suddenly looked up and saw him standing above her and the moist, hopeless appeal came into her eyes, he thought, *Oh God, I can't drive her away again.* But he always did. He had to. Twice now he had received a harsh reprimand from his superior officer because of the young widow.

Finally there was the old couple. Down the boulevard they would come at a hesitant, age-lagging pace, the little old man solicitously help-

ing the little old woman, and up to Ernst's section of fence. They would stand side by side, the old man's arm about the old woman's back protectively, not touching the wire at any time, and stare quietly at the people and cars, the trees and buildings on the other side.

Each day the little old man would ask Ernst the same question:

"May we cross over today?" even though Ernst had no gate at his command to pass them through, had he suddenly said, "Yes, go ahead."

And after he told them, "No, I'm sorry. Not today," they would nod imperceptibly as if saying, "No, we thought not. We understand."

They would stare through the wire for a moment longer, and then the little old man would gently turn his wife away and they would hobble on down the boulevard to the nameless, dank, pre-war, bomb-cracked hovel of Ernst's imagination.

There were others of course, many others. But these five people best symbolized and crystallized his impotency, anger, and guilt: the poet and the beat girl because they seemed to hold him personally responsible for the blockade; the young widow because she seemed to hold out her hand to him as one human being appealing to another for the help he could not give; the old couple because—in their apathetic acceptance of his word—they seemed to make a sort of cold god of him.

And today, his fifth day of duty, brought to a head all the emotion that these five faces in the crowd had kindled in his heart and mind.

"*Heil*, warrior, champion of the people's oppression!" the poet saluted him. "How many sobbing children seeking their lost parents have you driven from the wire today with your keen, bright bayonet?"

The fatuous question was a little too close to the reality of the young widow and her child for Ernst's comfort. He could feel the angry burn in his cheeks as he muttered, "All right. Move along."

The poet was delighted with Ernst's obvious discomfort.

"Behold, Zol," he said to the silently laughing beat girl, "our paragon of martial law is nearly a human being after all—just as I have asserted from the first. He has the grace to blush becomingly over his shame. Tell me—" He took an aggressive step toward Ernst.

"What would you do if my wife and I were to attempt to climb over that abominable wire which you and your kind must necessarily rely upon to fence in your multitude of fears. Shoot us?"

Ernst touched the tip of his tongue to the inner side of his compressed lips. "No," he said. "I'd pull you down."

"And suppose I resisted? What then?"

"I'd have you placed under arrest."

"Of course!" the poet cried dramatically. "First the bayonets

and barbed wire, and then the bars and beatings. Truly this *is* the Worker's Paradise. You either work until you drop or you are carted off to some medieval inquisition."

"You don't appear to be dropping from work," Ernst inserted.

The bantering look in the poet's eyes was replaced with burning intensity. "Do you know why?" he cried. "Because no artist, no poet, painter, writer, or musician can create in bondage. Yes, *bondage*, you clod! Shall I explain the word to you? It's the opposite of Freedom.

"Freedom!" He pointed a quivering hand at the wire, to the West.

Ernst glanced at the west side. "What's so different about over there?" he demanded. "It's only another part of the same city." But he knew this wasn't true. Anyone with two eyes could see the tall new buildings against the jagged West horizon, and, at night, see the merry glow of the parti-colored neons and the thin white spearblades of searchlights arcing across the city-gleaming sky to announce some new attraction or other, and hear the horns, horns, horns of traffic. While over on this side of the fence, the east side . . .

"If it's so bad over here," he continued hurriedly, "then why don't the people rise and mob the gates and fences? How many like yourself do you see here every day? A hundred, two hundred, a thousand? There are tens of thousands of people here in the east side. You don't see them at the fences howling for freedom."

"Fool!" the poet nearly screamed the word. "Don't you know that if one man," he held up one finger so that there could be no mistake about the number, "—if one man desires to walk from this side of the boulevard to that side, and yet is prevented from doing so by barbed wire, then *he is in bondage* and *all* men are in bondage with him!"

Abruptly, fiercely, he turned and went up to the fence. He grabbed the lower strand of barbed wire in both hands, and for a vivid moment gave the visual impression of a man crucified.

"Barbed wire!" he hissed. "Created for livestock—to fence in beasts of the field. *For animals!*"

Like the voice of a harsh, omnipresent god, the PA system suddenly filled the air with irritation. The officer on duty in the guard tower at the gate had spotted the incident in his binoculars.

"That man on post four! What are you doing with those civilians? Get them away from the wire! If you need assistance, call the guard!"

The poet looked around sharply, and turned to Ernst with a sneer.

"Your master's voice, slave," he said. "Don't you hear it?"

Ernst let out his breath slowly, then took it back again. "Yes, and so did you. Get away from the fence. Hurry up."

The poet stayed where he was. His eyes were nakedly fanatical.

"And if I don't?"

Ernst unslung his burp gun as the PA system blared at him again.

"That man on post four! Do you need assistance or not? What's wrong down there?"

Ernst motioned with the barrel of the submachine gun. "Move!"

The poet removed his left hand from the wire, made a small pale fist of it and shook it at Ernst. "Shoot! You mechanical man! Shoot and live with it for the rest of your purposeless life!"

Then the beat girl stepped up to him and grabbed his arm.

"Enough, Bob. Enough for now." Her voice was compellingly calm. "We'll never get across if we're in prison. Come away."

The poet seemed to stall. His frantic eyes blinked to her black-edged eyes. All at once he appeared to go limp, as though someone had pulled a drawstring down his spine. "Ahhh—" he muttered despondently. His hand left the wire and he let the girl turn him away. They walked off like the walking-wounded from a battlefield. They didn't look back.

It seemed to Ernst that he had hardly reslung his gun when he saw the little girl and her aunt crossing the West boulevard. And, in something like quiet panic, he turned and saw the young widow coming too.

No. Oh God, no, he thought. *Not today.*

The young widow gave him a worried glance, then hurried straight to the fence. She knelt down and put her fingers through the links. The little girl grabbed them hungrily from the other side.

Ernst looked fearfully at the far-off guard tower. He could start patrolling the fence in the opposite direction from the young widow, pretending that he wasn't aware of what was occurring behind his back. It would give her a few minutes with her daughter. But what if the officer in the tower was observing him through the binoculars?

He hesitated, biting at his lip. Then he said, Oh hell, and turned and started to stroll away. Almost instantly he spotted Lt. Hasse standing at the curb. The lieutenant was looking at him.

"Koster!" Hasse called. "Come here."

There was something of the old Prussian line officer in the set of Hasse's straight, young face, but it wasn't in his eyes. His eyes, somehow, never quite seemed to belong in a soldier's face.

"Have you been having trouble on your post?" Hasse asked quietly.

"Yes sir, a little. There's a man and his—his wife who come here every day. He's an intellectual and he . . . well, he likes to try to get me into arguments about the rights of man."

Hasse nodded, looking at the young widow. "And that woman?"

Ernst wet his lips. "She's a widow, sir. That's her daughter. She only

gets to see the child a few minutes each day."

Hasse's contemplative eyes carved a slow zigzag down Ernst's face.

"You have quite a few steady customers, don't you?" There was a wistful expression in his face, perhaps a faint smile. Then he said:

"I know about that young woman. She used to go to post seven —until she realized that the guard there was never going to let her near the fence. It's possible that the reason these same people keep coming to your post is that they know you are reluctant about turning them away. They make use of your leniency."

"Yes sir," Ernst murmured miserably.

"Remember, Koster, a soldier under orders need not feel responsible for his actions. A poet, politician, a priest—they can become the world's conscience if they wish: but not a soldier." He looked at the young widow kneeling at the fence again, and said:

"All right. You'd better move her along. That's just the sort of scene a Yank newspaperman with a camera would like to catch."

Reluctantly, Ernst saluted and went over to the young widow.

She looked up, her eyes bright with moisture and appeal.

"Please," she whispered, "not yet. Not so soon."

Ernst spread his hands helplessly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't help it. An officer's over there. Please . . ."

The woman looked at her child. Her fingers moved in the little girl's hands. Then she looked up at Ernst again and said the thing she had been saying with her eyes every day that week.

"Will you help me? Can you? I have money. I can—"

Ernst closed his eyes for an instant. "Don't!" he whispered. "Please don't say that. I can't do it . . . I mean, I wouldn't do it for money even if I could do it." He glanced at the little girl through the link wire. "Perhaps we could get her over here to you, though. I could arrange with that officer to—"

"No!" the woman said fiercely. "I'd rather have her dead."

Ernst stared at her blankly.

"Koster!" Hasse's quiet voice brought him back.

He leaned down and took the young widow by the arm. "Please, you must leave now."

"Mama. Mama!" the little girl's voice shrilled icily.

"It's all right, darling," the young widow said. "Mama will be back again. Berthe," she said in an undertone to the aunt.

Aunt Berthe reached for the small child with both hands. She gave Ernst a cold glance from under her brows. "Satisfied?" she asked.

Ernst clutched at the link wire with his free hand, wanting to grab through it for the aunt. "It isn't my fault!" he hissed. "I'm a soldier. I have to—"

"Mama!" the little girl wailed as the aunt lifted her away from the fence.

Ernst turned to the young widow. He was still holding her by the arm, and for a moment he thought she was going to fall. She half leaned into him, her hair brushing his cheek. Then she straightened and said, "Thank you. I'm all right," and he let her go.

He let her go—but something in him did not. Even as the clack of her heels diminished on the pavement he could still smell the soft perfume of her hair. He touched his cheek and leaned against the wire and closed his eyes. He felt like a man who had just run over a dog.

Then the old couple came to the fence and stood before it without touching it, touching each other instead, and stared at the west side.

"May we cross over today?"

"No, I'm sorry. Not today."

Not today or tomorrow nor the day after, Ernst thought. *Not ever, perhaps, in your lifetime. So don't—please—don't come back here again. I don't want to see your faces again—any of your faces. Leave me alone. For God's sake, leave me alone.*

And for a moment he almost said it to them aloud. But he couldn't, not when he watched them turn slowly away and hobble hesitantly down the boulevard, because they came to him to ask—out of a hope where no hope should have possibly existed—if he would perform the miracle of allowing them to pass through a wire fence that had no gate: simply because it was all they had left: hope.

Off duty now, Ernst went upstairs in the barracks looking for the old veteran soldier Gottfried Stoss. He badly needed reassurance.

Gottfried was squatting on the floor with four listless comrades around an army blanket. They were playing cards.

"*Salut*, Gottfried. May I speak with you?" Ernst said.

Gottfried looked up with a bland smile, saying, "*Salut*, boy. Yes, and just in time, else these sharks would take my boots as well as my money." He wagged his grizzled head at his grinning companions. "There is no doubt of it, Ernst: they learned their card thievery from the Yanks during the early days of the Occupation."

He stood up with a grunt and stamped his booted feet on the floor to renew the circulation in his bandy legs. Then he clapped Ernst on the shoulder and led him over to his cot where they could be alone.

"What is it, Ernst—girl trouble?"

"No. Nothing so simple."

"Ha." Gottfried cried. "When you reach my age you will realize that girls create the most complex problems in the world. Sit down there on Willy's bunk. Tell me then."

Ernst looked at Gottfried and wondered if faith in your leaders also came with age. But he doubted

it. Gottfried had been born to his station; there were no tributaries to his thinking. He was one of the fortunate few of the Twentieth Century—uncomplicated.

"It's about this patrol duty on the fence, Gottfried. It's getting under my skin. The faces of the people who come to the wire are—"

"*Ach!*" Gottfried snarled his disgust. "All this mewling about wanting to cross over to the West makes me ill. Listen, do you know *why* these idiots want to cross the fence? I'll tell you—" He patted his cot. "You take a land with an invisible boundary down the center. Some people live on this side, some on the other. Everyone's happy. Then—for reasons the Party considers necessary—you place a fence on that boundary. What happens? People start to want to cross over. Why? Because they are like children: tell them they can't do something because it is bad for them, and that's the very thing they'll want to do!"

Ernst nodded. "Yes, but why is it that only the people on the East want to cross over? Why do so many of them think they are in bondage?"

"Bondage!" Gottfried was exasperated. "They aren't in bondage. They simply don't understand yet what we are trying to do for them. So, until they do, until they realize we are trying to help them, advance them, they must be treated like children. They have to be restricted."

He leaned forward and looked into Ernst's troubled face.

"Listen, Ernst. I know it isn't easy to watch those people come up to the fence every day and look at you as though you were some form of monster for not letting them cross over. But you are forgetting your first lesson: the End justifies the Means. The Party knows what it is doing. Someday all the people in the world will realize that the Party was right all along. But it takes time, Ernst. And sometimes it takes barbed wire and bayonets, and yes—even blood." He grunted and nodded as though confirming his beliefs.

"You don't know what it was like in this country between 'thirty three and 'forty five. You weren't born until after the war started. But *I* know, because I was here. I was a member of the Party when I was in my teens. And some of the things we had to do in those days weren't nice and we didn't like doing them; but, Ernst, they were necessary. And we knew that someday they would pay off in rich rewards. For the world!"

Then Gottfried became very lecture-ish and he backtracked away down through the bloody, hero-garnished corridors of Party history to the tired old Battleship *Potemkin* incident, pointing out at every turn of the way that no matter how grim, brutal or deadly the policy of action had been, the End had definitely justified the Means, always.

"Remember, Ernst," Gottfried said in conclusion, as Ernst rose to leave. "A thing as big as world revolution takes time. And fortunately the Party has plenty of it."

Yes, Ernst thought, *but unfortunately each person in the world only has his own lifetime. And it's short, so very short.*

The next day was Ernst's sixth day on patrol duty. It was the day of the incident.

In the afternoon the poet and the beat girl crossed the boulevard with three men and another woman. They paid no attention to Ernst, who was some distance away, but stepped right up to the fence in a tight group, seemingly to stare at the west side.

Watching them, Ernst let out his breath heavily, feeling that he was about to have another bad day. The poet had evidently fetched along reinforcements to help him heckle the guard.

More and more civilians began trickling across the street, in twos and threes, men and women, some of them leading children by the hand. It was an unpleasant sight for Ernst. It was trouble. Perhaps today he would have to call up reinforcements of his own. He squared himself into proper military posture and started walking along the fence toward the ever-expanding crowd of civilians.

Suddenly he saw the young widow cross the boulevard. She hurried to the rear of the crowd and disappeared into it as if swallowed. Ernst hesitated, wondering. It seemed early for her to be there. He looked at the west side but saw no sign of the little girl and her aunt.

A cold wave of anticipation went humming through him. Something was up, something happening. The crowd was beginning to surge, to push and paw. The link-wire fence gave a little under their combined weight.

"All right," Ernst called as he approached them. "Move along now! Get away from the fence. We don't want any trouble here."

Those on the outer fringe turned to him with iron-eyed guilt, like defiant children caught playing a dangerous game. Ernst could see the tall poet deep in the crowd and tight against the fence. He was looking down and his expression was tense and engrossed in something he was doing. He looked like a man trying to open a door or gate for a mob of impatient people and having trouble with the lock.

"Hurry. For Godsake hurry!" urgent, low-pitched voices implored.

Ernst reached for the link wire with his left hand. He felt it vibrate with a jerk. *Wire cutters*, he thought blankly. *An escape hatch.* As though he had suddenly taken one step back from himself, leaving the situation up to the other him, he unslung the burp gun.

"Enough of that!" he shouted. "Get away from the fence, all of you!"

The equilibrium-shattering voice of the PA system abruptly rasped peevishly overhead. "That man on post four! What's happening down there? Move those people! *Get them away from that fence!*"

Ernst panned the muzzle of the submachine gun along the crowd. They were so tightly packed they couldn't fall back, and for some reason they didn't have the sense to scatter, as he had expected them to do.

"I'm warning you," he cried. "I'm warning you to get away from that fence!"

The poet turned and yelled something at a man pressed next to him. Ernst heard the words: "—keep cutting . . . stop him some . . ." The rest was drowned in the frantic uproar the crowd was now raising. The poet came lunging and shoving his way through them to reach Ernst.

Then he was in the clear and, melodramatically, he placed his back to the crowd and outflung his arms as if to protect them from Ernst with his brittle body. "Shoot, oppressor!" he cried. "Shoot us down! It's the only way you'll stop us now. We're going across!"

They were—though they must not have taken the time to cut much of an opening, because the first man appeared to be hung up on the wire. The others ganged at his back, shoving, forcing him free, shouting.

The PA system was literally raving. "Guard on four! Guard on four! Can't you see those people are cutting the wire? Stop them! Sto—this is an order: *Open fire!* Open fire, man! Stop those people!"

Open fire. That was the order. Ernst stared bleakly at the sardine-packed people ganged before him. Cut loose at them with the submachine gun. Pound hard, snub-nosed bullets into soft, mortal flesh. Melt them away—the men and women and children.

There must be something wrong, he thought, when people were willing to face a point-blank raking from machine-gun fire rather than remain on this side of the fence. Something so wrong that Gottfried and Hasse and that voice on the PA and all those others clear back to Moscow could never put it right. Not with speeches or promises or axioms. This Means—this gun—could never justify this End: cold-blooded murder.

He lowered the barrel of the burp gun.

The poet dropped his arms to his sides. His eyes burned with ecstatic compassion. "Can't you do it?" he asked. "Was I right? I told Zoë you were the only man along this fence with a twinge of conscience left. The only one who had managed to hide a scrap of his soul from them."

"Get them across," Ernst said. "Don't stand talking. Hurry!"

The poet threw his right arm into the air. "Hi!" he cried. "A man is reborn!" He turned and plunged

back into the thrusting crowd, shouting, "Wait for me, Zol! Zol—*we're going over!*"

But they were going too slowly. The pile up at the small, torn opening was maddening. Ernst looked for the young widow in the surging crowd, but couldn't spot her. Instead he saw the old couple hobbling hurriedly down the street toward the escape hatch. *They'll never make it*, he thought. *Not half of them.*

Lt. Hasse was coming on the run with a disorganized squad of soldiers. Ernst turned to face them. Something had gone wrong with the amplifier of the PA system; the insanely screaming voice sounded like a man drowning in an electrical whirlpool. Nothing made sense.

Ernst glanced over his shoulder and saw that a dozen people were still jammed on the wrong side of the fence. The young widow was one of them. He sprang and caught her by the arm, propelling her forward.

"Let her through!" he ordered. "She has a child over there. Let her through!"

A stalwart, hatless youth, who was savagely trying to maintain a sense of order, reached for the young widow with both hands. "Right," he said. "I'll get her over." He plucked her from Ernst as easily as if he'd taken a newspaper from him.

Someone was tugging for attention at Ernst's sleeve. It was the panting little old man looking up at him with questioning eyes.

"May we cross over today?"

The innocent irony of the question was all that Ernst's strained nerves needed. He laughed crazily, and said, "Yes, today you may."

He turned back and leveled the burp gun on Hasse's oncoming squad.

"Halt!"

The squad slammed to a hesitant stop with their bayoneted rifles half raised. They gaped at Ernst and the escaping civilians with wide, unbelieving eyes. Hasse said, "Don't be a damn fool, Koster! Put down that gun."

"No. Drop yours—all of you!"

They wouldn't. They edged forward as Hasse prompted them with a quick flip of his hand.

Ernst bared his teeth, elevated the barrel of the burp gun, and pulled the trigger. The gun leaped spastically in his hands, the stuttering roar going *Brap-ba-dap!* The squad panicked into a crouching cower, one man right to his knees; another dropped his rifle and left it there as he scurried away humped over. A second man went after him.

Ernst backed away from them. He glanced behind quickly. The little old man was helping the faltering little old lady through the tear in the fence. They seemed to be moving in slow motion. Ernst backed up against them, watching Hasse. Somewhere a siren lowed.

Then, miraculously, the opening in the fence was clear. But the

little old lady stumbled and fell on the far pavement. The old man tried to get her to her feet again. Hasse and his squad surged forward. Ernst swung the burp gun horizontally, freezing them.

"Don't," he said. "So help me God I'll shoot."

Feeling behind with his foot, he stepped half over the cut wire.

"Hurry!" he snapped back at the little old man, knowing that they weren't safe until they were well away from the fence.

"Koster," Hasse said insistently. "Don't cross over. You're dead if you do. The Party has agents over there by the hundreds. You fool! don't you understand they'll liquidate you? Even if you get out of the city they'll track you down; even if it takes years. You'll never be free."

But it no longer mattered to Ernst. Gottfried had been wrong: you couldn't ram your brand of freedom down a man's throat—every man had to seek his own, in his own way. He lifted his other foot over the wire and set it down. He was standing on the west side.

He backed away from the fence, not stopping until he was ten yards into the boulevard. Then he let out his breath and looked around. The street seemed strangely deserted. The civilians who had escaped were already long gone to their friends and families; the poet and the beat girl too; even the young widow. Only the old couple were in sight. The old woman was sitting on a doorstep getting back her breath, the old man hovering over her.

Ernst suddenly felt very alone, deserted, a foreigner in a friendless country. *I didn't do it for praise or for thanks*, he told himself. *They have their own lives to pick up. They don't owe me anything.* Still—

"Where are your friends now, Koster?" Hasse called from the fence. "Precious little thanks you'll get for what you've done to yourself. Now stop acting like a madman. Come back here and take your punishment. It's better than death."

"No," Ernst said. "It isn't."

He started walking to meet three west side policemen who were running down the street toward him. When he looked back he was puzzled by the expression in Hasse's straight face. There was no anger in it, only an enigmatic wistful quality. Ernst wondered if Hasse was feeling sorry for him, or if he was feeling sorry for himself.

The policemen in the West barracks treated him very well. They made much of him, pushing cigarettes and coffee and even a glass of schnapps on him. They showered him with questions: they wanted to know Why? And though he explained to them, as best he was able, about the poet and the beat girl, the young widow and the old couple, he didn't think they quite believed him. He got the impression they thought he had done it for

personal reasons, personal gain. So—even in their jovial midst—he still felt alone and lonely.

Then a burly sergeant entered the room and said, "Koster. There's a young woman and a child want to see you down in the yard."

The policemen laughed. One of them said, "Aha, she has a child, eh?" And he winked at Ernst. "Thought you said there was nothing personal?"

Ernst smiled and stood up. He had nothing more to say. He followed the sergeant downstairs.

For just a moment as he entered the sun-shot yard, seeing the smiling young widow and the little girl standing with the bold new city rising at their back, Ernst had the extraordinary feeling that he had been on a long hard journey and was at last coming home, and that now someone was waiting for him, for today and tomorrow and perhaps a long time after that.

DO-GOODER

He couldn't stand wife-beaters . . . it was too bad.

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY ROY CARROLL

HER name was Cherry Szykora. Regularly, every week, her husband would beat her black and blue. Across the street, Harry, the bartender, would slide a beer over the bar to a customer. They'd listen for a moment and chuckle. "Well," Harry'd say, "Cherry's gettin' it again."

The call came in at eleven sixteen P.M.

"*Car six. Check on disturbance at two-ten Prescott. Man beating his wife. . . .*"

Jake threw his cigarette out the window. "Hell," he said. Then he thought for a second. "Prescott. That's down in Hunkytown, isn't it?"

Tom Rivas nodded. "Yeah," he said.

Jake, who was driving that night, jammed the prowl car into gear and headed toward the part of town

where drab frame houses and dirty alleys huddled like a parasitic growth around the iron smelters. Hunkytown.

"Those people." Jake grunted. "Always kicking their wives around." He chuckled then. "Oh, well, maybe if my wife ran around like some of them babes do . . ."

Tom Rivas' face was pale in the glow of the dash. He was quietly grinding his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "Don't joke about it. It's nothing to joke about."

Jake Smith shot him a quick, puzzled glance.

Tom shrugged and lit a cigarette jerkily. "I just don't like wife beaters, that's all," he muttered.

"Okay," Jake shrugged. "So you don't like wife beaters. Personally I don't give a damn." He concentrated on driving.

Tom Rivas watched the streets unfold before their headlights. He didn't bother to explain his words. It was a matter of pride. You didn't go telling everybody how you watched your old lady get her brains beaten out one night by a crazy-drunk father. But Tom could remember plain enough, though he'd been only seven at the time. He could remember her whimpering cry and the huge brute of a man, his father, slamming his fist into her face over and over. And then the piece of stove wood coming down on her head, popping it open like an overripe canteloupe.

Yeah, he could remember.

They got down to the narrow streets and the buildings that were a constant gray from the iron works smog.

They stopped the car and walked across a wet street to a bar. It was raining a fine mist that night.

The name of the bar was *Harry's Place.* Harry, himself, was at the beer tap, carefully filling a glass with keg beer. He had a little plastic paddle in his right hand, skimming off the excess foam. He was an artist at this job.

Jake walked up to the bar. "You got some apartments in this building?"

Harry looked up at the two policemen. The other men in the dim place looked up too. Their faces all had the same look, a sullen animosity which was half fear. The people down here in Hunkytown had little use for the law, which was seldom on their side whether they were right or not.

Slowly, Harry laid the paddle down. He caught up a corner of the soiled apron that was tied around his fat middle and wiped his hands. "Nah," he said. "We ain't got no apartments here. Why?"

"This two-ten Prescott? We got a call to check a disturbance here. Something about a man beating his wife."

Harry's jagged teeth stumps revealed themselves in a leer. "Oh, sure." Down the bar, there was a man with his cap pulled down over

his eyes, a mug of beer in his hand. He laughed shortly.

"Well?" Jake asked, his temper beginning to shorten. Tom Rivas stood right behind him.

"Yeah," the saloon keeper said, "I guess there was a disturbance here, you might say. They went home, though. He took her home."

"The guy that was beating his wife?"

"Yeah. He come here and got her. She was screeching around like she didn't want to go, so he slapped her up a little and took her home. It's just across the street." He took a dirty, broken thumb nail out of the beer suds and jabbed it at a frame house across the way.

The man in the cap chuckled again. "Ain't nothin' to get excited about, copper. Just Mack Szykora havin' a row with his missus. Happens all the time. Every week he knocks her around a little. Don't mean no harm."

Tom Rivas' fist bunched and he got a little white around the mouth, feeling the urge to knock the man in the cap down for his callousness.

The bartender said, "Don't know who called you, copper. It wasn't nothin'."

Jake stood there a minute longer, then he went outside. "Let's go," he muttered.

But Tom Rivas remained on the sidewalk. He gazed across the street at the cheap frame house with the shades drawn. While he stood there, he heard a faint cry.

"Hey," Jake called after him, "where you goin'?"

Tom didn't answer. He went right up to the house, walking through the weeds and rubble in the front yard. He could hear it quite plainly now. A man's deep, rumbled curses. The smack of a hand against bare flesh. Then her gasp. "No, Mack. Please . . . for God's sake. Don't—"

Tom leaped up on the porch and went for the door. His lips were drawn back and a hot, red haze came down over his eyes.

The door was not locked. The knob spun in his hand. He jerked it open and charged into the place, stumbling over furniture in the dark hallway. Over to the left, a slit of light was showing under the bedroom door. Tom headed that way and wrenched the door open.

The man and the woman in the room froze with surprise when he burst in. For a split second the scene was transfixed. Nobody moved. The young policeman glanced at the girl who was huddled against a wall.

She was a pretty, young thing, not over twenty. Almost all her clothes had been ripped off. Her thick black hair had piled loosely around her naked shoulders and her puffed, tear-stained face. Her long, slim legs were coated with sheer nylon. She had lost one shoe. Her flesh was very white and smooth except where big Mack Szykora's fingers had left ugly, purple bruises.

Like most of the girls in Hunky-

town she was a bit on the pale, thin side. But her huge black eyes and dark hair contrasted beautifully with her white skin.

Tom couldn't get his eyes off her. He was a bachelor and not exactly dumb about women, but this one had an indefinable something that hit him like a strong electrical charge on a wet day. It was the first time he'd ever wanted a woman at first sight.

Her husband was a giant. Like all the iron workers in Hunkytown, he was well over six feet tall and carried at least two hundred and thirty pounds of solid beef. Heat from molten metal and blast furnaces had tinged his battered features a permanent dull brick red. Now he stood in the center of the room, blinking dazedly at Rivas.

The girl recovered first. She moved away from the wall to the bed where she snatched up a sheet to cover her nakedness. Her husband's brain moved slower. "Whata hell're you doin' here, copper?" he grunted, shaking his head.

With an effort, Rivas stopped looking at the girl. "Come on," he said. "You're going with me."

The ceiling light, a naked fifty-watt bulb on the end of a drop cord, hung directly over the big man's head, shining on a bald spot and casting the jagged lines of his face in harsh shadows.

His big paws began flexing. A low rumble, like a freight going down a grade, issued from his throat. "Why, you rotten copper," he whispered. Then he came at Rivas with his giant arms outstretched, a gorilla reaching to crush every bone in the policeman's chest with one hug.

The raw hate washed up into Rivas' mouth with a sour, rotten taste out of his stomach. He was glad Szykora wanted to argue about it. He took a blackjack out of his pocket and waited until the husky iron worker's arms came around him and the man's coarse face was pushed up to his with a gush of sour beer stench. Then, Rivas brought the blackjack down across Szykora's face. He could have simplified all this by drawing his pistol and frightening Szykora into submission. But he preferred to do it this way. He preferred to swing the blackjack again and again, whipping the big ape down to his knees, whipping his face into a bloody froth, while everything dissolved into a red haze. The frightened girl merged with his memory of his old lady the night she was killed and he took out on Szykora the hatred that had lived with him for twenty years.

Rivas was making animal sounds in his throat as his arm came down again and again and the sweat soaked through his uniform and stood out in big, sticky drops on his face. He would probably have beaten Szykora to death on the spot if Jake Smith hadn't come in and dragged him off the man.

The next day they brought Szykora into court. There wasn't

much they could do to him. The girl was there, but when she was brought before the court, she refused to testify against her husband. Nobody in Szykora's neighborhood would file a complaint. They were all afraid of the big man. Finally, Szykora was given a couple of days for drunken behavior and resisting arrest.

After the brief trial, Tom Rivas saw the girl out in the corridor. She was standing in a corner, lighting a cigarette. There was a long purple bruise on one cheek bone, poorly disguised with heavy pancake make up. She was wearing a sheer blouse, gray skirt, high heel pumps. A cheap patent leather purse was hugged under her left arm. Her clothes across her bosom, hips and thighs were tight, and Tom thought about how she had looked last night and a warm flush came up his throat.

He walked over to her. "You should have told the truth in there," he said gently. "You didn't have to be afraid of him. We would have put him away where he wouldn't hurt you any more."

She glanced quickly up. Her eyes were numb and a little frightened. She looked at him the way any of them from Hunkytown would look at a policeman, with a mingling of fear and hatred. *Damn it*, Tom thought, *even when you were trying to help them, they were afraid of you.*

He took a card out of his pocket with his home telephone number on it. "If he tries to hurt you again, call the station, or call me. I'll come down even if I'm not on duty."

She gazed at the card for a long moment with wide eyes, as if not entirely comprehending. Then, as if she had been ordered to do so, she took the card and put it in her purse. She started to turn and leave, but he caught her arm.

"What's your name?" he asked, with an undercurrent of desperation in his voice.

She stood there with her eyes lowered. Finally, she whispered, "Cherry." Then she walked away.

After Szykora was released, Tom had Jake Smith drive through that neighborhood several times a night so he could check on the house.

"I don't know," Smith swore. "She's nothing but a little twist. Not particularly pretty. I don't see why you're knocking yourself out over her. So her old man beats her up sometimes—so what? It happens to dozens of them every night. They like it."

"I just don't like a man that'll do that to a woman," Rivas said, rubbing his right fist into his left palm. "If he does it again, I'll kill him."

Smith shot him a disturbed glance. They'd been working together for several months. Smith had taken him under a wing because he was a rookie and he felt responsible for him. "Look, kid," he advised, "that blue suit you got on don't make you God. It don't even give you permission to bust into

another man's house without a warrant. You're liable to get in trouble, doing what you did to Szykora the other night. Take it easy, will you?"

Tom Rivas started going down to her neighborhood when he was off duty. He'd sit in the saloon by the hour, hoping to get a look at her. Sometimes he'd see her walking by, then he'd go out and make her stop and talk with him. She was always afraid, when he did this. She'd keep looking around, like a nervous animal. But he'd make her talk to him, anyway. He was going crazy, wanting her and worrying about her.

Szykora was still beating her up. She denied this, but she couldn't cover up all the bruises and marks. Once, she went in a bar with Tom for a beer. There were sitting in a booth together in the back of the room and she was swearing that Mack Szykora wasn't hitting her any more. With a swift movement, Tom caught her wrists in one hand and with his other, flicked the hem of her dress back up to her waist. Her thighs were firm and white above her stocking tops—except for the long red stripes where a belt had cut into the tender flesh.

She put her hands over her face and cried softly.

"Listen, Cherry," Tom begged, "leave him before he really hurts you. Before he kills you some night."

She took her hands away from her face and got out of the booth. "Leave me alone," she whispered miserably. "Just leave me alone!"

How could you help a girl whose eyes were dead, the way hers were? A girl so afraid of a man, she was letting him slowly kill her?

One night Tom was on Prescott Street, off duty, in plain clothes. He stood in the thick shadows and listened to them row. It was worse tonight. They'd been keeping quiet since that night Rivas had arrested Szykora. But tonight the big iron worker was too drunk to be cautious. The sound of him cursing and slamming around inside the house could be heard across the street. In the saloon, Harry served a foaming glass of keg beer to a customer and they exchanged knowing smiles.

Sweat covered Tom Rivas' face. He couldn't stand any more of it. He threw a half-smoked cigarette into a gutter and started toward the house. Just then the front door burst open and Mack Szykora came reeling out in his shirt sleeves. The big man stumbled across the yard, headed to the saloon for more beer.

Tom met him in the shadows. "You dirty bastard," Rivas cursed. "I told you to leave that woman alone."

Szykora reeled and blinked, picking out Tom Rivas' features in the darkness. "Well, I'll be damned," he said thickly, "it's th' copper. And without his monkey suit." A giant paw caught the front of Tom's coat. "You listen, you damn copper.

You keep away from here. You leave my wife alone. I know you been sniffin' around her. I heard talk." Szykora was whipping himself into a murderous rage. "She's my wife. What I do to her's my business—you hear me, copper?"

Rivas slapped the big man's hand away from his coat, and hit Szykora with all his force. It was like throwing your fist at the side of a stove. Szykora shook his head and swept Rivas up like a rag doll, hurling him against the dark wall of a warehouse. Then Mack Szykora picked up a rock the size of a large cabbage and came at the half stunned policeman, raising it to smash Rivas' head.

Numbly, Tom drew his service revolver and, lying there propped on one elbow, shot Mack Szykora in the face. Doing it gave him a great deal of pleasure.

Tom Rivas got in no trouble over the killing. Some men had come out of the saloon and they testified that it was justifiable homicide.

After the funeral and after the grand jury acquitted him, he went down to Hunkytown to see the girl. "It's going to be all right now, Cherry," he said, taking her gently into his arms. "I'm going to treat you right. You don't know what it's like for a man to treat you right."

"Thank you, Tom," she said numbly. She registered absolutely no emotion, neither grief nor joy at Mack's death. Submissively, she allowed Tom to kiss her, but her lips were like clay under his.

He realized that he had never seen her display any kind of emotion; she was a strange woman.

Tom figured that her natural emotions had been stifled by the years of fear she had lived through in Mack Szykora's house. She'd married him when she was sixteen. It would take a lot of tenderness and patience on his part to make her warmly human again.

As the weeks passed, he was good to her. As good as a man could be to a woman. He brought her gifts. He took her to fine restaurants where she had never been.

But she never showed a thing, other than to say, "Thank you," very politely. She allowed him to kiss her whenever he wanted. She didn't refuse a thing—she was like a statue that he could use in any way he wished. Several times he parked and kissed her and got a little more intimate, unbuttoning her blouse or brushing his hand along her leg. She was completely submissive, allowing him anything he desired. But he did not claim her. He wanted her more than anything in the world. He wanted to marry her. But not until she could come to him as a woman should, with fire on her lips and a warm response in her beautiful body that was made for a man to love.

He was living under a great strain, now. It was telling on him. He was thin. There were great shadows under his eyes which burned with a dark, restless fire. A man could

stand only so much of what he was going through.

One night after he had been wooing Cherry for three months, he went down to Hunkytown to pick her up for their usual date. He went down to Prescott street to the house across from Harry's Place, her house now, since the death of Mack Szykora.

He went in and waited while she finished the little feminine rituals required of a woman, touching a powder puff to her nose here and there, drawing a lipstick across her mouth carefully. Tom Rivas stood at one side of her mirror, watching her lithe, graceful movements, the soft curve of a bare arm, the valley of her bosom as she leaned toward the mirror and her deeply cut blouse fell away from her breasts. She was a beautiful, desirable woman, with her Slavic inheritance of large dark eyes, high cheek bones, a wide full mouth and a skin like moonlight. Tom stared at her, achingly, and with a sudden cry, he grabbed her arm and brought her up, crushing her wide red mouth under his, like a starving man.

"Cherry," he cried against her lips.

Lips that were like clay, body like a statue.

She stood there letting him kiss her, letting him do whatever he liked. She was like a sleepwalker.

He shook her roughly, digging his fingers into her soft white shoulders. His face was slick with perspiration. "What's the matter with you?" he gasped hoarsely. "What kind of woman are you? Don't you ever feel anything?" He was shaking all over, sick with frustration.

Her eyes filled. "I'm sorry," she said. He had been good to her and she was sorry that she could not give him what he desired.

"Don't you like me, at all?"

"Of course I like you," she answered quietly. "I like you, Tom."

"Then what's wrong with you? Why can't you wake it up? Why do you treat me like this? A man can't make love to an ice statue."

All she could say, numbly, was, "I'm sorry, Tom. I—I can't help the way I am. I'm sorry."

Rivas dug shaking fingers into his hair. It was like ramming your head against an invisible barrier. What could he do? He became filled with rage at something he couldn't see, couldn't fight with his own hands. He began cursing her. "You filthy little tramp. There's somebody else —isn't that it? You're sleeping with somebody else."

"No, Tom," she answered simply.

"Yes there is," he screamed, and hit her across the mouth. "I've done everything for you—killed for you, and you go out and lay with some bum." He struck her again, leaving red splotches across her cheek.

She took a step away from him, her head going back. Her lips parted, teeth gleamed. Something stirred in her dark eyes, something he had never seen before.

The months of frustration, desire and bafflement exploded in an uncontrollable fit of jealous rage. Listening to his own words, he had convinced himself that she was frigid with him because she was sleeping with another man. He hit her again and again, with blind, unreasoning anger.

She flew against a wall. Her black hair tumbled over her eyes. There, she cowered, whimpering, staring at him, fascinated. Her dark eyes were filled with a wild excitement he had never seen before. Suddenly, she reached up with both hands, grabbing the collar of her blouse. With a single, impatient gesture, she ripped it open, baring herself to her waist. Then she threw herself at him, mouthing unintelligible sounds. Her parted lips found his, hungrily. Her fingers, like claws, dug into his back while her body writhed and bumped against him in a paroxysm of uncontrollable passion.

But Tom Rivas could no longer stop. He tore the rest of her clothes off and then his fists struck her body again and again, tattooing the soft white flesh with ugly purple bruises. His eyes glazed and his breath rattled in a hoarse gasp.

He kept hitting her, harder and harder.

And across the street, Harry, the bartender, drew a glass of beer off tap, shoved it over the bar to a customer. They both listened to the sound of blows and a woman's sharp cry from the frame house. Harry put a finger against one nostril and blew.

He grinned at the customer. "Well, Cherry's happy. She's gettin' it again."

"Yeah," the man said. "She's gettin' it again."

The Loyal

Martha had killed for me. The least I could do was lie to save her.

BY LAWRENCE E. ORIN

It was on a Saturday afternoon in late summer when I learned that June Bowman, our neighbor, had been murdered.

Because it wasn't a normal business day, I'd left my office early. None of my employees work on the week-ends, but I'd made it a practice to go in on Saturdays to catch up on all the little odds and ends I didn't find time for during the busy week.

Turning off the teeming freeway and winding up the quiet, tree-lined streets of our neighborhood, I'd seen no indication anything out of the ordinary had taken place. Dobson Hills Estates, with its semi-fashionable homes set well back beyond lush, verdant lawns, appeared as peaceful as usual.

In the middle of the block I swung sharply into the steep, narrow service road that borders the rear of our property. In many places I'd called home before I'd married Martha, we would have called this an alley, but here in Dobson Hills they were referred to as service roads. I maneuvered my little, drab Volkswagen into the garage, and left it, dwarfed and humbled by Martha's stately, gleaming Mercedes alongside.

The flagstone-paved walk leading to the house parallels an embryonic, California privet hedge. Someday the bushes will heighten and merge to make an effective barrier, separating Martha's rose garden from the adjoining Bowman yard. Now, however, anyone

could step over, or between, them with ease.

As I knew they would be on such a balmy day, the French doors to the patio were standing ajar. I came through the den and down the long hall to the living room.

Martha was in her favorite chair, a platform-rocker pulled up close to the big picture-window which dominated one wall of the cheerful room. Through the sheer, filmy curtains she could see out over the Bowman's neatly-manicured front lawn. Beyond, the shady street curved toward the city far below. I hadn't intended to be especially quiet, but I must have startled her. She jumped when I placed my hand on her shoulder.

"Oh! Hello, Mark," she said. "I didn't hear you come in. You're home early."

I kissed the smooth, velvety cheek she held up for me. As always, I was aware of the light, disturbing fragrance she wore.

"Yes, I know," I said. "It's just past three."

Martha returned her gaze to the uninteresting view outside, gazing pensively at the empty landscape.

"How about you?" I asked. "Did you have a good day?"

"I wouldn't say it was good, but it wasn't boring." She hesitated a moment, then, without turning to look at me, she went on. "June Bowman was murdered this morning, right over there in her own living room."

Just like that! No emotion, no hysteria, only a flat statement. She might have been more excited if she were telling me she crumpled a fender, or that a gopher had destroyed one of her precious rose bushes.

My legs went rubbery, and I plopped down on the sofa. My mouth must have fallen open for I was speechless for a moment.

"June dead! How did it happen? Who killed her?" I finally managed to stammer.

Martha slipped from her chair and came over to join me. She is a small woman, slim and graceful, with a figure worthy of a girl a dozen years younger than her thirty-one. Nestled at the far end of the couch, her shoeless feet tucked up under her housecoat, she looked like a life-sized doll.

A silver lighter lay on the end table at her elbow. She used it to set a cigarette aflame before she answered, her strong hands sure and steady.

"I guess no one knows for sure —yet," she said. "About half-past one, two police officers came to the door. They asked me if I'd seen or heard anything over at the Bowman's this morning, anything unusual, that is. I told them I hadn't, and asked them why they wanted to know. They said Fred had come home about an hour earlier and found June dead on the living room floor."

Martha was speaking slowly. At

each measured word, a tiny whiff of smoke escaped her lips. I was fascinated by the way the miniature clouds drifted up across her face, turning her green eyes a dusty-gray, lingering in halos around her soft, dark hair.

"She'd been killed by a blow on the head, they told me. Probably by a golf club, for they'd found one on the floor beside the body. You remember, Mark? Fred always keeps his bag of clubs in the entrance hall, near the front door."

"Yes, I remember," I said, "but I still can't believe it. What time did it happen, do they know?"

"The officers said they thought she'd been dead about three hours when they arrived."

"Three hours. If Fred found her at twelve-thirty, and it would take the police fifteen or twenty minutes to get here—" I did some mental arithmetic. "That would make it close to ten this morning."

"That's right," Martha said. "That's the time the police think it must have happened. When they told me that, I decided I'd better tell them what I'd seen."

"But you said you didn't see or hear anything."

"Nothing *unusual,* but a few minutes before ten o'clock I did see Fred pull up in front of his house. Today being Saturday, I thought nothing of it. I just supposed he wasn't working. When he came out and drove away about twenty minutes later, I still didn't pay any attention. But when the police told me June had been murdered about that time—"

Martha crushed the life out of her cigarette. The lip-stick-stained filter lay smoldering among the ashes of its brothers in the overflowing tray. She looked at me with a quizzical expression on her face. "Well, under the circumstances, I felt I was obliged to tell them what I'd seen. Don't you agree?"

Before I had a chance to answer, the telephone rang. It was Mrs. Townsend from across the street, wanting to talk to Martha. I handed her the phone and whispered, "I wouldn't mention seeing Fred in the neighborhood." She nodded, and I listened to their gossipy chitchat for a moment, then went down the hall to our bedroom.

The telephone interruption had come at an opportune time. I needed to get away from Martha for a few minutes and sort out the thoughts racing through my mind.

Martha had told the police a lie! Fred Bowman couldn't possibly have been near his house at ten o'clock this morning. At nine-thirty Fred had called me from Rosedale, a good ninety miles away. He was on a pay phone, and I'd heard the operator tell him how much the toll charge would be. I'd hear the clang of the coins as he'd dropped them in the box. Driving time to or from Rosedale is at least two hours—on a busy Saturday it

would be closer to three. According to the police, Fred had arrived home and found June about twelve-thirty. That sounded reasonable.

But why would Martha make up such a story? I'd always thought she was quite fond of Fred. There were times I wondered if they weren't just a little overly fond of each other. Not that I'm a jealous man, and I'm as broad-minded as the next.

I was certain my wife loved only me. At any rate, she hadn't married me for *my* money. Hardly that, for before Martha became Mrs. Mark Donovan, seven years ago, I rarely had more than a few dollars in my pocket at any one time. Even now, almost everything we owned, the house, our mountain lodge, even my business, one time had been hers—inherited from her father.

I could understand her not feeling too upset over June's ill-fated end. There was no love lost between them, although we used to visit back and forth occasionally—bridge games, home movies, and the like. Quite often we did get invited to the same parties. It was common knowledge that most of the women in our little social circle distrusted Fred's wife, and for a better reason than they, themselves, realized. If they'd known the whole truth, June might have died at an even earlier age.

June Bowman was, or rather had been, a nymphomaniacal mantrap. It didn't seem possible Fred hadn't been aware of his wife's extra-marital activities, of her affairs with many of his friends. Why was the husband always the last to know?

I'd been as susceptible to June's readily available charms as any of the others, and had slipped just as far. From the beginning, I knew I was taking a foolish chance in seeing her. If Martha found out about our escapades she'd divorce me, and I didn't want to lose my wife, and I couldn't afford to lose her money. Only recently, I'd decided the game wasn't worth the risk, but June hadn't wanted to quit.

Then I remembered the letter! June had written me a note, threatening to tell Martha all the sordid details of our little affair if I persisted in breaking off our relationship. Like a fool, I'd hidden the letter instead of destroying it.

Hastily, I jerked open a chiffonier drawer and rumpled through its contents with hands suddenly turned clammy. A cold sweat beaded my forehead as I realized the envelope was gone. Only one person would have occasion to go through my things—Martha!

As surely as I was standing there, the missing letter had something to do with June's murder. Suddenly, everything fell into place. Fred couldn't have done it, as Martha seemed so anxious to have the police believe. That left

only my wife. *She* had found the note and had gone to face June with it. There'd been a scuffle, and *she* had been the one to pick up the golf club. I could see what occurred as plain as day—Martha had killed her rival for the man she loved!

Now she was frightened and was trying to throw suspicion on Fred. It was a clever move, for an investigation would certainly uncover clues pointing to Ruth's infidelities. This would undoubtedly lead to an assumption that Fred was jealous—provoked enough to kill his wife.

Martha had done this for me; the least I could do was lie to protect her. I'd have to forget that telephone call from Fred this morning. It was a scurvy trick to play on him, but I couldn't afford to lose my wife.

I straightened the shorts and undershirts back into a tidy pile and closed the drawer. I'd stopped perspiring now, and went into the bathroom to get under a cold shower.

Tingling from the icy water, I was hurrying into my clothes when I heard the door chimes. A few minutes later Martha called to me.

"Mark, can you come here? There's someone to see you."

"Okay, just a couple of minutes."

I finished tucking my shirt into my belt and went down to the living room. Martha was there, and so was Fred. He was sitting on the sofa, his face pale and drawn, sucking on a cigarette with quick, shallow puffs. I walked over and touched his arm.

"I'm sorry, old man," I said. He looked up, but didn't answer.

Two other men also sat on the sofa, one on either side of Fred. Martha introduced the two strangers.

"Mark," she said, "these gentlemen are police detectives, Lieutenant Delano and Sergeant Anderson."

The two officers got to their feet and I shook hands with each of them, then we all sat down. Delano, the older man, with a tanned face beneath a shock of prematurely-gray hair, started the conversation.

"Mr. Donovan, I'm sure your wife's told you about what happened next door this morning. We're trying to get all the facts we can, as soon as we can. While they're fresh in everybody's mind, if you know what I mean."

"Yes sir," I said. "That sounds like a good idea."

"Right. Now, one thing we must know is everybody's whereabouts at the time we think the crime was committed."

"Yes sir," I said again. "I can understand that." This was the kind of questioning I'd expected, but not quite so soon.

The detective's tone became more business-like. "Where were you this morning, Mr. Donovan?"

"I was in my office. I got there about eight, and I didn't leave until the middle of the afternoon."

"Was anyone there with you?"

"No, I was alone. None of my people come in on Saturdays."

"Did you receive any telephone calls?"

Here it was, the question I was prepared for. "No sir," I replied. "I didn't get a phone call all day."

Delano glanced at Fred, then back at me. "Mr. Bowman says he called you from Rosedale at nine-thirty this morning. He says he talked to you for five minutes, or so."

I glanced over at Fred, but he didn't look at me. He was studying an invisible patch of carpet at his feet. "Fred must be mistaken," I said. "The first time I've spoken to him today is just now, when I came into the room."

"What would you say if I told you the telephone company has a record of that long distance call, made to your office number?" Delano's voice was getting rough. He was beginning to sound like a policeman.

"I'd have to say the company's records are in error." I wasn't worried. Martha was still in the clear. She was an eye-witness that Fred was at home at ten o'clock. Such testimony was bound to carry more weight than a mechanical record made by the telephone company.

Lieutenant Delano settled back and seemed to relax a little. He fished a crumpled cigarette package from his pocket, and Martha handed him the silver lighter. He took a couple of deep drags before he continued.

"Mr. Donovan, how long does it take to drive from here to your office?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps twenty minutes. Why?"

"Well then, *you* could have left your office shortly after nine-thirty, right after you were sure Mr. Bowman wasn't home, and have arrived at the house next door around ten."

"Wait just a damn minute!" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet.

Delano was also standing, his cold, blue eyes only a few inches from my face. Martha and Fred sat quietly gazing up at me. Sergeant Anderson edged around behind Delano, a piece of white paper in his hand.

"No! You wait," Delano shouted. "And while you're waiting, see if you can explain this, and how it got on the floor beside Mrs. Bowman's body." He whirled and grabbed the paper from Anderson's hand.

At a glance, I saw he was waving June's note under my nose. Poor, frightened Martha! She'd dropped the evidence at the worst possible place!

"Okay! Okay!" I cried. "So you know about June and me. But I didn't kill her. Fred did." I point-

ed a shaking finger at him. "My wife saw him at his house at ten o'clock this morning. She's already told you that."

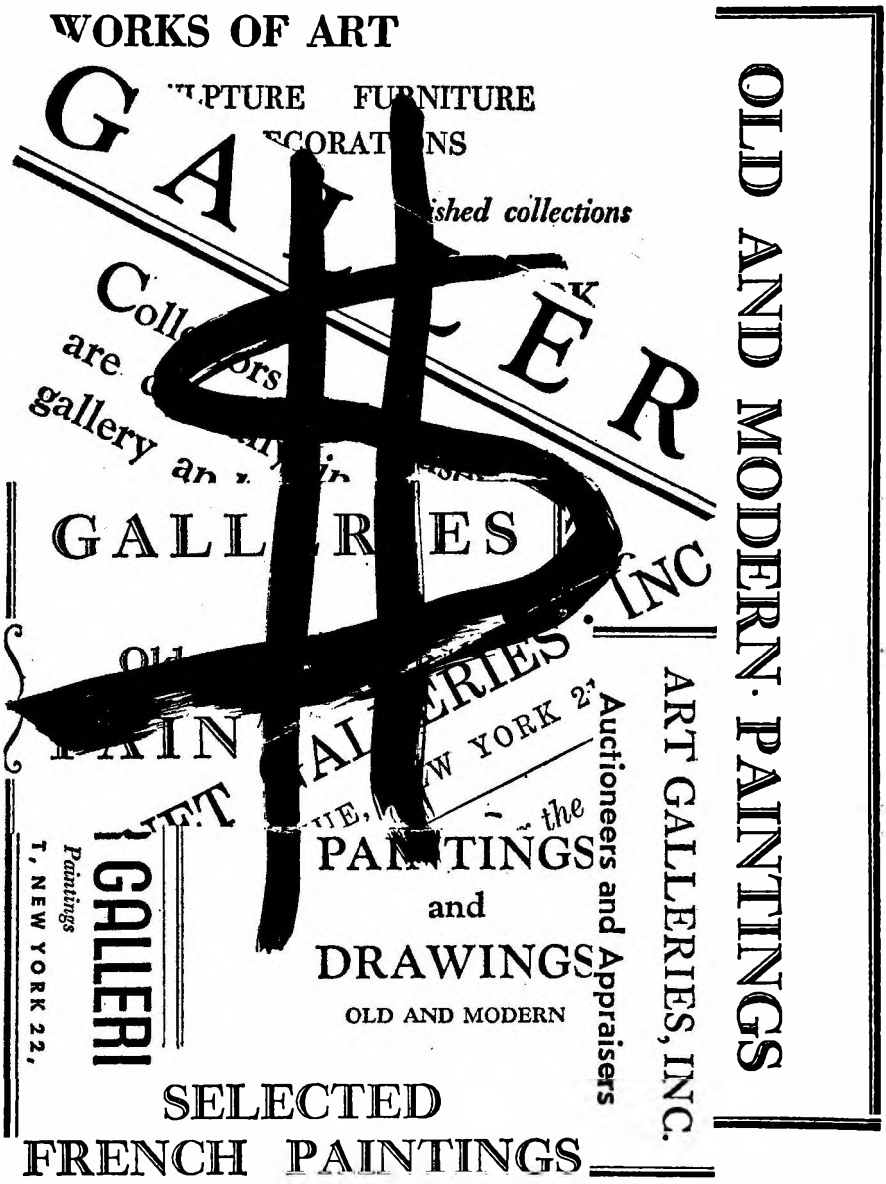
A look of surprise spread over Delano's dark face, and he turned to Martha. "What's this, Mrs. Donovan? In your statement you said you saw no one about the house at all."

Martha was staring directly into my face, and I could see the hate smoldering in her gray-green eyes. As she swung her head toward the detective I saw them grow big with innocence and astonishment.

"I'm sure I don't know what Mark's saying," she declared. Just as I told the two officers who first came to the door, I didn't see a soul over there all morning, not until I heard the commotion and looked out the window to see the police cars and ambulance arrive."

The squad car's siren shattered the quiet of Dobson Hills Estates as it speeded down toward headquarters. As we rounded the curve, I glanced back to see Martha and Fred, standing side by side, watching them take me away.

I'd been correct on one score; Martha *would* kill for the man she loved. It was too bad that man happened to be the one who lived next door.



The Cade Collection was one of the largest and finest private collections of art in the world. To the surviving Cades . . . it was a dangerous collection of white elephants.

OLIVER SHORT—seated in a fat gray and silver chair, looking pink and plump, his thinned-out yellow-gray hair combed straight back and clipped close at the ears and neck—looked aside with a smile as a marble-based, brass-trimmed clock chimed eight times in a muffled alto G.

"If that's right—" he checked a stainless-steel military type chronometer, a fine Omega, strapped to his thick wrist—"and it is—our killer will be late. If he shows up at all."

"He'll do something. I'm sure of it." The words came from a tall, slender woman fashionably sheathed in a plain cut black gown that doubtless cost double Short's monthly salary from the Cosmopolitan Detective Agency. The woman, perhaps thirty years old, reflected every element of beauty that much wealth, background, and leisure for living could produce. Her hair was warm chestnut, long, straight, loosely waved at the ends; her eyes a deep golden topaz; and her skin was delicate white, smooth, and perfect. One of her lovely hands, quite narrow and sensitive-looking, rested on the dark wood of the grand piano beside which she stood; the other hand hung relaxed at her side.

"You've read the letter," she added calmly. "Whatever else George may be, he's an emotional and desperate man. The—ah—artistic type. Uncontrolled. Infantile. I'm sure he'll do something. Something least expected."

Oliver Short studied the woman thoughtfully, frowned, nodded, and stood up. His eyes scanned the large drawing-room, noted the windows, the drapes, the great fireplace, and every possible corner where a human being could hide. After that he went to the large carved doors, slid them apart, and stepped into a thick-

AN "OLIVER SHORT" NOVELETTE

BY NELSON ADCOCK

COLLECTION

carpeted hallway. On an ebony pedestal a marble Aphrodite, larger than life, gazed unblinkingly down on him. And beyond her, near a twelve-foot high window, an even larger statue, a figure of Neptune, bearded and holding his trident, stared sightlessly at Short. Aside from Short himself, there was nothing living in the museum-like hall. Short slipped a hand inside the lapel of his jacket and loosened his snub-nosed Colt in its shoulder-sack. He went back into the drawing-room and closed the doors.

The woman was still in the same position by the piano. She exuded stoic immobility, a quality that Short felt was rare in women and one he usually admired, but now it annoyed him no end. He couldn't explain to himself why. He looked at her again, still said nothing, and walked to an inlaid walnut occasional table. Picking up a paper, he unfolded it and read for the third time that evening:

Myra—Unless you come to terms with me, I will most certainly kill you. I hold my own life as nothing. You have till 8 p.m. this Friday and not a minute longer. I implore you to be sensible. G.

The note was typed on ordinary good-quality bond paper.

Short looked up and asked, "You said it came by mail?"

"I think not. I said it was found amongst the post."

"Then somebody put it there—stuck it in the letter-slot?"

"Obviously."

Short sighed to himself. Bothering with fingerprints would be useless. But he had recognized the type-style. "It was done on a German machine," he said. "An Olympia."

The woman inclined her head once. "Yes, it's likely. We gave George an Olympia portable on his last birthday."

And he's so stupid, so incredibly stupid, Short thought, that he types you a murder threat on it. Great. Smiling, Short asked, "Mrs. Cade, what are the 'terms' he wants? What's he talking about?"

"I can't go into that. We've discussed this before. In order to avoid the whole subject I'm paying your company a rather high fee instead of using the services of the police."

"All right. But tell me this: if you were to decide to meet the terms—just assuming—how would you do it? The letter implies you know an address or something. How would you get to George?"

Mrs. Cade shook her head. "No, I've no idea where George is. The matter he refers to is such that a material contact isn't necessary. I won't say more. I'm sorry."

Short made no attempt to keep a bitter edge off his next words. "But 'G' does stand for George, and George is George Cade, your dead husband's brother? At least we're sure of that? Really sure?"

"Yes. Quite. Please don't be angry, Mr. Short. The manager of

your firm assured me that the matter could be handled as I presented it. With absolute discretion."

Short withheld a grunt. The manager in question would be Chief Zorn. Old leather-faced, emaciated Harry Zorn, ex-Police Chief, wartime OSS Director, and one of the greatest man-hunters who ever lived. Grinning skull-like from behind his desk, he'd promise to put a tail on God Almighty if somebody demanded it and handed him a blank check. Of course it was better than twenty years since Zorn had been an operative and had to *do* any of the things he so blandly promised. But that was Chief Harry Zorn, Philadelphia Branch of the Cosmopolitan Agency. Short withheld another grunt and wiped the image of Zorn from his mind's eye. He said:

"Discretion's one thing. But to be of any use I need *some* information. For instance, this letter came Monday and you waited till today, Friday, to get help. Why?"

"All that I require is exactly what you're doing," Mrs. Cade answered. "Protecting me. You're here; I presume you have a gun and know how to use it well; you're sensitive and alert to danger, and have an instinct for the unusual. Mr. Zorn said you were a former OSS agent; I'm certain that my brother-in-law, George Cade, cannot possibly outwit you. You're protecting me and I'm satisfied."

Short shrugged. "I was an aerial-gunner and a cop too. And just because of these things I know this is all wrong—waiting to be hit's not the way to handle it. Tell me what I want to know and I'll go out and take this guy off your back, one way or another. You should trust me."

Mrs. Cade smiled and made a little *moue*, as if to indicate Short's blunt speech was inappropriate. But before she could actually reply, the phone rang—a small, rose-pastel instrument located on a table containing flowers, magazines, and miniature objects d'art. The table was about two feet from a casement window.

"Wait!" Short ordered. He snapped off the large central chandelier at the wall switch and quickly went round putting out three smaller lamps that were lit. Within a second he had the room in complete darkness. Then, going to the window by the telephone, he drew aside the drapes and looked out. He saw only trees and the highway beyond; the trees, scrubby pines and sumacs at the far border of the Cade property, were not large or well-foliaged enough to hide a sniper. He closed the drapes and with the aid of a flat pocket flashlight looked critically at the phone which was beginning its fifth peal. Picking it up, careful to keep the receiver tight in its cradle, he examined the screwed-on bottom-plate. It suited him. He held the instrument to his ear and shook it hard. Then he

looked at the cord where it entered the base. Finally he put it down and removed the receiver.

"Hello?" he said, snapping off his flashlight.

A man's voice asked for Mrs. Cade. Mrs. Stephen Cade. She was waiting in the darkness at Short's side and he passed the instrument to her. She spoke in a controlled, pleasant voice. "Yes? . . . this is she . . . yes . . . yes . . . where? . . . on Walnut Street? . . . yes . . . certainly, I'll be right there . . . of course, within the hour . . . yes, I understand . . . thank you. Goodbye." Mrs. Cade put down the phone and said to Short, "My brother-in-law was killed in a hotel on Walnut Street. That was the police. They want to talk to me. I must go there immediately."

"George Cade was killed?" Short walked over and put on the central lights. He kept his voice level. "The George who wrote the note?"

"Yes, of course. He's the only brother-in-law I have. Mr. Short, I believe you ask these redundant questions hoping I'll contradict myself. Please stop. Do you intend to come downtown with me?"

"Sure. But let's take it easy. How was George killed?"

"An explosion in his room, the policeman said."

"Did the policeman give his name?"

"Yes. Gormand or Gorman. A sergeant, I think. I'll have to change from this gown."

Short nodded. "That'd be Ed Gorman."

"You know him?"

"For some thirty years. What hotel?"

"I beg pardon?" Mrs. Cade looked blank.

"What hotel was your brother-in-law killed in? It's not a redundant question. You only said 'a hotel on Walnut Street—remember?"

"I'm sorry. It's the Somerset."

Short nodded again and scooped up the phone. He dialed information for the Somerset Hotel number, got it, dialed again, and asked for Sergeant Gorman. "Hello? . . . Ed Gorman? . . . Oliver Short . . . yeah, fine Ed, and you? . . . good . . . yeah, sure thing . . . yeah. That's why I'm calling. Look, Ed, did you just call Ivy Hill 7700? . . . yeah, that's right, Mrs. Stephen Cade's . . . yeah, I'm here . . . yes, I'll tell you when we get there . . . yes, I'll come with her. She said an explosion . . . a bomb? . . . yes, I'll tell you then . . . right . . . so long, Ed."

"I'll get dressed," Mrs. Cade said as soon as Short put down the phone.

"Fine. I'll go with you."

"What! While I dress?" Incredulity caused Mrs. Cade's eyebrows to arch to high points. "You can't be serious?"

"I am. There must be a screen or something I can sit behind. I don't want any walls or doors between us till this affair's settled. It's for your benefit."

Mrs. Cade's classically beautiful face looked a trifle amused. "Well, there's a dressing-room adjoining my boudoir. If you're serious and think it's necessary, you may sit near I suppose. But tell me," she frowned, "why should I be in danger now? Since George is dead, I mean?"

"All this could be some kind of razzle-dazzle to throw us off guard. We'll play it cool."

"Cool? Oh, you mean smart—cautious?"

"Yeah. Tell me something, while I think of it—how did this brother-in-law of yours make his living?"

"The sergeant . . ."

"He'll wait, believe me."

"Well, at present, I've no idea. At one time he had a sales agency for foreign sports cars; at another, he taught creative-writing up at Cape Cod or someplace near there, and he's published several volumes of poetry. In fact—" she looked toward some shelves containing knick-knacks and a few books—"I believe there's something of his in there. If not, it's in the library." She went to the shelves, searched a moment, and removed a thin book with an orange, black, and violet binding. "Here you are," she handed it to Short. "He sent them occasionally to my husband."

Taking the book, Short read: *Thundermill*, by George Cade. The jacket design was abstract, a hodge-podge of green, violet, and yellow lightning streaks against a black background. He opened the thin volume at about the middle.

Remember, Ellie?
We went up narrow splintered steps
All askew. To see greenmould
On redclaybrick. Where the Money-worms
Foregather and have a Mass.
We saw the Restless Congregation
Led by the Gilded Diamond-Head Highpriest
Watched them slobber,
Victims to the Ekstases, just like us.
The priest bantered, shouted, raved
From a red plastic shell
Then, his cycle fullfilled, he died
Biting his own tail.
He'll be reborn of an egg.

Short looked up, smiling. "Is this good stuff? I don't understand it."

Mrs. Cade shrugged. "I wouldn't know. It's very modern. Symbolism or Existentialism, I think it's called. But now I must change—that sergeant is waiting for us." She moved to the door.

Oliver Short slipped *Thundermill* in his pocket and followed her.

2

"According to Schulwyck, our expert," Sergeant Gorman told Mrs. Cade and Oliver, "he was trying to put together some kind of crude bomb. There was a lot of tools and stuff—wire, batteries, metal strips, nitric acid and glycerine containers —Schulwyck's pretty sure the thing

went off on him by accident. Now—" Sergeant Gorman pulled his eyebrows together, rubbed his blue shadowed jaw with a thumb and forefinger, and looked concerned—"why'd he want to make a bomb?"

Mrs. Cade, wearing a knee-length blue silk dress, a large gray fur-piece, black hat, shoes, and gloves, replied, "I know very little about him. He was my husband's brother, but I hadn't seen him for almost a year. Nor can I tell what he was doing here. At my husband's death, I severed practically all communication with George—what little there was. An occasional phone call, perhaps a dinner, a concert—he knew music quite well."

"What's Mr. Short doing for you?" Gorman asked, smoothing the abrupt change of subject with a half-smile.

"I have a servant problem," Mrs. Cade replied cooly. "Small thefts—petty things, but they add up."

Gorman's eyes turned to Short for a moment with a curious amused look. Short's face was absolutely blank. "I see," Gorman said. "Well then, I guess you can't help us much after all, Mrs. Cade. I suppose it's the coroner's job from here in. You'll want to make some kind of arrangements? The er—body was badly mutilated and—"

"I understand," Mrs. Cade nodded. "I'll have a mortician provide whatever's necessary."

"If he'll contact the coroner—say day after tomorrow."

"Of course."

"Fine. By the way, we think he was trying to build that bomb inside a typewriter case. We found a hundred or more pieces of an Olympia portable scattered all over the room."

"Really?" Mrs. Cade frowned. "On his last birthday, at my husband's suggestion, we gave him an Olympia portable as a present."

"Why a typewriter?"

A shadow of irritation crossed Myra Cade's face. "Oh, just shortly before he sent a sad, begging letter. He complained he was so poor he hadn't even a machine on which to compose his poems. He wrote poetry. Bad poetry, in my opinion."

"Your husband was a wealthy man, is that true?" The Sergeant's tone suggested only mild curiosity.

"Yes. Most would call him that."

"And yet his brother was so poor?"

Myra Cade shrugged. "George's inheritance was equal to my husband's. But Stephen worked while George frittered his away."

"I see." Gorman took a notebook from his pocket and slid a piece of heavy paper from it. The paper was tattered at the edges and somewhat torn. "Look at this, please." He handed it to Myra Cade.

"It's some kind of label," she said, handling it gingerly in her gloved fingers. "It has my name and address typed on it."

"Yes. You'll notice it's an express label. We also found a shipping

crate—the parts of one—designed to hold an Olympia portable. That label was gummed to it. Just freshly gummed to it."

Myra Cade remained silent, looking at the label.

"Mrs. Cade," Sergeant Gorman went on, "wouldn't it be best if we knew the whole story? The department understands how you feel about the publicity, but in a case like this—well—" a tired smile crossed Gorman's rugged, square face—"is it possible George Cade intended sending you the rigged typewriter? Were you on some kind of bad terms with him?"

Myra Cade caught her lower lip between her teeth, frowned, and looked at Oliver Short. "What can I do?" she asked in a voice that had lost all stoic detachment.

"If a man intends to destroy you with a bomb," Sergeant Gorman said quickly, "and destroys himself instead, how can it be any fault of yours? Or how can you owe his memory any respect?"

Myra Cade kept looking at Short.

"Does it matter what you do?" Short asked her. "Since he's dead? Personally, I'd tell Sergeant Gorman the whole truth."

Gorman gave Short another quick amused look and turned back to Myra Cade.

"Very well," she sighed. "I lied to you. My brother-in-law threatened me. For years he hated Stephen and me although we gave him money and every kind of help. Here," she took the threatening note from her purse and handed it to Gorman, "I received this Monday morning. After a hectic and distraught four days, I employed Mr. Short to protect me. As you conjectured, George probably intended returning the typewriter, killing me and any other innocent person who might be in the vicinity. He was mad. Apparently providence interfered and turned his own scheme against him."

Sergeant Gorman read the note several times. "What are these terms he wanted from you, Mrs. Cade?"

"Excuse me, Ed," Short broke in, "but I'd like to ask how you identified George Cade in the first place. Is it all based on that mailing label?"

Real annoyance flashed over Gorman's face. He was taller by a head than Oliver Short and he glowered down. "Don't be silly. For one thing, he's registered as George Cade in the hotel—"

"He *registered* as George Cade?" Short stared at Gorman.

"Yes. He came in Sunday night. Besides we found a lot of identification papers in the room."

"Were you able to take prints?"

"No. His hands—you want the messy details in front of Mrs. Cade?"

"But you found prints in the room?" Short's voice was soft and unperturbed. "You're checking them out?"

"Yes, we found some. And they are checked out."

"George Cade had a record?"

"Yes. Aggravated assault."

Myra Cade looked surprised. "My brother-in-law was a known criminal?"

Sergeant Gorman shook his head. "Not exactly. Somebody named Gramsky swore out a warrant against him six years ago. Anybody can swear out a warrant against anybody, get them a night in jail, and they'll have a record. Gramsky was some kind of paranoid—psycho—your brother-in-law wasn't indicted."

"You've worked fast on this one," Short said.

"Yes. Now—" Gorman looked at Myra Cade—"about this thing George Cade wanted—these terms —you were saying . . .?

"I dislike going into that part, Sergeant."

"I suspected that, Mrs. Cade," Gorman said drily, glancing at Short.

Oliver lifted his eyebrows and smiled.

"Surely it doesn't matter now?" Myra Cade asked, touching her forehead lightly with her hand and closing her eyes momentarily. "It was enough to drive him to criminal extremes and his plot backfired. Isn't that sufficient?"

"I'm afraid not," Gorman said.

Myra Cade's face became resigned, a little tired-looking even. "All right. At the death of their father, my late husband and his brother George became the owners of one of the largest and most valuable private art collections in America. The famous Cade Collection. Three years ago when Stephen, my husband, died, I became coowner with George. He has been plaguing me for months to sell out his interest for him. I have consistently refused. That's what he wanted."

Both Oliver Short and Sergeant Gorman looked puzzled. The Sergeant spoke first, asking, "But why didn't he sell out his interest himself?"

"He couldn't. Under the terms of old Adam Cade's will, his sons could never sell the collection. They could give their shares to each other or make a combined gift to any accredited museum, but neither could ever sell."

"But *you* can sell?" Gorman asked.

"Oh yes. I inherited my half from Stephen and old Adam's will has no control over me. So you see, George wanted to *give* me his half, with the private understanding I'd sell it for him." Myra Cade shrugged. "Naturally he offered to pay me something—a small percentage."

Gorman thought for a moment. "And you wouldn't do it? Why not? Excuse me, if that's impertinent—I've no real legal knowledge, but it seems like the gu—like George was just asking a favor."

"It's not so simple," Myra smiled. "I've had experts go over the matter. In a quick, forced sale, such as George wanted, I'd lose money. The

Cade Collection's appraised at seventeen million dollars for tax purposes, but on the real market, under present conditions, it might bring less than half that."

"But he was just asking you to sell his half. The losses would be his. Isn't that so?"

"If I did that, the Cade Collection would be divided and broken up. Neither my husband or his father ever wanted that to happen. I respect their wishes."

"And I imagine," Short broke in, "that the seventeen million dollar appraisal depends on the collection considered as a unit. In other words, half the collection isn't necessarily worth half of seventeen million dollars. Right?"

"Exactly right," Myra Cade replied. "Disposing of George's share separately would devaluate mine a possible two or three million dollars."

"I see." Gorman lapsed into another thoughtful silence, then asked, "Just for the record, in rough terms, if you'd agreed to do what he wanted, how much actual cash money might George Cade have realized? I want a clear, plain picture of his motive."

Myra Cade hesitated. "It's not an easy question. But say two million dollars, allowing for the quick turnover, agents' and auctioneers' commissions, experts' testimony, and etc."

Gorman grunted. "It's enough. Men have threatened murder for a lot less. Where is this collection now? —in your home?"

"Oh no. It's been on permanent traveling loan to American and European museums for the past twenty-two years. At this moment it's in Madrid."

"You don't keep your own art collection?" Gorman looked amazed.

"Certainly not. It's a white elephant. Have you any idea of the insurance premiums and upkeep on seventeen million dollars worth of irreplaceable, inflamable, temperature-sensitive, sulphide-absorbent, oil-coated canvas?" Myra Cade laughed lightly. "I much prefer to see them at the museums along with the general public."

Sergeant Gorman tightened his lips and shook his head sadly. "I don't wonder your brother-in-law went crazy and sat in a hotel room building a bomb. He owned half of a seventeen million dollar white elephant and couldn't get a nickel out of it. It'd drive anybody mad."

"He was impulsive and impatient," Myra explained. "In the future, under a stable market, in the proper way, I should have agreed to sell the complete collection as a unit. Such a sale is difficult and takes time. I'm not interested in art and have no objection to selling, but I would not go against my dead husband's express wishes."

"And now that George is dead, who gets his half of the collection?"

"I do. Unless George has a living

wife or child, which he hasn't to my knowledge."

"And you will sell the collection?"

"It's possible. In due time. As a unit."

"All right." Sergeant Gorman closed his notebook. "I guess that covers things for now. Thank you, Mrs. Cade. It'll be necessary for you to sign a statement concerning all these things. If you could drop by the office tomorrow—"

"Could it be done now?" Myra Cade asked. "Could I return to your office with you and complete the matter?"

"That's fine with me, but—" Gorman looked at Short questioningly.

"Mr. Short's services are completed," Myra Cade said. "Obviously I'm in no further danger." She extended a hand to Oliver. "Thank you, Mr. Short. You are an excellent, capable bodyguard—" she smiled charmingly, letting one eyebrow tilt—"perhaps a bit insistent, but altogether capable. I'm delighted. Mr. Zorn's bill will be taken care of at once, on arrival. Thank you again and good night."

Short took the gloved hand, moved his head forward, and said, "Goodnight, Mrs. Cade." He shook hands with Gorman and stood watching the pair as they went out to the sergeant's car. Short's plump pink face and cold blue eyes looked dissatisfied and worried. He lit a cigarette with his old Zippo lighter and smoked thoughtfully.

3

A few minutes later he went to the registration-desk and asked for Elmer Fay, the hotel-peeper. He was sent to the Grill where he found Elmer eating raw ground sirloin sandwiches loaded with chopped onion, parsley, pepper, and mustard. After shaking hands, he backed away and asked, "You saw him, Elmer—the blown-up stiff?"

"Sure. Whatta mess! That apple blew a hole right through the wall into Room 17 next door. Blew all the damn windows out too. And that stiff!—wow!—all over the rug, Man, all over the rug!"

"That bad, eh?"

"Worse." Fay nodded as he finished his sandwich and plunged into the second. "Enough to make a guy sick. Looked like spaghetti hanging from the walls. With sauce. It was a hell of a good bomb he made, I'll say that for him. Too bad he couldn't control it. Boy, don't we get 'em round here? You know, last week a dame took—"

"Anybody in Room 17 get hurt, Elmer?"

"Room 17?"

"Yeah. Next door. You said—"

"Oh. No, but the minister in there was kinda shook up. Lucky he was in the bathroom at the time. It's on the other side and naturally that put a double wall between him and the bomb. But he was plenty shook. He checked out twenty minutes later. Madder'n hell. We'll

get a nasty letter from his lawyer, you bet."

"A minister, eh? What'd he look like?"

Fay hunched his shoulders and squeezed up his nose. "Medium size. Red-faced. Sorta bulgy. Say fifty-five—maybe fifty. Why?"

"What was his name?"

"Lemme think. Hanley? No—Seely, that's it. You can check it in the book. Reverend Seely. Why?"

"A minister, eh?" Short muttered thoughtfully.

"Yeah, a minister. Nothin' strange about that either. Town's loaded with 'em. There's a religious rally at Convention Hall."

"What kind of luggage did Seely have?"

"Aw—come on. A suitcase. A black suitcase. Why?"

"Just a suitcase?" Short put a hand on Elmer's wrist. "Stop shovelin' in that garbage a minute and think, Elmer. Think hard."

Elmer wrinkled his forehead and thought. "Yeah, Oliver, I remember now. He had an umbrella and a typewriter. A portable typewriter."

Short let out a breath he'd been holding. "Good. You saw him come in with it?"

"Yeah, I saw him. He came in with a black suitcase, a black umbrella, and a typewriter in a gray case. You know, you could tell on account of the way the case cuts off and slants. Naturally, I didn't—"

"I understand. And he left with it?"

"Hmm. Tell the truth, I didn't bother noticin' his luggage goin' out, but I guess it went out with him. Nobody ever forgot a typewriter in this hotel in the fifteen years I been here. I—"

"Thanks, Elmer," Short cut him off, "I'll see you around." Back at the registration-desk, Short convinced the clerk he should let him see the register for the previous few days. George Cade had arrived Sunday night and had given his address as New York City. The Reverend Arnold Seely had checked in Wednesday morning. According to his neat handwriting, he was from Kane, Pa.

"Did you see much of George Cade?" Short asked the clerk.

The clerk laughed. "I didn't see anything of him. Not since the night he registered. He holed up all that time in his room, building that bomb, I guess."

"What'd he look like?"

The clerk, a long-faced man with sad, pale eyes and a wide drooping mouth, looked surprised at the question in a bored, mild way. "You know, I don't *know*? Best I can remember is he came in Sunday night with a crowd of ministers. I was kinda rushed. Right after the blow-up, I kept thinking, 'Cade—Cade—who the hell's Cade?" And I still ain't got a picture of the guy. Yet he checked in on my shift. It's in the book."

"You were too busy to notice him much." Short shrugged. "I hear

Reverend Seely was sore about the explosion?"

"Seely?—oh, yeah. *Him* I remember. He went out steaming and threatening to sue. Let 'im. We pay Aetna Insurance to get wrinkles worrying for us. Funny, ain't it?—you'd think a minister wouldn't be so damned excited about dying. With his in, you'd think he'd want to *get* to heaven."

Short laughed. "Maybe he's not so sure of his in. I'll see you later." He went out, caught a cab, and directed it to his own hotel, the Crown, just off Logan Circle and the Cathedral. In his room overlooking Parkway lights, he stripped down, showered, wrapped his body in a big terrycloth robe and settled down with the copy of George Cade's poems. After reading it from cover to cover, he lay on his bed, chain-smoking and thinking. As far as he could see, nothing in the Cade case was settled.

4

At one a.m. something popped in Short's mind. He reached for his bedside phone, woke up the clerk downstairs, and got the Cade residence. "Hello? Hello? . . . Mrs. Cade? . . . this is Oliver Short calling . . . yes, I know it is . . . yes, this is important . . . yes, yes, I know. Don't believe everything Gorman says. Nothing's ever closed with Gorman. He's got cases from twenty-years ago still clicking round in his mind. Now listen—how did your husband Stephen die? . . . *what?* . . . an airplane explosion? And you never mentioned it? Didn't the coincidence strike you? . . . no? . . . well, look, I must see you first thing in the morning. And keep your place well locked. Have you a pistol? . . . you know how to use it? . . . good . . . keep it in your bedroom. And write down this number—my hotel number—I'll be here all night. Do-8-9822, Room 41 . . . got that? . . . good. I'll be on hand a little before nine in the morning . . . certainly you're in danger . . . yes. Goodbye."

Dropping the phone, Short got up and dressed fast. Three minutes later he phoned for a cab. Then he called Sergeant Gorman's home.

"I'll pick you up in ten-minutes," he told him. Gorman thought Short was drunk and said so. "Never mind," Short chuckled, "use the time you're waiting to check the financial condition of the Cade estate."

"At this hour?" Gorman groaned. "What've you got, Ollie?"

"Everything. Throw some weight around, Ed. Wake up the president of the First National. Call the mayor or the Union League. It's now or never. See you in ten-minutes."

Gorman lived in Germantown and Short urged his cab driver to burn up the expressway. He rang Gorman's bell exactly twenty-three minutes after hanging up the phone.

Then, dragging a tousled, still sleepy-looking Gorman into the cab, he directed the driver to the Cade mansion.

"I'm a married man with a family," Gorman complained. "Not a footloose and fancy-free nut like you, Oliver. What's this all about?"

"What's the Cade financial condition?" Short asked. "As for being married—remind me to write you up a T.S. slip."

Gorman sighed. "I can't get anything official this time of night." He finished knotting his tie while he spoke. "but on pretty solid authority—Mort Fineman at the *Globe* who does the society spreads—it's bad. Been that way for a number of years too. Stephen Cade's insurance has been keeping Myra Cade in beans and potatoes. That and her reputation with the International Set. I guess the Cade mansion and the art collection's about all she's really got. Fineman says her hat's cocked for a husband, the right kind—one with dough."

"It figures." Short smiled.

"You think she knocked her brother-in-law off, don't you? Sent *him* the bomb in the typewriter." Gorman shrugged and added, "Well, I been playing with the idea myself. Since about two minutes after I met her. I'm just giving her rope. She could easy have typed that note to herself, sent the machine down to George, and—boom. Seventeen million dollars worth of paintings—hers, all hers. And the reverse? If George had succeeded in blowing her up, what would he get? Mockus. He can't even sell the stuff. Only thing—" Gorman shook his head—"I can't see her object in hiring you."

"It makes her look innocent, doesn't it? It keeps you undecided and guessing because you can't see her object."

"Damn!" Gorman muttered. "How smart can they get?"

"Besides," Short kept smiling, "if she'd come to you with the note, what would you've done?"

"Done?" Gorman bent over and tied his shoe-laces. He snorted. "Why we'd have had George Cade in the clink in an hour. The dope registered in the hotel under his own name. Fact is, we'd have saved his life."

"Exactly. But I couldn't fine-comb the city that fast. Don't forget she hired me the last minute—the letter came Monday; I came Friday. She had to have *somebody* on the outside; you don't get murder threats and just forget about it. Not a woman in her position."

"Yeah." Gorman laughed. "So she get's you—a guy who's as much cop as any cop, right down to his flat feet. What a break." He laughed again. "Zorn'll lay a brick over this—you jailin' your client."

"Zorn won't stand behind a phoney. He likes money, but not that much."

"He'll sue the estate. If we fry her, he'll sue the city."

"Nobody with seventeen million ever fried," Short said. He pointed out the cab window. "There it is, Driver. Stop a little ahead. Over there by the trees. Fine." He turned to Gorman. "Ready?"

"Sure, I'm ready." But outside the cab, Gorman added, "Only you haven't told me the angle. What're we going on? What'd you find?"

Short indicated the house with a nod. There was a glow of light behind one pair of long casement windows. "I stirred things up. That's the drawing-room. We'll slip in the other side—probably the library."

Gorman halted and stiffened. "Breaking and entering? On what? Come on, Oliver—you know better."

Before Short could answer, a pair of auto-headlights zoomed up the highway and swerved into the gravel drive. "Back!" Short cried. "Get behind the bushes!" He shoved Gorman and jumped down behind him. "Just in time!" he breathed softly.

"For what?" Gorman grumbled. "What's going on? Who's in that car?"

"Ssssh! Look." Through the bushes Oliver pointed to a pair of men getting from the car. They walked up the broad stone steps, crossed the stone-posted porch, paused a moment at the house-door and entered.

"We won't have to break in now," Short grinned in the darkness. "We'll just wait up on the stone benches by the door. Back in the shadows."

"Thank God for that anyway," Gorman stood up. "You know you caught me half asleep or I wouldn't even be here. You're playing a bluff, Oliver."

"A damn good one though. Come on." Short led the way to the porch and indicated the stone seats in shadow. "We'll wait here." He sat down opposite Gorman and slipped out his gun. Gorman raised an eyebrow, said nothing, but transferred his own regulation revolver to his large topcoat pocket, leaving his hand in with it.

"Like old times—a stake-out," Oliver whispered. He referred to events of thirty-years before, when he and Gorman had been rookie-cops together. After six-years Short had left the Force for the army; Gorman had remained.

Gorman nodded at Short's words. "Yeah," he said in a warm tone, but his big square jaw was set and his face held a worried frown.

They hadn't long to wait. Within another minute the door opened, two men came out lugging three suitcases each, half-stumbling sideways, and behind them, carrying a pair of smaller bags, Myra Cade followed. When they were well out on the porch, Short stepped forward.

"Good morning, Folks. Getting an early start?" He held his gun loosely, not definitely pointing at anyone, but in a position that made

it clearly visible. Sergeant Gorman came out of the darkness on the other side. "Everybody stay where you are," he growled.

"Sergeant Gorman!" Myra Cade cried. "What in the world is this . . . ?

The two men looked at her, then at each other, and finally at Oliver Short, who stood nearest them. "Police?" the smaller, thinner one of the pair asked. "What do you want with us?"

"Just to get acquainted," Short grinned, "with the Cade Collection." He turned to Gorman, adding, "Allow me to present Stephen and George Cade—as lively a pair of corpses as you'll ever meet!" Then, after enjoying Gorman's thunderstruck expression for a moment, he went on, "Let's all go inside, Kiddies. We'll have a chat and the Sergeant can phone for his nice red wagon."

Not much before dawn, Oliver Short sat drinking coffee in Benny's on Market Street, just west of the Hall. He could, in fact, see Sergeant Gorman just leaving the Hall, cross a misty and deserted Penn Square, and approach Benny's. When he entered he slipped back his hat, grinned at Short, and ordered eggs and coffee.

"They cracked wide open," he said. "All three are trying to blame the other two. What a deal! Don't ever do it to me again, Oliver. That Cade woman knows everybody worth knowing except President Johnson." Gorman shivered. "I can imagine the D.A.'s face if they hadn't confessed."

"You've got prints on record to prove George's identity," Short replied, yawning. "And proving Stephen's would be just routine and time. True, after sending some dupe on a plane under his name with a live bomb, he probably changed his looks as much as he could. How much insurance did they get?"

"A hundred-thousand. The dupe was a bum he picked up in Chicago. Bought him a shower, a shave, and a ticket to instant death. Him and a plane-load of innocent people."

Short nodded. "And Stephen got out from under a lot of losing business commitments, no doubt?"

"Yeah. He milked another fifty, sixty-thousand from his creditors. But he and Myra used up the loot in three years and then it was selling the art collection or nothing. They brought George in. He had to 'die' so Myra would own the stuff outright—the business of 'giving' it to her is just malarkey. Under the terms of old Adam Cade's will, Stephen and George could never sell and could only give to a bona fide museum. But if Myra inherited the entire collection, she could sell it. And if the deal had worked out, the three of them would have had ten or twelve million to play around with. Not a bad price for changing your name, dumping an old mansion you can't afford to heat, and leaving a bankrupt business."

"And the blown-up stiff in the Somerset—they confessed who he was?"

"Yeah. A minister who had the room next door. They didn't even know the poor jerk's name."

"Seely," Short said. "Reverend Seely of Kane, Pa."

"You know it, eh? Good. Well, Stephen got to talk to him—"

"Stephen?"

"Uh, huh. George agreed to the swindle, rented the hotel room, spread his prints around, and was willing to lose his identity by 'dying', but he balked at committing murder. He's a poet, the sensitive type. Anyway, he beat it back to the mansion and Stephen took over. When the time came, he got Seely in his room, slugged him, changed clothes, and propped him over the bomb. He waited for the blow-up in Seely's bathroom, then checked out of the hotel."

"He went out very angry and indignant about it all."

"Yeah, he's something of an actor. You know," Gorman smiled, "I think they might've made it if they hadn't played round with the threatening letter. It still seems awful dumb to me."

"They overplayed it because they were afraid the corpse's identity might be investigated too closely. They wanted the fact that it was George to be cut and dried, and, in point of fact, they succeeded. You never questioned if it really *was* George Cade spread all over the room—Myra's appearance, mine, the hotel-registration, and the note sort of nailed it down. The emphasis was displaced from the corpse's identity to his motive; that's why Myra pretended to be reluctant to talk about the Cade Collection at all. Besides, there was always the question, 'Why was George making the bomb that exploded and killed him?' and it had to be answered. No, the note wasn't dumb; it fit nicely into the scheme. The real big boner Myra pulled was a complete accident—she unwittingly told the truth."

Sergeant Gorman's eggs arrived and he began sprinkling them with salt and pepper. "When was that?" he asked.

Short eyed the eggs hungrily. For the past two weeks he'd been trying to cut down on his waistline. At last he yielded, sighed, and signaled the waitress. "Two over light, home-fries, and bacon," he told her.

"Come on, Ollie, what tipped you off?" Gorman urged.

"Well, the thing that kept spinning round in my head was Reverend Seely's typewriter. He brought a portable into the Somerset. I spent hours trying to fit it into the scheme of events. It didn't fit. It was just coincidence and had nothing to do with the rigged Olympia. And," Short chuckled, "the thing that told the whole story, I neglected completed. Myra slipped up bad in the hotel when she told you very plainly that she and Stephen gave

George the typewriter *on his last birthday*. Stephen was supposed to be dead for over three years—a thing she confirmed only a minute or two later. What slipped out was the truth, of course; she and Stephen probably did give George the machine. You see, I knew there was something wrong about typewriters —something not kosher and it bugged my subconscious—but I got involved with the wrong one, poor Reverend Seely's."

Sergeant Gorman said nothing till he finished eating his eggs. "I missed it too," he admitted finally, looking a little red. "And the funny thing is I remember her words clearly now. Well—" he shrugged and changed the subject by asking, "What are you going to tell your boss?"

"Zorn?" Oliver's eyes glowed as a platter approached the table. "Maybe I'll tell him this," he slipped Stephen Cade's book from his pocket, opened it, and read aloud:

Summation

Life, beating like a madding drum,
Here, there, everywhere; but for some
Nowhere. Till that final hour
When each man rises to his place
As prime exponent of Nothing
Faces conditional Ekstases
And becomes godlike, gazing on a lost multitude,
And in that mighty instant, he is
Beyond imperfection
Beyond finitude
Beyond the need of meaning
Beyond the Core Itself.
Tetelestai.

"What was that last word?" Gorman frowned.

"T-e-t-e-l-e-s-t-a-i," Short spelled out.

"What's it mean?"

"I'm damned if I know."

Sergeant Gorman grunted. "You read that to Zorn and he'll have you committed. Put it away and eat your eggs; they're getting cold."

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Man of the people

The situation in Cuba was bad . . . but the Senator knew how to turn the tide of public sentiment.

BY XAVIER SAN LUIS REY

SENATOR Rogelio Ortiz Castañello was a rich and very powerful man. He was also a politico who had a great many enemies. On account of this he spared no expense to keep himself alive. "Why bother to steal a million pesos if you can't live to enjoy them?" he commented once. "But my ambitions lead to the Presidency of the Republica, so it is important that I stay alive. I owe that much to the Cuban people."

Not only did the Senator have a pack of vicious police dogs running freely about the grounds of his home, a large palatial estate located just a few miles from Habana, but this was surrounded by two separate fences, the outer one a fancy grill-work affair with a back-drop of thick hedges and the inner one a Page wire that was electrically charged and hidden from view by beds of flowers and a thick growth of bushes

that ran the entire length and height of the fence. Policemen were on constant duty at the gate and several plainclothesmen were always in the house.

Microphones were hidden everywhere in the luxurious home. By flicking a switch the Senator could pick up anything that was being said in any part of the house while small cameras photographed anyone who was admitted into the Senator's study or was passed onto the grounds. Rigged into the back-rest of the chair by the Senator's desk was a pistol of special design that could be fired electronically by pressing a button. Alarms were installed all over the house and a small siren was set up on the roof to summon emergency aid or re-enforcements should the grounds ever be invaded by rioters, looters, or thieves.

Normally the Senator rode about the city in a Cadillac limousine with bullet-proof chassis and windows. A telephone in the car kept him in constant touch with his home and private secretary. In public he was always accompanied by a bodyguard.

A short pudgy man who habitually dressed in "white drill cien" suits by day and formal attire by night, he perspired heavily and changed clothes often, selecting garments from a ward-robe closet that was stocked like those suit racks in department stores. Usually he wore a bullet-proof vest under his jacket and strapped a small revolver of foreign make to his leg beneath the trousers.

The Senator was vain, arrogant, surly and dictatorial in his dealings with subject and colleague. Having an incredibly acute perception of the professional and political weaknesses in his colleagues he also had the sharp ability to grasp a political problem in its entirety and take the proper steps that would insure a speedy solution and win him praise and profit in the end. Whatever measures he thought useful he adopted and exploited, regardless of the consequences to friend or foe.

In the beginning the Senator had been an obscure politico in one of the provinces. Later he became the Alcalde of a small town, was eventually elected a Representante, and finally was made a fullfledged Senator when an orderly room sargeant in the Cuban army forced his way to the presidency.

The Senator made thousands of dollars on graft after that and was instrumental in pushing through the bill on the Habana Bay tunnel. Within a few years he had deposited more than a million dollars in a European bank, owned acres of real estate in Miami and Venezuela and had a chain of "agencias de pasaje" in the city of New York. His two youngest children attended a fashionable private school in the United States and his oldest son, a tall, handsome Captain in the Cuban Air Force, habitually wore the wings

of a jet fighter pilot on his uniform although he had never soloed in anything more than a Piper Cub.

La Senora Castañello, a large buxom woman with a Roman nose and the poise of a duchess was fond of collecting antiques and rare jewelry and was usually traveling about Europe, snooping in curio shops for some precious item to add to her tremendous horde. The Castañello home with its thick red carpeting, oakwood paneling, decorated ceilings, rich furnishings, gold and glitter, squads of servants, was one of the most beautiful mansions in the exclusive suburb where they lived.

As a rule the Senator spent his nights at home entertaining guests at bridge or cocktail parties. Sometimes he ran motion pictures in the theatre in the basement of the house and at other times he visited the Habana Yacht Club or Casino Espanol, where he was an important and influential member. His hobbies were boating (he owned two large vessels), fishing and playing with electric trains. In one part of the basement he had a special room rigged up with a layout of hundreds of feet of track where locomotives huffed and puffed and pulled lengthy lines of freight cars and passenger trains through tunnels, across bridges, over mountain, hill and meadow. Located in the very center of the layout was the control panel for the equipment where the Senator, dressed in engineers cap and coveralls, would operate his miniature railroad with the same enthusiasm and delight of a little boy.

Several attempts had been made on the Senator's life. On one occasion a bomb was wired to the ignition system of his car and exploded prematurely, blowing the chauffeur and several pedestrians to bits. On another occasion the Senator was making a speech at a political rally when a large bottle filled with acid came hurtling at him from the audience and hit the backdrop of curtains and burned tattered holes in the fabric.

His most spectacular brush with death took place the night he visited the "bodeguita del medio," a small yet famous eatery located in the old section of the city.

As he sat eating a large order of "lechon asado con arroz blanco y frijoles negroes con yuca," two men wearing women's stockings over their heads entered the establishment, drew guns, yelled "Toma, maricon!" and opened fire at their corpulent target.

Women screamed hysterically and patrons dived for the floor while the gunmen emptied their guns at the Senator, who stood half raised in his chair, mouth hanging open and eyes opened wide. Finally, the gunmen whirled about, dashed through the door and disappeared.

When the commotion subsided the Senator's bodyguard was discovered on the floor, his face shot away. The Senator, however, hadn't

been hit at all. Two bullet holes were in the wall behind his head, another had passed through his coat below the left armpit and another had hit his plate and ricocheted away, throwing the frijoles in the Senator's lap.

When the owner of the establishment came running up to him, whimpering apologies, the Senator plopped back in his chair, dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief, blew his breath and said: "Cojones, but that was close!"

One afternoon, during a secret conference with several dignataries in the government, the Senator expressed his growing concern over the National crisis brought about by the Castro revolution. "Gentlemen," he said. "Drastic action must be initiated at once to rid the country of the menace personified by this monster with a beard. If we don't defeat the bearded one's armies before they invade the province of Santa Clara the day will soon arrive when the rebel flag will be hoisted atop the capitol building."

"Along with the communist's banner," the Alcalde spoke up.

"Fidel will probably hang us all by the neck along with the flags," a naval officer said. "Gentlemen, let's face it. The situation is hopeless. We have a formidable army, but it lacks military discipline. Its moral is also deplorably low. Within a few months I thoroughly expect our armed forces to be vanquished. Whether we care to admit it or not the fight is lost."

The Senator banged his fist on the conference table. "The fight is not lost!" he said angrily. "Dam your ignoble defeatist's attitude! The fight is not lost!"

"Your 'Horatio at the bridge' stand is admirable, Senator," the naval officer said, "but hardly rational under the circumstances."

"Who is this upstart, this scoundrel called Camilo Cienfuegos whom Fidel recently appointed a Commandante?" the Alcalde asked. "Are any of you gentlemen familiar with his background?"

"He is a former dishwasher," a General spoke up.

The Alcalde frowned. "Dishwasher? Are you certain about this?"

"Quite certain," the General said. "He learned his trade while living for a time in the city of New York. Does the fact surprise you? His cleverness on the field of battle proves he is a military genius. Remember, our own Presidente was a grocery clerk and orderly room sargeant before he took control of the government."

"This man Fiedel, he is obviously demented," the Chief of police said. "He develops talent out of human refuse."

"He is a swine," the Senator said.

"The Americans have sided so strongly with Doctor Castro that they now claim he will put an end to revolutions in our country," the General said.

"Revolutions are the only thing

that keep our country alive," the naval officer said. "Take away our revolutions and we would have no way to change the Presidents."

"That is treasonable talk," the Chief of police said.

"I have heard we have no gold reserves in the treasury," the Alcalde said. "Is this true?"

"Due to the threats imposed by the revolution the Presidente has seen fit to order the gold reserves moved to an undisclosed place for safekeeping," the General said. "It is a temporary situation, nothing more."

"Of course we'll never see the gold reserves again," the naval officer said.

"Why did you call this meeting, Senator?" the Alcalde asked.

"To discuss a plan of action," the Senator said.

"What is your plan?" the Alcalde said.

The Senator slapped his hands behind his back and began to walk slowly around the conference table, the eyes of his colleagues following him. "Gentlemen," he said at length. "As we all know, the Presidente has gone into seclusion in Fort Columbia. His chief advisors, on the other hand, have been practically silenced by inertia. Consequently, it now seems mandatory that all present must assume control of the government if it is to survive. United, we form the highest body of authority in the country. Therefore, it is up to us to make any and all decisions that will aid our regime to win this ugly war." The Senator paused. Then he went on. "Now, as we all know, one of the most effective strategims that Castro has repeatedly used against us involves the placing of bombs in different areas about the city. His underground has been instructed to plant bombs in theatres, department stores, and government buildings. Rebels are responsible for policemen being gunned down as they walk their beats and soldiers being shot and killed as they guard their posts. The scheme behind these cowardly tactics, gentlemen, is to undermine the people's confidence in the government, to create panic and confusion and to disrupt the normal course of law and order. Very well. If that be the case I say we shall fight fire with fire. That is my plan. We shall follow the rebel's example and plant bombs throughout the city. We shall plant bombs in theatres, in schools and churches. We shall commence to leave bombs everywhere and the people will naturally assume that Castro is to blame. The people associate this type of subversive activity with his underground and would never associate it with their government. If Castro sympathizers never protested or complained before when a few of their comrades were blown to bits or a public establishment was totally devastated by a rebel bomb they will strongly protest if the national shrine of the Caridad were

to be blown to pieces one night. Yes, gentlemen, that is my plan. We will wage war on the people. They are the weakest part of Castro's armor and it is through them that we shall strike his blackguard's heart. By conducting our own reign of terror Castro will slowly deteriorate in the esteem of the people and they will turn against him. It is inevitable. He will no longer be judged a savior, but a barbarian and a heathen."

"Are you serious about waging this terrible campaign of terror against the people?" the naval officer said.

"Of course I'm serious," the Senator said. "I'm not accustomed to making idle talk. These are trying times. Our backs are to the wall and we must defend ourselves whatever way we can. We must kill or be killed. I must insist, gentlemen, that you subdue your humane instincts and heed my plan. Our necks depend upon it. Trite sentimentalism now would only serve to place our necks that much quicker in the noose. But to further my plan we must begin to take hostages. For every Cubano who has joined Castro in the Sierras I can produce a relative who has not. These shall be our hostages. The situation demands that we employ drastic measures to save the country from falling prey to Castro's savage hordes and I say we must begin to bomb our schools and churches and take hostages. We must smash this revolt with an iron fist. That is my plan. We must take hostages and we must serve notice to the rebels in the mountains that if they do not surrender immediately we will execute their entire families. Our policia secreta has an impressive list of names. We might begin to work with that." The Senator paused and studied a painting of the Presidente de la Republica hanging on the wall. "I assure you, gentlemen, that under such terms rebels will desert this man Castro by the score."

"The Presidente would never approve such a plan," the Alcalde said. "It might provoke civil violence and mass revolt. It is one thing to war with isolated groups of fanatical rebels and another to war with the whole of a civilian population."

The Senator whirled about, snarling. "The Presidente would never approve such a plan you say? Well, I say dam the Presidente! He is a coward and a traitor! During this crisis we must over-rule the Presidente! Our lives depend upon it! Good Lord, man, do you not realize that the Presidente has a large airplane from the Fuerzas Aerias on constant alert to fly him out of the country at a moments notice? The Presidente does not have faith in his troops any more. Today all he thinks about is saving his own neck."

"I think we'd all be wise to follow the Presidente's lead and make arrangements to flee the country," the Alcalde said. "It frightens me to think what will happen to us should

we be taken prisoner by those bearded devils."

"If we do decide to flee the country we will not be permitted to travel with the Presidente," the naval officer said. "I have received information to the effect that he plans to travel with his immediate family only."

"Cubana de Aviacion has very large airplanes," the Alcalde said. "Surely one single airplane would be sufficient to accomodate the whole of the Presidente's cabinet. Gentlemen, I move that we make arrangements to lease one of these airplanes immediately."

"Cubana has only a handful of serviceable planes," the Senator said. "Seven at the most. In order to transport his family and other personal effects the Presidente has allready leased three of these planes. He has a vast amount of personal effects, you see. The remainder of the aircraft have been assigned to transport the Presidente's closest friends to safety and political asylum in Miami."

The Alcalde looked shocked. "But . . . but I am the Mayor of Habana," he said incredulously. "The Presidente has always regarded me as one of his most trusted associates. Surely I deserve the highest consideration in this matter. Why wasn't I informed?"

"For the same reason none of the gentlemen gathered here today were informed," the Senator said. "Each one of us has provoked the Presidente's displeasure at some time or another. Perhaps you will understand now why I called this meeting."

"We are being deliberately sacrificed, is that it?"

"In a sense, yes," the Senator said. "But rest your fears, Senator Alcalde. I have allready made arrangements to have us flown out of the country when the proper time arrives. But that time will not arrive. I am determined to save the Patria at any cost. If I receive your fullest cooperation, gentlemen, I know we will emerge triumphant from this crisis. But we must act swiftly and decisively. We must agree to bomb our schools and churches and we must begin to censor the press and take hostages. We must begin to act now, today."

The Chief of police rose to his feet. "Gentlemen, I think our course is quite clear. The Honorable Senator has outlined a most practical and effective plan of action. We must agree to wage an all out unconditional war on Castro's forces and sympathizers and we must cast aside the traditional policy of taking prisoners. Henceforth, they are to be shot on the spot. This same rule shall apply to any saboteurs or terrorists who may fall into the policia's grasp. Gentlemen, I agree with the Honorable Senator's convictions."

The Senator leaned on the conference table. "And you, mi General; of the armies, what is your

say in this matter?"

"I agree, of course. Most emphatically."

"Good, good," the Senator said, smiling. "Tomorrow you will issue orders to your command to commence daily attacks on the Sierras. You will also issue orders that any town, large or small, where rebels are entrenched is to be bombed and strafed until not a single building is left standing. In addition, all the regiments under your command must be alerted and pushed to offensive action immediately. Is that clear?"

"Of course. Your orders will be carried out to the letter."

"Shouldn't this matter be discussed formally with the various authoritative departments of the government?" the naval officer said. "Congress should . . . I mean the Presidente. Well, you realize these proceedings are most irregular, I suppose?"

"You are the highest authority in the Naval Department, are you not?"

"Well, yes. Of course."

"Cast your vote please."

The naval officer waved his hands helplessly. "Very well. I agree. We have nothing to lose, I guess."

"Nothing except our necks," the General said.

"If we succeed with our plan the Presidente will feel most grateful towards us," the Senator said. "On the other hand, if we fail none of us will be around to care."

"I agree wholeheartedly with your plan," the Alcalde said.

"Good," said the Senator. "It is settled then. Gentlemen, I am pleased by your vote." Suddenly he faced the painting of the Presidente de la Republica and clicked his heels and saluted smartly. "Long live the Presidente!"

The dignataries rose wearily from their chairs and faced the painting. Stiffening to attention they saluted. "Viva el Presidente!" they said together. Then they sat down at the conference table again.

In the weeks that followed bombs secreted in public places by members of "the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar" exploded in unprecedented numbers in Habana. The worst explosion that came to vibrate the city occurred when an enormous cache of dynamite was detonated in a power main on the Prado, leaving the city without gas or electricity for several days. Bombs exploded in parked autos, in buses and baby carriages; they exploded at social and civic gatherings, in schools, theatres, at sports events and even in funeral parlors. Sometimes a whole shopping center would be destroyed by a single incendiary bomb. Fires of mysterious origen broke out in the middle of the night and quickly destroyed such landmarks as the shrine of "La Caridad de Cobre" in Matanzas Province, the church of "The Immaculate Conception" in Cienfuegos, and the shrine dedicated to "San Lazaro"

in the town of Holguin. In the meanwhile, the Government strongly denounced the atrocious campaign of the July 26th Movement to instill fear and terror in the heart of the country by waging war against the people and the rebels circulated literature advising all patriotas that they had long since ceased all war-fare that could bring harm to the innocent populace itself. "We are not beasts," growled the rebel radio. "Nor are we barbarians. We do not bomb schools and churches and we do not wage war upon the people. Our cause is maintained by Cubanos for the libertad of all Cubanos. We do not kill innocent women and children. We kill only criminals; those swine in the government who are determined to keep our country enslaved forever. Cubanos, do not believe the lies of such imperialistic newspapers as "El Diarioor "Ataja." We do not place bombs in parks. We plant flowers there. Nor is it our wish to instill fear in the hearts of the people. Our only wish is to instill love for freedom in the hearts of the people. We are not beasts. We are Cubanos determined to win liberated for all Cubanos. We implore all patriotas to retain faith in our sacred cause as we pray to Dios that he will open the people's eyes so they will see and know that the July 26th movement is in no way responsible for the present reign of terror being targeted on the innocent of our nation."

In the confusion and panic that followed the people became afraid because they did not know what to believe and soon did not venture into the street any more because the police were arresting everyone who aroused their slightest suspicion. Though hundreds of terrorists were arrested, tried and convicted and shot no facts concerning their guilt were ever disclosed to the public. All the terroristas, however, were publicly identified as members of the rebel movement. But if the revolution was suffering the people were suffering also, and their was ominous grumbling and soon open defience as the people began to rebell to rid themselves of the yoke of tyrrany. On his way to a political meeting one morning the Senador abruptly picked up the intercom and ordered his chauffeur to take him home. "Take the shortest route, Raul. But avoid the busier streets."

Moments before the Senador had received an urgent telephone message from his secretary advising him that revolutionary elements, led by a man called Echevarria, were attacking the presidential palace. "It would be best if the Honorable Senator retires to his home," the secretary told him. "The situation is most alarming. The Presidente himself is trapped in his private study in the palace and we fear for his life."

As the car turned the corner of a tree-lined avenue in the Miramar

section of the city its path was suddenly blocked by an angry hord of yelling citizens. Apparently the situation was a good deal worse than the secretary had intimated and the people themselves in revolt, inspired by the brazen attack on the presidential palace.

Recognizing the Senator's car with its official license plates and politico's banner they pressed around the car until it could not move.

"Sacanlo de alli!" someone cried. "Drag him out of there!"

Fortunately the windows were closed and the doors locked from the inside. "Keep moving, fool!" the Senator cried, desperately. He was beginning to perspire. "Get this dam car moving!"

The car began to push foreward through the solid mass of people. Hostile faces were glaring at the Senator and his chauffeur through the windows. Raul had drawn his pistol and held it in his hand as he guided the steering wheel. The Senator had drawn his own weapon but held it between his knees. He was afraid to show it because the people might interpret this as a sign of hostility and defience and press their attack even further. Now the rioters closest to the car began yelling encouragement to those further behind. "Vamonos, muchachos! A matar un perro!" The people moved foreward, gesticulating with wild enthusiasm.

"The Senator is a maricon!"

"His mother is a puta!"

"Queme la maquina! Burn the car!"

By now there were at least ten rioters climbing over the slow moving vehicle. They stood on the roof, fenders, and hood. Only the skillful maneuvering of the chauffeur kept the car moving. In the rear seat the Senator, alarmed by the situation, was bowing his head at the people and smiling weakly and saying, "Paz, paz," which meant peace, peace. His face was pale and he was dabbing at his neck and forehead with a handkerchief.

Suddenly the people on the car began leaping to the ground and before the occupants of the car could guess what was about the windows of the vehicle were smeared with mud. Soon all the windows and windshield were completely covered and the chauffeur couldn't see ahead and the interior of the vehicle went dark.

"Keep moving! Keep moving!" the Senator cried. Then the car banged against something and stopped. The chauffeur pressed the accelerator and the motor roared, but the car would not move. "The road's been blocked," the chauffeur said. "What should I do?"

"Back up, fool! Back up! Quick!"

The chauffeur shifted gears and raced the motor again, but the car still would not move. "We're hemmed in, Senor," the chauffeur said. He was struggling to remain calm. "I think we better get out

of the car."

"Are you mad? That would be suicide," the Senator said. "The mob would tear us to pieces if we stepped out of the car." Suddenly he stiffened, cocking his head to listen. "What is that noise? What are those devils doing? What are they throwing over the car?"

"Gasolene, Senor. It is gasolene. I am sure of it. We better get out of the car."

The Senator lunged at the door. "Yes, yes," he panted. "We must leave the car. Quickly, Raul." He froze. "The door, it will not open!"

"Nor mine," the chauffeur said. "They have been jammed from the outside."

"Dios mio!" the Senator exclaimed.

Raul struggled with the door at his side, gave up, and turned to the other one. The Senator was panting heavily and tugging at his own door. Then he stiffened, blinking nervously. "Raul, there is smoke coming through the floor of the car! The mob has set it on fire!" He fell on the door, banging the window with his pistol. "Let me out of here!" he raged. "I order you, let me out! I am Senator Castañello! How dare you do this!" He beat the door. "Let me out! Let me out!"

Raul tugged desperately at his door. Tiny beads of sweat popped out on his forehead and trickled down his face. He was amazingly calm but he was obviously gripped with that panicky desperation of an animal when it is cornered. Abandoning his struggles momentarily, his eyes darted about, searching for an avenue of escape, and fell on the hydraulic buttons that controlled the windows.

With a lightning like gesture his hands pounced on the buttons and pressed them all at once. He started to climb through the window even before the glass had eased itself down into the door.

Poking his head and shoulders from the window he cringed when he came face to face with the rioters. There was a horde of them surrounding the vehicle. "I am unarmed," the chauffeur blurted, throwing his gun to the ground. "Do not harm me. I am not a politico, I swear it. I am a trabajador, a worker."

Rough hands grabbed him and pulled him to safety. "Do not kill me, please," the chauffeur whimpered, shielding his head with his arms. "I am innocent of any crime, I swear it."

The rioters circled him and threw slaps at his head. "Who is this maricon?" someone asked.

"He is a worker," someone else said. "Did he not say this?"

"He cries like a woman," another voice declared.

"Let's cut off his huevos," said still another voice.

"Look!" yelled an excited voice. "The Senator, he is escaping from the car! Stop him!"

The Senator had half his body

sticking out of the car, but he had jammed at the waist and was heaving and squirming and grunting to get free. "You dam fools!" he bellowed at the crowd as they rushed him. "I am Senator Castañello!"

His words were cut short when the mob fell on him. They smashed blows at his face and shoved at his corpulent body. "This is cold-blooded murder!" the Senator screamed, fighting back. His eyes were wild. "You are making a horrible mistake! You must not do this, I implore you!"

The rioters struggled with the Senator, whose face was now battered and bleeding. Blood was trickling from his nostrils and there was a large gash on his forehead. When the car suddenly burst into flame with a slight muffled explosion the mob fell back in a rush, almost trampling one another underfoot in their haste to get away. Then they paused and turned at a distance, their faces reflecting awe and fascination as they watched the Senator's frenzied efforts to save himself. Now he was pleading and sobbing.

"You fools, I am Senator Castañello." Tears rolled down his cheeks and his hands supplicated the crowd. "I am a servant of the people." He sniffed. "Do not make a martyre of me." Fire licked at his body and he lunged foreward and screamed hysterically: "In the name of God! I humbly beseech you, do not kill me!"

Taking advantage of the confusion the chauffeur slunk away and lost himself in the crowd. Walking hurriedly, almost trotting and stumbling over himself in his haste to get away, he reached the boulevard. There he paused to catch his breath. From the distance the wind brought the feint, agonized screams of the Senator, and in the sky he saw the rising curls of smoke that heralded his cremation.

Blessing himself, the chauffeur left the road and started to run across a field. As he reached the woods the bark of a rifle echoed through the valley and the chauffeur tripped and fell to the ground. Blood trickled from the jagged hole in his head as he lay perfectly still.

a 2'ND chance

THE SUN seared into my neck. I knew I had made a mistake. I shouldn't have started walking. Now I would probably have to walk all the way to the next town. Almost no one stops for you when you're in the middle of the country. You get rides better just on the outskirts of town.

That wasn't my only mistake. Being broke and alone was the first one.

The black pavement oozed beneath my step. The heat radiated through the soles of my shoes. I was thirsty. "Oh, hell," I said aloud.

A pickup passed. I didn't even bother to thumb it. It twisted and warped as it went through the heat shimmers on the road in front of me. Its thin wake hardly disturbed a scrawny tree growing beside the road a short distance ahead.

When I reached the skimpy shade

BY
C. G. CUNNINGHAM

It was a bad town for strangers . . . worse for hitchhikers. When he left it the second time, he was running.

of the little tree, I gave up. I decided to rest under it until the sun got lower. Then I would walk on. At the next town I would probably get a ride. I wondered how far it was.

It seemed cooler behind my closed eyelids. I didn't open them as an occasional car hissed by on the soft paving. I guess I dozed, or nearly. A different sound penetrated my consciousness, the distinct sound of a slowing vehicle. I opened my eyes and looked up. It had passed me, but then the tail lights flashed on. It was stopping.

I got up and trotted down the road to where it was stopped. The driver spoke when I got to the door. It was a woman. "Need a ride?" she asked.

"I sure do."

When I got in I got my first look at my benefactor. She was large, in her late thirties or very early forties. She had bleacheed blond hair and large eyes. They went with the rest of her. Her figure was formidable. She wore some kind of a jersey blouse with a square neck cut very low. Floating above the line of the blouse were two huge pillows of flesh. In the heat they were covered with a glow of moisture.

She saw me studying her and smiled faintly. She pulled her skirt up above her knees and spread her knees apart. "Hot," she said.

Her legs were well shaped and proportional with the rest of her body. "It sure is," I agreed. I looked away. I didn't want her thinking I was getting any ideas . . . even if I was. All I needed was some woman to start screaming rape at me.

The car was moving again. "Turn the wings out," she said. "Cool us off quicker."

I bumped the wing out with the butt of my hand and looked over at her. The wind was blowing her hair out behind her, exposing darkened roots. "Too windy?"

She shook her head. I wasn't sure, but, since she knew I was watching her, she seemed to throw her shoulders back a bit. She sort of writhed in the breeze letting it massage her body. The effect was plain. Firmly, I turned by eyes back to the scorching road ahead of us. The hot air didn't soothe me.

"Where are you headed?" she asked after a while.

I didn't look at her. "How far are you going?" I laughed.

She smiled and glanced over at me. "I might go quite a long way." She turned her head toward me.

I met her gaze. "That's just where I want to go."

She sighed heavily hanging on to the air a long time. I couldn't tell if it was for effect. Nevertheless, her expanding lungs manipulated the exterior of her body. Who wouldn't notice?

"Where you from?" she asked.

"Chicago."

"I've been to Chicago. Her tone was musing. "Going back?"

"I doubt it."

"No people there?"

"No." I was getting tired of this. It seemed to be the fare you paid for getting a ride, an abbreviated family history. You usually had to listen to one, too.

"They move out of the city?" she continued.

"Yea," I said. "To nice little plots in the country . . . cemetery plots."

Her eyes darted my way again. She shook her head slightly. "Any brothers and sisters?"

"I've got a brother somewhere."

Again, she looked at me, wry amusement on her face. "Where *are* you going then?"

"I don't really know," I confessed.

She turned her head toward me. Her eyes were large and sympathetic as she gazed at my face. They made a quick tour along my body. Carefully, she ran her tongue around her lips and returned her attention to the road. Then, taking one hand at a time from the wheel, she smoothed her blouse down along her curves. She seemed deep in thought. So was I.

It seemed like the car floated through the waves of heat. She kept her attention on the road, occasionally glancing my way and studying the few wooded patches beside the route. I guess they appealed to her in the heat. It was beginning to get to her. She was breathing rather heavily through her open mouth. Near one thin grove she slowed—I thought to stop—my heart sped up—then she continued on.

The car blocking the road jumped through the silvery heat shimmer with a startling suddenness. Despite the flat open country it had been invisible because of the refraction off the road. After we saw it, it still seemed to be an illusion until we made out the markings. It was a police car.

As she slowed the car and the wind slowed with it, the heat crashed in. It really bothered her. Sweat stood in large drops on her head. Her neck and torso and the upheaved mounds of her breasts were covered with a sheen. I ran the back of my hand across my forehead. It was nearly dry. That was one of the prices she paid for being slightly fat . . . even if it did make for visual interest.

The cop stayed in the patrol car until we were fully stopped. He took his time ambling up to the door. Viewed from the still, fiery interior of the car his movements appeared to have the slow deliberateness of a scene from another world.

"I hope you've got a valid driver's license," I said.

The blond woman looked over at me. She didn't speak.

When the cop came up to the window, he was older than I had guessed. His hair was grey around the temples and his skin looked dry and fragile. A two inch band of sweat ringed the crown of his stetson.

"Driver's license," he said flatly. His eyes did not reflect the dull tone

of his voice. They skillfully inventoried the car, its contents, and its passengers. When this circuit was complete he turned them onto the license she extended. He didn't need to look up to compare the picture with the owner.

"Where are you going?" he asked. His eyes strayed to me while he waited for the answer.

"New Orleans."

He continued looking at me. "This your husband?"

She looked over at me; her face was completely blank. She was perspiring much more freely. "No. I'm just giving him a ride."

The cop's eyes quickened with interest. He kept them on me. I sensed his body tense. "Where did you pick him up?"

"About twenty miles back. Why? What's the trouble?"

He didn't answer; his stare riveted on me expectantly. He waved one arm in the direction of the patrol car. "Get out," the cop said. There wasn't any question about who he meant. Another cop had left the shade of the patrol car and was headed toward us. The man watching me now held a gun in his hand.

Carefully I opened the door and stepped out. The black pavement sunk under my weight. Through my thin soles I could feel my feet getting too hot.

"Lean against the car, arms and legs apart." It was the other cop. He was younger and watched me through small brown eyes. His brows were heavy and smooth adding to the smallness of his eyes. Somehow, I knew what to expect from him.

When my hands touched the dark roof of the car I had to catch myself to keep from jumping back. Carefully I lifted them off the car and looked over my shoulder at the young man. "I can't," I said. I nodded toward the car. "It's too hot."

The small eyes didn't move. "Do it anyway," he said. My feelings of resigned irritation melted into the beginnings of fear.

I assumed the position while expert hands explored the contents of my clothing. The searing metal of the car was just below the threshold of out-and-out pain. I didn't know how long I could stand it. While I waited I looked in at the blond woman. She sat, staring straight ahead. Her shoulders were thrown back thrusting her charms outward for the admiration of all the world.

"Nothing, Rufe," the young cop announced.

The older one stood near me. The sight inside the car was not wasted on him. He nodded his head back and I gratefully pulled my hands off the car.

"Where you going?" he asked.

I jumped at it. "New Orleans."

He looked through the windshield at the blond. I wanted to follow his gaze, but I was afraid to. He looked back at me, slow specu-

lative. Then, suddenly he said, "Where is the man you were traveling with."

It rocked me. It didn't make any sense. "What?"

"Where's your buddy? The one you came to Morston with last night."

"I don't have any buddy. I'm traveling alone," I said.

"Where were you last night?"

"I don't remember the name of the place. The next town back along this road." I waved my arm in the direction we had come.

"That would be Morston." He started sifting through the things the younger cop had taken from my pocket. He didn't seem too happy with the collection.

"Look," I said, "do you mind telling me what's going on? Who are you looking for?"

"We may have found him," the young cop put in.

The older man, known as Rufe, looked carefully at his young assistant. "You really think that, Otto?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He turned to me. "You'll find out soon enough. Right now, we're asking the questions." He lifted the wallet up before his face. "This all the money you got?"

"Yea. I'm afraid so."

"Won't carry you far."

"I guess not."

"What were you going to do when it ran out?"

I didn't like his choice of tense; like whatever I was going to do didn't matter anymore. I said, "Get a job, I guess."

The young cop, Otto, snorted. "What the hell, Rufe. Let's take him in. Save all the yammerin' out in the hot sun."

The small knot of fear that had slowly been tightening inside me turned cold and hard.

We all turned at the sound of the other car door opening. I was glad; it was a sight I would have hated to miss. The blond woman came around the car. She was big, I mean, really big. Tall and big, in all the right places. She exuded one thing . . . sex. I watched Otto's small eyes rove the expanses of her body. His mouth dropped open. He put his hand in his pocket and kept staring.

She kept her shoulders back as she moved carefully toward us. She looked at Rufe. "Would you tell me what's going on here?"

The old man was not safe from her despite his years. His pale eyes were locked on the dark crevise between the rise of her breasts. Reluctantly, he looked up. "Yes mam. I'm sorry. I'm the sheriff. There was a man killed last night just this side of Morston. Stranger, seedy looking, probably a vagrant. Nothing on him so we didn't have anyplace to start looking for who killed him."

"What makes you think he did it?" She indicated me.

"I don't, necessarily. If I'd found

a good size knife on him then I'd have more reason. The man we found had his guts . . . had been stabbed several times. Course, he could have thrown the knife away when he was finished."

I watched her face as the cop talked. I'd expected surprise, shock, fear. Instead, and especially when she would meet my eyes, there was just a yearning hunger. Strangely, in my frantic gratitude for a friend —and underdog's friend—my previous instincts toward her receded.

"I think we had better take him in," Rufe continued. "He probably isn't the man, but it don't hurt to be sure." Again, he looked into the blond's eyes. "Now, we may need to get in touch with you later on. Do you have an address where you can be reached in New Orleans?"

She looked at me again. She seemed uncertain. Her tongue traced her lips. "Maybe I'll go back with you. You'll probably have this straightened out pretty quick." She smiled.

Rufe stared at me in surprise. I could read his mind—no figuring a woman. I grinned. I was surprised myself.

Otto's brown eyes burned. His leer was obvious as he surveyed her in the light of this new development. I could read his mind too.

I rode back in the cruiser with Otto. Rufe, the sheriff, rode with the blond. Keep her company, he said. Otto's mood grew steadily blacker as the trip wore on.

When we entered the small sheriff's office he was fuming. "Why don't you just confess and have it over with by the time the sheriff gets here," he said. "What did you do with the knife?"

I remained silent.

He led the way to the small cell compound and opened the grill. "In here." He shoved me ahead of him into an open cell. "Now strip."

"What?"

"Strip!" he roared. He grabbed me by the shirt, jerking it open.

I started removing my clothes.

"Skinny little bird aren't you? Never could understand why those big women liked skinny little men. Hand me your clothes."

I gathered them up and handed them to him. He removed the belt and wadded them thoroughly, feeling as he went.

"Turn around. If you were in much of a fight with that guy you killed he would have marked you some." He laughed. "Before you get out of here, if there aren't any marks now on that pretty white bony body of yours, you can be sure there will be. Bend over."

I bent over. I could feel him moving up close behind me. Fear struggled with revulsion for possession of my consciousness. He brought his knee up quickly under my spine. I barely had time to catch myself as I pitched forward. The room spun; I could hardly breathe.

"Take off your shoes and remove the strings," he commanded. He

threw my clothes in my face. "When Rufe gets through messin' around 'questioning' you, we'll get together again." He said the word mincingly. "Then we'll finish up getting it out of you." He snorted and slammed the cell door.

My ears rang, my head throbbed and my back felt broken. But through this pain came a stronger one, the pain of stark terror. I was accused of murder, of ripping another man's guts out. With casual certainty they would pin it on me for the simple reason I couldn't prove I didn't do it. Justice is for the wealthy and I certainly wasn't that. Furthermore, I was friendless. Except for the blonde woman who, for reasons I didn't understand, was standing by me. Some friend, I thought. I didn't even know her name.

When the sheriff came back, I was almost glad to see him. At least he was reasonable. There was even a trace of kindness about him. With him around I figured I was safe from Otto's violence. I was disappointed that the woman wasn't with him.

He came back to the small block of cells and stood looking at me. His only expression was weariness. His watery grey eyes were blank and distant. Finally, he asked, "Where did you hide the knife, boy?"

"I didn't. I didn't have a knife. I didn't do it. What have I got to do to prove it to you?"

"Find the man who did . . . if you didn't." His eyes remained blank.

"I can't very well do that if I'm in here, can I?"

"Not very well."

"Great Scott, sheriff you wouldn't try to convict an innocent man. You don't have any evidence."

"I may not need any." He imperceptibly inclined his head toward the front office. He meant Otto. "Look boy, you don't seem to understand. Some stranger came through this town and killed another one. As far as the people who live here are concerned it doesn't matter. There's a killer loose. And that makes me look bad. I've got to show them that I can catch him . . . right away. And I have. We got enough evidence already to convict you—just as soon as you confess. And you'll do that just as soon as your lady friend gets tired of waitin' for you and leaves town."

"Then you turn Otto loose on me."

His expression remained blank. "Who said anything about Otto. Oh, I may let him get his kicks, but I don't think we'll really need him. You're not playin' a very good hand, boy. You and me, we'll make a couple of small deals and I'll have my confession." He sighed heavily. "Right now, though, we'll just have to wait a while. You think about it. Maybe by morning you'll remember all about it."

I had learned something about

the way the world turns. I was afraid of Otto. But, it was an open, predictable fear. I was more afraid of Rufe. He was hidden and secret and implacable. He didn't need violence; he had power. It was clear he would use it in any manner to obtain his goals. Somehow, sinking through the blackness of the despair of powerless frustration, I went to sleep.

When I awoke, it was under the fevered stare of Otto's dark eyes. The lump of his adam's apple kept bobbing as he swallowed the juices from his mouth. His fist worked, clenching until the strings stood out on his wrist muscles. His eyes brightened when he saw me watching him. Quietly he opened the cell door, he was carrying my belt doubled in his hand. I got up.

He stood in front of me. Rage poured from his small eyes. "What are you expecting, skinny?"

I stood silent.

"Think the time has come for our little talk?" Quickly his arm swung the belt in a half circle catching me across the ear. I jumped back and got my arms up for protection. A shrill whistle screamed through my injured ear.

He threw the belt on the floor. My shoelaces were with it. "You don't know how much I hate it," he said, "but we're not going to have our little session. You're out. Get the rest of your stuff up front." He walked out of the cell. His fists still worked.

I didn't stop to wonder or react. All I wanted to do was get out of there . . . fast. Somewhere, though, deep in my mind was a dark thought, I wondered if it was some kind of trick.

The sheriff's wrinkled face wore a clear expression when I walked into his office. He was mad. Raging, fuming, killing mad. He shoved an envelope across the desk at me. "Don't take time to count your money, boy, just make tracks out of here. If I catch you in this county ever again, you'll be sorry."

I glanced over at Otto. His eyes burned into me hungrily. He was smiling to himself, anticipating the pleasure. Slowly a chill gripped my spine. They were setting me up for a trick. I looked at the sheriff. "Why? I thought it didn't matter to you whether I did it or not."

"It still doesn't, boy. So don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

My fear developed into anger. They considered me nothing more than a puppet to be manipulated to their own ends. They just sat there —smug and secure in my helplessness. Otto's grin broadened. "You think you can get away with anything, don't you." I shouted.

"Look boy, I don't know what you're askin' for, but keep it up and you'll get it. And a lot more. I'm lettin' you go because we found another one, killed the same way, last night. But if you want to stay . . . we can work out something."

My heart leaped and, nearly, so

did I. I nodded and backed away from the desk. Then I turned and walked out of the building. I could feel Otto's eyes boring into my back.

I made up my mind to violate my rule again and walk out of town and keep walking. I didn't care if I got a ride or not. All I wanted was distance between me and the town of Morston. I knew, however, that all of my shaking was not due to relief. I was hungry. I stopped and bought breakfast. I didn't waste time savoring it. All I wanted was strength to walk away from there. Far away. Longingly my mind turned to the blonde. Her transportation was sure nice. So were several other things. Who knows what would have worked out?

When I passed the last house in Morston the sun was already blistering the asphalt. An occasional car swished by puffing hot air. I swore.

When the car stopped beside me I knew I had used my luck for several months. It was the blonde. When I got in, she smiled. "This is familiar, isn't it?"

I laughed. "I hope it isn't too familiar. I hope we get farther than we did yesterday."

She smiled at me. "I think we will." Her expression was soft and yearning.

"I'm sure glad to see you," I said.

"I'm glad to see you, too." She looked again in my eyes. Her tongue circled her mouth.

As we drove I looked at her. She was dressed in fresh clothes, but the same style as yesterday. A tight skirt and jersey blouse. The neck was square and cut very low. A fresh scent rose from between her breasts. Their white up-thrust were freshly powdered. I marveled at her interest in me. I was ridiculously grateful for it too.

"I'm surprised you weren't afraid to pick me up after yesterday," I said.

She smiled, sweet and careful. "I think I'm safe." Her eyes roved the sides of the road, hesitating on the wooded coolnessess. "It's obvious you had nothing to do with it." She looked over at me with female knowingness. "I knew it all along."

"I'm surprised for other reasons, too."

She arched her back, holding back her shoulders. "Let's just say you're the kind of man that interests me."

I felt excitement rising in me. It was going to be a long hot day. I forced my eyes off of her.

The car slowing up pulled me from my fantasy. I glanced at the woman. She was studying a small woods on my side of the road. She turned into it and threaded her way among the trees.

She saw my puzzled look and smiled. "It'll be too hot, pretty soon." She stopped out of view of the road and slid across the seat toward me. "You didn't think I picked you up just for conversa-

tion, did you?" She was breathing hard. Her tongue coursed her lips frequently.

Her hands cupped her breasts, sliding down, smoothing the material along their sweep. They continued downward and slid her skirt up above her knees. She looked into my eyes, her hunger pleading.

Excitement exploded in me.

She leaned toward me. One hand slid down into the crevice between the two pillows of flesh. From this hiding place it drew a knife. It had a white bone handle. It made a soft click as it sprung open.

00003
County Jail
Tinican, La.

Dere Uncle Alf,

You is all wrong about Cousin Essie and me. We wasn't out behind the outhouse compromisin' her honor . . . we was tradin' Manhunts. I had me two Manhunts to trade and Essie only had one. What you caught Essie offering me for trade I wasn't in no way about to take. There ain't no woman worth a copy of Manhunt.

Now I ain't about to marry her . . . so you can tell Dupre and Sam and Jaycee to put away the rope. And you tell Essie, for me, it's pretty lowdown havin' a baby on a man just to get hold of his subscription.

Your beholdin' nephew,
Jeremiah

P.S.
See back cover.

TWO GRAND...
and a bullet

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY

ROBERT PATRICK WILMOT

Velco was a big-shot. He liked to pay-off in thousand-dollar-bills.

When Joe Carlin was tired, the jagged scar along the left side of his jaw turned red. Now, as he stood staring down at Paul Velco, the scar was like a heavy scarlet thread stitched on his white skin.

"Don't hurry any on my account, Velco," he said quietly. "I got nothing better to do. Enjoy yourself."

Velco plucked a grape from the cluster of Concords on the silver dish and stuffed it into a mouth that was already filled with bread and cheese. He took a long gurgling drink of wine from a tall glass, wiped his mouth, belched, and leaned back on the sofa and looked at Carlin as though Carlin were not really there at all. "I wouldn't even give you a piece of fruit," Velco said, in a voice that was thick with distaste. "I wouldn't even ask you to take a chair."

"You can keep your fruit," Carlin said. "You can keep your fruit and your chair."

Velco picked up a linen napkin that lay on the coffee table alongside the silver dishes of bread and fruit and cheese. He wiped his neck where the pink flesh hung in sweaty folds over the collar of his silk dressing gown and spat grape seeds into the fireplace. "I oughtn't to pay you nothing," he said. "I ought to throw you right out on your can. You think I should pay you, go ahead and convince me. Make it good. Make me believe it."

"I did the job," Carlin said in his hoarse low voice. Carlin was a small man with powerful sloping shoulders and heavy hands. His sullen, handsome face was as pale and hardlooking as bleached bone. His eyes were a shade of gray-blue that was almost white, the color of dirty ice under dark brows, and his hair was Indian black.

Velco's heavy lips sneered over the rim of his glass. "You did a job!" he said savagely. "You went after the woman's stuff, and there was nobody there but her, and all you had to do was tie her up and walk out with the loot, as easy as that. So what did you do, you cheap punk?"

"You know what I done," Carlin said tonelessly. "You know what I

done—so why chew me about it any more?"

"You don't give me any reason," Velco said. "A guy should have a reason for a nutty caper like that."

"I had a reason," Carlin said. "You ever pull any time, Velco?"

"What's that got to do with it?" Velco asked, and his eyes came up quickly from the glass and stared at Carlin's face. His eyes, under their heavy lids, were like polished jet. "What the hell kind of bug question is that to ask? You must be stir simple, asking me a question like that."

"I was trying to tell you why I messed around with the broad," Carlin said. "I'd been out of Auburn exactly six days when I pulled that job. You ever see this Eve LaMotte, this babe I took for the stuff?"

"I've seen her," Velco said. "I've met her. I owned a piece of a show she was in once. I'm even a kind of an acquaintance of the guy that's keeping her now."

"Okay," Carlin said. "Then you know what she's like. A babe like you think about all day and dream about all night, when you're doing time. Like I said, I'd been out of Auburn six days, after doing three years. I walked into her apartment and there she was and I guess I went a little crazy."

"A little crazy," Velco said scornfully. "A little crazy! That girl, that beautiful girl, only got out of the hospital yesterday, and it's four weeks since you snatched the stuff."

Carlin lifted his thick shoulders in a shrug, and a faint reminiscent smile twisted his hard mouth. "She didn't want to play," he said softly. "She had on a negligee a guy could push through a keyhole with his thumb, and she must have taken a bath in perfume. I shoved her in the bathroom and when I told her I wanted more than the jewelry, she started to yell. So I clipped her. What else was there for me to do?"

Velco stood up, a big man, thick of waist and chest, with a belly that sagged over his fat thighs. "And your handkerchief came off while you were playing," he said, moving towards the desk in the corner of the room. "The handkerchief you used for a mask fell off and Miss LaMotte got a good long look at your stupid puss. Guess what, punk?"

Carlin pulled a loose cigarette from the breast pocket of his shabby coat, lit it with steady hands. "Maybe you better tell me, Mr. Velco," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "I never was good at guessing things. I never liked guessing games, either."

"A smart piece of goods too, aren't you?" Velco said. "A fresh punk as well as a creep. All right, Carlin, listen! This afternoon, LaMotte went down to police headquarters. She looked at the mugg books and identified your picture without half trying."

Carlin let smoke dribble through his nose, and a muscle moved in his

flat cheek over the red line of the scar. "I must be a pretty hot article by now," he said, and the faint smile tugged at his lips again.

"Hot!" Velco said. "Like a homemade machine gun, you're hot, Carlin. Your picture'll be in every paper in town tomorrow. It'll be in the *News* that's on the street now."

Carlin spat a shred of tobacco off his tongue and took another deep drag on his cigarette.

"I should've known you'd queer it," Velco said. "I planned that heist so good I didn't think even a moron could louse it up. I told you everything you had to know to pull it clean. I did everything but write out instructions."

"Sure," Carlin said. "My part was easy. You had the dirty end of it. You had to fence the stuff. You had to carry all that heavy jewelry clear across town in your Cadillac. Tough."

Velco pulled open a drawer of the massive desk, reached inside and brought his hand out with an envelope pinched between thumb and forefinger. "I'm going to pay you, Carlin," he said, and his wide mouth smiled. "I got a reputation for being a square guy, a reputation I built up for years. When I say I'll pay, I'll pay. Even to a five-and-dime chiseler like you. Your cut in the deal is two thousand bucks."

Carlin's lips twitched into a grin that was as mirthless as the smile on Velco's face. "You said the tuff was worth a hundred and thirty grand. But I guess it was tough to fence, huh, Velco? And besides, what with all the heat I stirred up, I'm in a bad spot to argue, huh?"

"Listen to me," Velco said. "I'll tell you things you don't know, five-and-dime. I could even pick up the phone and call the cops and turn you over. And suppose you told the law I was the top man in this deal? I'll tell you what would happen, crumb. With the connections I got, the legitimate businesses I got, there isn't a cop in town would believe you. There isn't a cop, or a judge, or a jury would believe a man like me would as much as spit on a cheap hoodlum like you, not even for practice."

The muscle moved again in Carlin's cheek and his pale eyes darkened as though some muddy fluid had boiled up suddenly in their icy depths. But Carlin made no hostile move. He spread his hands out in a wide gesture of resignation, and sighed.

"Okay, Mr. Velco," he said. "You're the big wheel, the high shot, the guy with the weight. Me, I'm just a punk like you said. So pay me off, if you don't mind. Pay me off and let me go."

Velco slid a thumb under the flap of the envelope, his belly shaking with silent laughter. "I said I'd pay," he told Carlin. "I said I'd pay, like I always pay. But did I say how? Did I say how?" From the envelope he took two new one-thousand-dollar bills and fanned

them out upon the flat top of the desk.

Carlin stared at the money with his mouth open in astonishment, and Velco's laughter rose to a rumbling roar that echoed through the room.

"And just how are you going to cash these, punk?" Velco asked. "Just where and how would a petty larceny bum like you bust a grand? Especially a guy with no connections in this town. Especially a guy that's very hot in every inch of it."

Carlin swept up the two thousand-dollar bills quickly and put them into a hip pocket, his face impassive, his eyelids lowered like white curtains over the dark fury of his eyes.

"So now, start marching, you punk," Velco said. "Crawl out of town! And while you're crawling, think about what it means to put your dirty hands on a girl like Eve LaMotte."

"So that's it," Carlin said. "You're just sore because you'd have liked to do the same. Only you haven't got the guts."

Velco slapped Carlin, hard.

Carlin was quick with his knife, whipping it out of the pocket in which he had tucked the money. But Velco was just as quick with his gun. The .38 came out of a pocket in the dressing gown, gripped in a big fist. Velco fired as the springblade of Carlin's knife snicked out of the handle like a darting tongue and came up in a flashing arc that did not reach its mark.

The bullet tore into the muscles of Carlin's chest where they curved out below his left armpit. It ripped through sinews and flesh and smashed into the bones of his upper arm. Carlin felt as if a sledge hammer had smashed his shoulder with one frightful, shuddering jolt of pain that turned half of his upper body to sheer ice.

Carlin reeled back, spun half way around, and the knife fell from his hand. He felt sudden illness claw at the pit of his stomach, and nausea rolled over him in a blinding yellow-green wave that had a hard core of sound—the sound of Paul Velco's voice shouting through the fog in which Carlin reeled, waiting for a second bullet to cut him down.

"If you don't want one in the head, get out!" Velco said. *"Get going before I change my mind."*

There was a door at the end of the room, and Carlin found himself going through it as though by blind instinct, choking back the sour stuff that rose in his throat. Beyond the door, a banister curved sharply into a stair well that was like a deep pool of shadow, and Carlin flung himself toward it, going down with reckless speed, stumbling, falling, rising to reach a frantic hand for the street door of the house.

Outside, the rain fell and Carlin went down the street that was wet and dark and gleaming with misty

lamplight, and the wind blew cool against his cheeks. He went at a staggering run, heedless of where he was going so long as his leg carried him away from the house. The rain soaked through his clothes and into his wound, and Carlin felt the first searing, stabbing pain of his torn flesh and bones as numbness gave way to agony.

II

Twenty minutes later, Joe Carlin pushed the ball of his thumb hard against the button beneath the grimy white card that read *Arnold Burkman, Attorney at Law,* and kept it there until he heard footsteps behind the door. After a while, a voice said, "Who is it?"

Carlin put his lips close to the scummed varnish. "Open up, Burkman."

The door opened a few inches. Carlin got his good shoulder against it and pushed his way inside. He closed the door quickly and stared at Arnold Burkman.

"God!" Burkman said. "So it's you." He was a tall man in dirty underwear, a gaunt man with matted, grizzled hair, and a face that was all lumps and creases and sagging hollows, like a wax mask that had been exposed to the sun.

"Yeah," Carlin said. "I got a slug in me. I need a doctor bad."

Burkman's washed-out eyes, red-rimmed and filled with sleep, fixed themselves on Carlin in a wavering stare. His eyes moved to the great stain spreading on Carlin's coat, and then down to the drops of blood dripping on the floor.

"So you copped one," the lawyer said. "And you probably left a trail of blood into the house and all the way up the stairs. Jeez, my landlady'll blow her stack."

"To hell with the landlady," Carlin said, holding his right hand inside his coat.

"You shouldn't have come here," Burkman said. "You know damn well you shouldn't have come here."

"I got to have a doctor. You're a criminal lawyer, rumpot. You must know a croaker who'll fix me up. You got a lot of connections in this town."

Burkman shivered, hugging himself with long skinny arms. "Croakers cost money. No ethical doctor would touch you with a fork."

"So get me one that ain't ethical. I'll pay him whatever he's got to have."

"And what about me?" Burkman asked, looking away from Carlin's face, frowning at the blood stains on the floor. "It's nothing for nothing in this world and damn little for a dollar. I'd be taking a big risk helping you, Joey. I'll have to see a hundred bucks in it for myself."

"I'll pay," Carlin said.

"There's a guy I know up in Spanish Harlem," Burkman said. "Got

no license because he did a jolt for some abortions, but he's good. He could patch up a hole made by a cannon. But he'll want at least a C-note for himself, too."

"He'll get it," Carlin said. His rising voice had anguish in it. "God-damn it, shyster, get the lead out. Get moving!"

Burkman reached a skinny hand inside the dirty undershirt and deliberately scratched his chest. "I'll want my dough first, Carlin," he said amiably. "Like all good hustlers, I get my money first. My hundred bucks now, before I take you to the doctor."

Carlin took a quick sliding step towards the lawyer and glared up at him, his face shining with sweat. "You get paid at the doctor's, see? You both get paid off when I get fixed up."

"How do I know you got any money?" Burkman asked. "You've been living hand-to-mouth, waiting for the payoff on that job you pulled. How do I know you got two hundred?"

Carlin withdrew his right hand from inside of his coat. A spasm of pain rippled across his face, like a flash of lightning in an empty sky, and the scar was a line of flame across his set jaw. He wiped his bloody hand carefully on a trouser leg, reached into his hip pocket, pinched out one of the thousand-dollar bills and held it close to Burkman's face.

The lawyer stared, his big mouth gaping. "Jesus!" he said. "A grand! You know if it's good, kid? You sure it isn't queer?"

"Paul Velco gave it to me. His idea of a joke because he figured I'd have trouble getting it busted. Velco don't shove queer money."

"Velco, huh?" Burkman said softly. "So I guess you couldn't pass it, could you, boy—not in the shape you're in? But I could pass it, couldn't I? There's lots of places will cash a G-note, no questions asked, if you give them a hundred for their trouble."

"We'll give 'em the hundred," Carlin said. He pointed with his chin at a raincoat that hung on a peg on the back of the door. "I'll need your raincoat, Burkman. Tie the end of the left sleeve together, see, and the sleeve will stop the blood from drippin' out. No hackie'll haul me if I'm bleeding all over his cab like a stuck pig."

"I hope you got cab fare," Burkman said, "Because I'm absolutely Tap-City myself. I haven't got a crying die."

"I got just four lousy bucks in the world," Carlin said, "outside of this one G-note."

Burkman shrugged and walked to a cluttered table pushed back against one wall. He lifted a nearly empty whiskey bottle and pressed the neck against his lips. Carlin crossed the room in three long strides and snatched the bottle from Burkman's hand. "The shot that's left in here goes to me," he said.

"You can tie the bag on tighter after we bust the grand. But I'm the guy that's belting this one, because this is one I really need."

III

The woman who opened the door of the apartment had skin the color of cinnamon and a slim, upthrust figure like a young girl's. She stood with the door open a few inches, fumbling with a shoulder strap of her soiled satin slip, her black sloe eyes squinting into the shadows of the hall.

"You remember me, Rosa," Burkman said. "Get the hell out of the way and let us in."

The woman giggled, and stood back, and Carlin followed Burkman down a dimly lighted hall. The lawyer opened a door and led the way into a dark and malodorous kitchen in which a fat little man sat at a littered table, hunched over a Racing Form.

"Greetings, Gradek," Burkman said. "And how's the good gray doctor?"

The fat little man had a bald, domed head that was too big for his dwarfed body. His face was round and childlike. He looked at Burkman with bleak dark eyes, and spat on the kitchen floor. "Mr. Burkman," he said bitterly. "The legal lush. The saturated shyster."

"Now that we've admired each other," Burkman said, "meet my friend, Joe. He's had a piece of bad luck. He was looking at an old gun he's got in the house, a family heirloom, see, and it went off and punctured him a little. A mere trifle, a flesh wound, Gradek, but bothersome."

"Any wound I look at is serious," Gradek said. "Any wound I look at could be dangerous—for me. I hope your boy friend remembered to bring his bankroll with him when he came."

"Look," Burkman said, and the levity was gone from his voice. "We've done business, you and I, and you know I can't afford to cheat you. The boy's got a G-note, see, a thousand-dollar bill. A good one. It's all he's got."

"I never saw a thousand-dollar bill," Gradek said. "I imagine they're beautiful to look at." His thin, precise voice sank to a sardonic growl. "So how do I get paid out of a thousand-dollar bill? Who cashes one at eleven o'clock at night?"

"I know a loan shark who'll break it," Burkman answered. "He'd cash it at five o'clock in the morning in a graveyard. Patch this boy up. Give him a shot of something that'll keep him on his feet. When you've done that, we'll go out, the three of us, and we'll break the bill. You know I'm not going to stiff you, Gradek. Hell, there's no telling when I might even need you myself."

The fat little man stood up quickly. "I can tell right from here that the wound is quite serious," he

said. "I could always make a good fast diagnosis even from quite a way off. So my price, of course, is a little more now. Say a hundred and fifty instead of one hundred dollars."

Carlin followed Gradek into a bathroom that adjoined the kitchen. The pain was like a knife in him now, a dull knife that twisted and slashed and turned into red-hot pincers whenever he moved.

"If you'll step into the bathtub, please," Gradek said, "it'll be so much easier to clean up the mess."

Carlin looked down and saw the tub, cracked and stained with rings of human grime, a shallow pit yawning beneath his wavering eyes. He kicked off his shoes and climbed into the tub, lifting his legs high, feeling the cold, slippery enamel beneath him. He stood very still, sweat running down his face, as Gradek stripped off the raincoat and bloodsoaked jacket and shirt beneath.

"It's not so bad," Gradek said, looking at the crimson horror of Carlin's chest and arm. "But it's bad enough so that you won't feel like hugging your girl friend for a while. You'll need plasma, and morphine, and other things, of course. So, naturally, my price comes up a little. One hundred and seventy-five now instead of the hundred and fifty I quoted."

Carlin did not answer. He stood looking over Gradek's shoulder, watching a fat cockroach crawl between two waterpipes that rose like black fingers against the discolored wall. Arty Keller, the old con who had shared his cell at Auburn, had told him that it helped to stare at something, very hard, when you were in great pain. You looked at something hard, and you thought of things, and if you were lucky you wouldn't scream, because concentration turned the edge of pain.

Carlin stood still, his eyes fixed on the fat roach, thinking of Paul Velco's florid face, his soft smiling mouth, of the boss mobster's big belly shaking with silent laughter as he put the two thousand-dollar bills down upon the desk. He felt the sting of the needle as it bit into his flesh.

Alongside him, Burkman asked Gradek if there was a drink in the house. When the medic said no, he asked: "The alcohol in this bottle, Doc . . . Is it drinking or rubbing stuff? And what would it do if I took a shot of it? God, I've got the grandfather of all hangovers."

"The Bowery stiffs drink it," Gradek said. "A lot of guys guzzle it, and some of them live."

Carlin watched Burkman slosh three fingers of raw alcohol into a dirty glass, dilute it with warm tap water, and swallow the mixture when the alcohol had turned to the color of thick smoke. And then, suddenly, his vision began to blur and the pain grew in him and several times he almost blacked out

but managed to hold on. He didn't dare black out.

IV

It was long past midnight and they were on their way to find the man who Burkman had said would break the thousand-dollar bill. Carlin moved like a sleepwalker, guided by Gradek's hand upon his arm: dazed but his mind still on the G-note, now in Burkman's pocket. The doctor's needle had stopped Carlin's pain temporarily, but the effects of the drug lay heavily upon him, and he was glad when Gradek came to a sudden halt. They were on an empty street that ran between warehouses and tenements and there was no glimmer of light in the buildings that rose black as cliff walls toward the dark sky. It had stopped raining, but a cold wind blew strong from the east, and along the gutters, dirty, sodden scraps of paper raced like tumbleweeds before the force of a gale.

"How much farther?" Gradek asked. "Jeez, Burkman, you think I've got legs like a kid? Why didn't we stay in the cab, instead of getting out way back up the street?"

"You spend too much time with Rosa," Burkman said. He stopped suddenly, and there was a long silence. Then he said, "But I guess we've come far enough, at that. So now you can get lost, pill roller. Beat it, before I kick your teeth in."

"Wait a minute," Gradek said, his face contorted. "You can't get away with this. You stiff me, shyster, and I'll get even if it's the last thing I ever do. You still have to live in this town. I got friends here, don't forget."

"Nobody has any friends," Burkman said in a calm and weary voice, and clubbed a short jolting blow into Gradek's belly. The little man bent almost double, and the lawyer jerked up a knee and drove it into Gradek's face.

The fat little man went to his hands and knees and was very sick. Burkman looked down at him with an almost impersonal stare. "You squeal on me, Gradek," he said, "and then I squeal on you. So we both go to jail, and there's no percentage in that for either of us. The way it is, you got no money, but you're still free to use your tools. You've got your knives, your needles, and you still got Rosa."

Burkman turned and, without another look at Gradek, walked off into the darkness.

Carlin leaned against the wall, peering down at the man who knelt at the curb. Gradek raised a face that was chalk white. He twisted his bloodied mouth into a grimace that looked like the grin of an idiot. "Go after him, you fool!" he said. "You half-witted slob! Don't you know he's going to gyp you, too?"

Carlin found Burkman standing under a street lamp, looking up and down the street for a cab. "I didn't

think I'd have to tell you, Joe," he said. "But I just cut you out of this deal, too. You got off the gravy train, back there, where Gradek fell on his face."

"I'll kill you," Carlin said, his voice thick from the drug. "You cheat me, I'll kill you someday, no matter how long I have to wait."

"Count yourself out, Joey," Burkman said. "You haven't got your shiv, you haven't got a gun, and you're so weak you couldn't knock a sick fly off a saucer of milk. So count yourself out."

Carlin said, hoarsely, "You filthy louse!"

Burkman laughed. "Before I passed out last night," he said, "I saw the early edition of the *News,* with your mug splashed all over half the second page. You haven't got a prayer, kid."

"Bust the grand," Carlin said. "Give me a break, Burkman. One little break. Bust the grand and keep it all, except enough to get me across Jersey, to a place just over the Pennsy line. Give me a break?

"What's for you in Pennsy?" Burkman asked. "They got cops there, too, Joey. They'll scrag you wherever you go, boy."

"Give me a break, Burkman," Carlin said. "I got a cousin with a farm in Pennsylvania, a place I can hole up in until I'm well."

"Sorry, kid," the tall man said, and his voice faded as he walked away fast. "But I'm checking out of this town for a while and I figure I'll need every cent I've got. Going to try my luck somewhere else. California maybe."

Carlin's quivering legs would not carry him after Burkman. He stood still, cursing him. It was then that the two winos came out of the doorway near the corner.

He smelled the men even before he saw them, the rank sweat and alcoholic reek of unwashed flesh, the sour odor of clothes that stank from months of wearing. He turned as they came at him from the black cave that was the doorway.

One of the men was a burly giant with an empty bottle gripped in his hand. A new fear stirred in Carlin as the wino towered over him.

"Hey, Mac," the man said, his teeth chattering with cold. "How about slipping us half a buck?"

The other wino came at Carlin from his injured side and his voice was a harsh command. "A crummy four bits, mister? Or maybe we should take it out of your hide?"

"There's the guy with the dough," Carlin said. He pointed at Burkman's retreating back. "I ain't holding anything, boys. Not a lousy dime. But that guy there is crawling with dough. That guy there is packing a thousand bucks."

The two winos looked at him a moment, and then at one another, and then they turned and ran off toward Burkman. A moment before they reached him, Burkman turned and raised his fists, and the bottle which the big wino was car-

rying struck Burkman on the forehead with a splintering crash.

The lawyer screamed and fell on his back, and the smaller of the two winos brought one of his feet crashing down on Burkman's face. The lawyer raised himself on one hip and flung his arms over his head. The big wino still held the neck of the bottle in his hand and the cruel and jagged fragment of the bottle remained like a broken-rimmed goblet in his fist. He drove the broken glass into Burkman's face and then stepped back, whooping with drunken, maniacal laughter, and the smaller drunk staggered at the fallen man and kicked him again and again. Carlin stood watching from the shadows as Burkman's sagging features lost all shape and identity, like red clay on a potter's wheel.

Carlin stepped back into a doorway and watched the winos go through Burkman's pockets until they found the thousand-dollar bill. He watched them both grab it at the same time and saw that neither one was going to give it up. Each of them held onto part of the bill, and with their free hands they started slamming at each other's face, clawing and tearing at each other. The sight and the feel of that money in their hands seemed to drive them to fury. Carlin watched the G-note as it was snatched from hand to hand, and torn apart. He saw the torn and crumpled tiny pieces of it flutter down to the muck and mud of the street, and move away in the heavy wind.

Carlin left them still fighting and walked to the corner, turned into a side street and staggered on, moving into the teeth of the wind. When he could walk no farther he stepped into the door of a vacant building and sat on the cold floor with the collar of Burkman's raincoat pulled up around his face. He fell asleep almost instantly.

When he awoke, stiff with cold, with the knife of pain twisting again in his chest and arm, he saw that the darkness beyond the doorway was growing thin, washed to the color of dirty wool by the faint and indefinite light of the moment before dawn.

V

Rosa ushered Carlin into Gradek's bedroom and slipped away without saying a word or making a sound.

Gradek lay under a torn crazy quilt, on a tarnished brass bed. His swollen lips were the color of grapes. He did not seem surprised to see Carlin again.

"I thought maybe you'd be around," Gradek said. "It isn't as though you had so much choice, is it, Joe? To a boy in your position, I'm like the Johns Hopkins and the Mayo Brothers rolled into one. You could say I had a sort of medical monopoly, in a way of speaking." His fingers came up to touch his

mouth. "I could use the Mayo Brothers, myself. I damn near never got home after the way that bastard kneed me. But I'll get him for that. If I have to—"

"Forget it," Carlin said, tiredly. "Burkman already got his. But good." He told Gradek about Burkman and the winos. When he finished, he leaned against a crumbling wall that was half covered with photographs of nude girls and wiped sweat from his grimy gace. "I came to make a deal," he said. "I want to make a deal, Gradek." He sucked air into lungs that seemed filled with hot sand, and started to speak again.

Gradek waited, cocking a polite but skeptical eyebrow, but Carlin could not get the words past his lips. He fell forward in a long, sliding fall, and lay face downward beside the bed.

When Carlin recovered consciousness, he was lying upon the bed, stripped of everything except his bandages, and Gradek was standing beside him with a hypodermic syringe in his hand. He was wearing a long-tailed cotton shirt that flapped about his knees, and a cigar butt smoldered in the corner of his mouth.

"You passed out, Joey. Exhaustion, pain, loss of blood. Rosa and I thought we'd be doing you a kindness by undressing you and putting you to bed. And incidentally, Joey, we found your second thousand-dollar bill."

"Okay," Carlin said, "so you found it." He was too tired to care very much, either way.

"You must understand that you're in pretty bad condition," Gradek said. "There's a bullet in you, Joey, lodged pretty deep, and it should be removed. There were several reasons why I couldn't remove it, last night. I didn't have enough morphine on hand to really knock you out, for one thing. And if I had, you would have been too sick to go after the money. You understand, don't you?"

Carlin said nothing, and Gradek's amiable voice went on. "So, what could I do, except sew you up with the slug in you? A pretty unethical procedure, I'll admit, but you can't eat ethics or wear them, or sleep with them, either."

He sat down on a chair and stared thoughtfully at the floor. "I could take the slug out of you today, Joey, but after that, what? You're a sick boy. You need some place to stay until you get well. Also, you're hot. You're hotter than young love in a haymow in August."

Carlin cursed him feebly.

"Of course I could just turn you out when I'd patched you up," Gradek said. "But you'd only fall down in the street, and then the cops might pick you up, and you'd probably tell them about me. On the other hand, I can't keep you here. It's occurred to me that maybe you have some place you can go. If you've got any such place in mind,

tell me, and perhaps I'll help you to get there."

Hope stirred in Carlin. "There's a farm in Pennsylvania," he murmured. "Jut across the Jersey line. If I could get there, I'd be all right."

Gradek lifted the long-tailed shirt and scratched one of his fat thighs. "Pennsylvania is a long way," he said. "I hadn't thought of going that far. But I suppose, since you're a reasonable fellow, and can't expect to get that thousand dollars back, I might consider it. I can borrow a friend's car—for a price, of course."

"That's wonderful of you," Carlin said bitterly. "That's the biggest-hearted offer I ever heard."

Gradek rose from his chair. "I'll dig the lead out of you at the farm, son. It won't kill you to pack it a few hours more. I could dig it out of you here, of course, but you'd be weaker, and it's be a mess, and Rosa doesn't like me cutting people in here." He shook the hypodermic syringe, and smiled. "I'll just sink this spear into you, Joey, and you'll get some rest. Along towards dark, we'll shove off for Pennsy."

Carlin scarcely felt the needle. It was a pin-prick of minute pain, dissolving almost instantly into a feeling of drowsy pleasure as a warm pink mist closed in about him. . . .

VI

Carlin awoke to find Gradek gently shaking him, and beyond the window the light was blue with autumnal dusk. Gradek was neatly dressed in a shabby tweed suit and a white shirt and polka dot tie. He had a cup in his hand, and he held it to Carlin's lips.

"Drink this, Joey," Gradek said. "It'll help pull you out of the fog. You really were sleeping. I dressed your wounds while you slept, and my Rosa gave you a nice sponge bath. Boy, you needed that bath. You know what Rosa said? She said, 'Ayee! but thees one steenks!' "

Carlin swallowed some of the bitter fluid, retched and then emptied the cup as Gradek pressed it relentlessly against his lips.

"I've got some clothes for you," the doctor said. "Not new, but clean. The car's outside, and we can leave as soon as you're dressed. But I'll have to make one stop, in Manhattan, to break the thousand-dollar bill."

"Okay," Carlin said. "Okay."

"On second thought," Gradek said, "I'd better stop at a post office too. So that I can mail the money to myself. Just in case you should get any bright ideas, Joey, after I've hauled you to Pennsylvania. Just in case you should turn out to be ungrateful for what I've done."

He set the cup down on the floor, picked up a pair of faded khaki trousers from a small pile of clothing on the bed, and began to draw the trousers on over Carlin's legs." "Sorry there's no underwear," Gradek said. "I couldn't seem to find a pair of shorts that were clean."

He pulled the trousers up around Carlin's hips, then said: "I gave a lot of thought to the matter of where I was going to break the grand note. I was getting discouraged, and then I happened to think of the Plume Club. You know the Plume Club, Joey? No? Well, perhaps it's a little too refined for your type of character. But, for your information, the Plume Club is a private drinking club, in the sixties.

"Only it's something more than just a private guzzling joint," Gradek went on as he picked up a torn cotton sock. "What it really is, Joey, is a very high-class brothel! One of the finest in the world. At the Plume Club, you can get a good dinner, and a good bottle of wine. And if you want—if you have the price, of course—you can dally with a really beautiful girl. Not you, really, Joey. You're in no condition for that kind of stuff."

Carlin ran his tongue across his parched lips, and said nothing.

Gradek lifted one of Carlin's feet and began to ease the sock on gently over his toes. "I happen to have done some business with Grace Jones," he said. "Miss Jones is the proprietor of the Plume, and a very nice woman, too. When I called, she said she would be pleased to cash a G-note—for a ten per cent rake-off, of course."

Gradek finished pulling on the sock, and made a flourishing gesture with his plump hands. "So, I have ordered a steak dinner for six o'clock, a dinner and a good bottle of wine. Maybe you might feel like eating a little, maybe, but I don't think you will feel like trifling with any lovely girls, Joey, huh? No, not tonight."

VII

Grace Jones had cowslip-colored hair, a face that was pink and slick, like a well-iced cake, and a body that was apparently losing a war against old age and excess flesh. She stared at the thousand-dollar bill, turning it over and over in her hands, and finally lifted her cool gaze to Gradek's face and gave the little fat man a fleeting smile. She paid no attention to Carlin.

"It certainly looks like the McCoy, Doc," she said in a hard baritone drawl. "And anyway, you wouldn't be simple enough to try to palm off a bum G-note on me. But you must have taken an elephant's liver out, to earn this much dough in one slice."

Gradek cut a chunk of rare beef from the slab of red meat on the table in front of him, forked it into his bruised mouth, chewed, and washed the meat down with a gulp of red wine.

"Confidentially, Miss Jones," he said, "I've performed an operation that will make medical history. I've succeeded in grafting a chorus girl's legs onto the trunk of a spinster school teacher in Queens. There isn't a boy in her class who will ever

play truant again."

Carlin rested his head against a wall of the small, curtained private dining room. He sat with his eyes closed, because even the soft light of the room seemed to burn his eyeballs. The fever had given way to chills now, and his body shook as the cold seeped deep into his bones.

He heard the thousand-dollar bill crackle, and the scrape of the woman's chair as she pushed it back, and then Grace laughed, joggling the table as she arose."

"Your friend doesn't look very happy, does he, Doc?" she asked. "What is it, hangover? Or has he been taking some of your pills?"

"He's a man troubled by conscience," Gradek said, his mouth filled with food.

"He looks sort of familiar, too." the woman said. "Seems like I've seen him somewhere before. But not here, I don't think. Somehow he doesn't look like a customer of ours."

"Don't let his dirty raincoat fool you," Gradek answered. "Or the rest of his sloppy clothes. My friend is a rich eccentric. He could buy and sell this place."

Carlin heard the woman's thickening body move away from the table and the sound of a door as it was softly closed. He forced himself to open his eyes. He saw Gradek's face, flushed and sweating, and noisily chewing food. He let the leaden weights of his eyelids fall down again.

"Please, Joey," Gradek said, "don't go out of your way to look like a zombie. Do me a favor, kid. I took a lot of risks bringing you in here, as hot as you are, even at an hour when there's nobody around."

"You'd have taken a lot of risk leaving me sit out in the car, too."

"All right. But, please, if anyone else comes in here, make like a living person."

Carlin opened his eyes again and stared at Gradek for a moment, and his eyes were pools of shadow under knit black brows. "Speaking of risks, Gradek," he said softly, "something's been bothering me. It could be that I'd wind up very dead, somewhere out in the Jersey marshes. Never get to Pennsy. A thing like that could happen, couldn't it, Doc?"

Gradek hacked at his steak with a sharp-bladed, bone-handled knife. He made a wry face. "Anything is possible in this world," he said. "But have you got anybody else to cart you around? If not, shut up. You've got to depend on me, Joey." He half rose from his chair, using his fork as a spear with which to reach a plate of rolls.

Carlin moved quickly. He made a swift movement with his hand, caught up another bone-handled knife, and thrust it into the raincoat pocket. The smell of the half-raw steak clawed at his nostrils as he leaned over the table, and his stomach seemed to constrict and then rise against his throat.

"The first door to the left, down the hall," Gradek said. "I can imagine how you feel."

Carlin rose unsteadily, went to a door in the rear of the room, and pulled it open. He stumbled down an unlighted hallway that smelled of cold cooking and stale tobacco and perfume. He found the first door to his left and clawed his way into a room that was small and not luxurious. He was very sick in the close, bad-smelling darkness of the room. When he had finished, he pushed the single small window open and let the cool evening air blow in upon his face.

After a while, he went back into the hallway, but slowed when he heard the sound of heavy footsteps and loud voices from the private dining room. He took a few wavering steps forward, and leaned against a wall. He recognized Grace Jones' baritone as the other voices fell away.

"These gentlemen here are from the D.A.'s office, Gradek," the woman said. "They say they want to talk to you."

"Sure," Gradek said. "Talk all you want—and the first thing you can tell me is what this is all about."

"They know about the G-note," Grace said. "I'm sorry, Gradek, but I got caught short. They came in here and braced me, and how did I know they've been watching you for a long while? I want to stay in business, don't I? All right, so I figure it's the G-note they're after, and I turn it over to them. So what?"

"But what have I done?" Gradek asked, and his thin voice rose in a kind of blustering scream. "Is it a crime to eat a good dinner, to drink a nice bottle of wine? Is it a crime to have a thousand-dollar bill?"

A man laughed, his voice a sardonic bass growl. "Maybe it is a crime to be passing out thousand-dollar bills, Pop—unless you can damned well explain where you got 'em."

"I would hate to be the D.A.," Gradek said in a bitter voice. "I would hate to be the D.A. and be hanging by my ears until he learns where I got that grand."

"What's the use, Gradek?" another male voice asked. "We saw you park that heap outside, and you got a whole briefcase full of surgical instruments in the car. Tell us some good reasons, Gradek. Tell us why an ex-con with no M.D. license should be packing a bunch croaker's tools."

"I'll tell you a reason, flatfoot," Gradek said. "A reason you wouldn't have intellect enough to understand. Before a stupid, bungling jury and a moronic judge committed the criminal error of sending me to prison, I was a great surgeon. A great surgeon. I carry my old surgical instruments with me because of a sentimental attachment I have to them—like a great violin virtuoso who can no longer play might still carry his violin."

Grace Jones said sadly: "It's no

use, Doc. They got to Rosa. They told me that. They made her spill her guts. Your racket's finished."

Gradek shrugged heavily, and shambled to his feet. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

"One thing first," one of the men from the D.A.'s office said. "Where's the guy Grace said was with you—the guy looked like he'd been on a ten day diet of slow pills? Where'd the sleeper go, Gradek? Where'd he go?"

"For your information," Gradek said, "he's in the john. Sick. On account of eating some of the steak Grace served me, and drinking a glass of her wine. Even the food in prison is better than the stuff she serves here." He spat, and turned his broad back in her direction. "Let's go," he said again.

Carlin was already back in the toilet room when he heard the heavy footsteps coming down the hallway. He locked the door, and turned on both water taps. As fists pounded on the door, he climbed over the sill of the window and dropped into the alley beyond.

VIII

The living room of the apartment was long and wide, with three white walls that gleamed like old ivory in the semi-darkness. Carlin stood very still in the center of the room, on a piled carpet thick enough to muffle an elephant's tread. Listening intently, he heard no sound except the whistling hoarseness of his own labored breathing, the ticking of an Ormolu clock on a curved mantelpiece beneath a tall mirror that reflected the hollow-cheeked, pain-ridden mask of his pale face.

He turned away from his reflection, noved silently towards the bedroom door. Light shimmered softly on the bone-handled knife as he drew it from his pocket, held it behind him, against the skirt of the raincoat that Burkman had once owned.

On the threshold of the door, Carlin sucked in his breath, held it as he moved cat-footed into the room in which Eve LaMotte stood naked before a full-length mirror.

Carlin stared at her firm, pointed breasts, at the soft curve of her stomach, mirrored in a long panel of shining glass; at the clean lines of her white flanks and the profiled breasts. Her flame-colored hair rippled about her white shoulders, and her back was a flawless, deeply indented marble wedge, tapering into a slender waist.

Carlin moved up behind her. He held the long supple blade of the steak knife pressed against his forearm, and he let his knuckles touch the warm curve of her throat.

"Don't yell," he whispered. "Don't make a sound. Just do what I tell you, and you won't get hurt."

He felt the girl shudder beneath his clenched fist, saw the dark eyes jerk up and go wide with terror,

looking at his reflection in the glass. Carlin ground his knuckles against her mouth, muffling the scream that rose in her throat. "Keep quiet," he said. "You yell, and I'll kill you. You make any noise, I'll kill you. Do what I say, and I won't hurt you at all. So help me, I won't."

The frightened eyes stayed on his face a moment, and then she shivered and hunched her shoulders in a despairing shrug. She made a gesture of resignation with her narrow hands and spoke with her lips soft and moist against his fist. "I won't yell," she said. "Take your hands off me. I promise I won't yell."

Carlin withdrew his fist, keeping the knife carefully hidden from her sight. "I don't want you," he said. "I don't want you the . . . the way I did before. I didn't come for that."

The girl moved away from him slowly and sat down before her vanity. She drew her long legs up onto the seat and wrapped her bare arms about them. "Why, then?" she asked her teeth chattering behind the sensuous lips. "Why did you come? You cleaned me out last time. You took every bit of jewelry Eddie'd given me in four years—in all the time we've been together. I haven't anything of value; nothing but a few dollars in my purse."

"Sure, sure, baby," Carlin said. "Listen, I want two things. To get even with a guy, and to grab some getaway dough. You're going to help me do both."

She stared at him without saying anything, and he let the knife fall into a pocket of the raincoat. He crossed to the wide bed that filled a corner of the room and picked up the negligee that lay upon a silken pillow. The negligee was a filmy cloud of almost transparent silk, the same one she had been wearing the first time Carlin had seen her. Carlin sighed and turned and brought the negligee back to her, and stood over her as she drew the clinging green stuff around her body.

"Here's how you're going to help me," he said. "You're going to make a phone call—to Paul Velco."

"You mean that fat politician I sometimes see around town?"

"That's him," Carlin said. "A guy who's got a lot of things, including a yen for Eve LaMotte, a yen that's eating him alive. So you're going to call him. You're going to tell Velco that your boy friend Eddie's out of town, and that he left you no dough, and that you can't cash a check. Then you'll tell Velco you're all alone, and ask him will he lend you a couple hundred bucks, to last you until Eddie gets home. You'll tell him that you're alone, and he'll bring you the money, personally, here. And you tell him to give four rings, two long, two short, so that you'll know it's him."

"Take it easy! God!" Her eyes were slightly narrowed now. While they waited, the girl asked him,

"How'd you get in here, anyhow? I paid a guy ten bucks to change the lock on the door."

"It was easy," Carlin said. "I've had a lot of practice with locks. I heard the water running in the bathtub, and it covered what little noise I made. I didn't make much."

The doorbell of the apartment was a soft chime, and its music came to them then, in two long, and two short bursts of pleasant sound.

Carlin came to his feet like a marionette jerked by violent strings. His legs were shaking, but he crossed to the girl quickly and pushed his face close to hers.

"Now listen to me!" he snarled. "Get what I tell you! I'll be behind the door when you open it. You turn right around and come back here, and he'll follow you, and I'll close the door. I'll take it from there."

Eve LaMotte looked at his face, and the dark eyes were round with fear. "What are you going to do?" she asked. "You're not going to—?" She choked as she looked into his eyes. "Oh, God, no! Not here!"

"Do like I said," Carlin told her, "and maybe you won't get hurt."

He was behind the door when the girl opened it to admit Velco. He stood so close to him that he could smell the perfume and talcum and pomade aroma of the big man as he followed the girl out of the hallway and into the dim light of the living room. He gripped the knife handle so tightly that his fingernails were like sharp blades digging into his palms. He moved soundlessly to the end of the short hallway, and paused.

Velco chuckled, a soft, growling noise deep in his throat. "What a surprise, Baby, your call was," he said to the girl. "Last thing I expected, but I don't have to tell you it's all right. Plenty all right."

The girl laughed, a nearly hysterical cackle.

"That stinking Eddie, to leave you without dough," Velco said softly. "But, it's a break for me." He nudged her, and began to laugh.

To Joe Carlin, the big man's laughter sounded like tearing silk. He saw the vast belly shake. Then he came into the room, on tiptoe, and halted six feet away from Velco's back.

"You know something baby," Velco went on. "I didn't bring you the lousy two C's you asked for. I thought it would be nicer if I brought you a special little present. A little token of how much a guy like me appreciates a really beautiful dame."

Carlin heard the stiff crackle of paper as Velco reached a hand into the breast pocket of his coat. The light shone dully on an envelope in his pudgy fingers.

Velco purred, "Me, I like to do everything the big way. The great big way. So, you ask me to lend you a couple of hundred dollars, instead, I bring you *this*—as a gift. Here, baby—a thousand-dollar bill."

Velco's words burst and echoed in Joe Carlin's brain. *A thousand-*

dollar bill. Not the two hundred bucks Velco should have brought, the two hundred bucks that would have taken Carlin to Pennsylvania and the farm where he could get well. No! Velco had to big-dog it with a *thousand-dollar bill!*

Carlin heard himself yell, a choking, sobbing, scream that seemed to rip at his throat, a shriek that turned somehow into a swelling crimson bubble within his head, and broke against his skull in a tearing burst of pain. He plunged forward and drove the steak knife into Velco's broad back. From the corner of his eye, he saw the girl as she ran, screaming hysterically, out of the apartment door. Then he twisted the knife loose and buried the long blade in Velco's body again.

He was still crouched near Velco's corpse when the police came. He flung himself at them, but the knife was deep in Velco's back, and there was nothing in Carlin's hand but a torn and bloody fragment of a thousand-dollar bill.

He ran straight at the cop who shouted at him to halt. The cop shouted again, and then, when Carlin came screaming on, the cop fired straight into Carlin's writhing face.

THE NEBULOUS LOVER

BY JERRY HOPKINS

All the evidence pointed to a man who didn't seem to exist.

ALICIA BENNETT, a plain and lonely woman of 36 seemingly ordinary years, was found brutally beaten and slashed to death in her modest second-floor apartment. Her death was reported by the building manager, who had gone to her rooms after receiving a call from her office. Miss Bennett had been late for work. She had never been late before.

The manager, a smallish, heavy, balding man named Ernest Abelard, said he had knocked at her door and when there was no response had let himself in with his pass key. Then he had called the police.

An hour later the drab apartment was empty of all life except for the two detectives who stood sullen-faced in the living room. The coroner's photographer had gone. The curious, whispering neighbors had been shushed and hustled back to their apartments. The body had been carried away in a litter. One of the detectives, Capt. Salvatore Ruiz, had just arrived and was talking with his junior officer, Lt. David Terrence.

"Any clues?"

"The place is crawling with clues," the lieutenant said, matter-of-factly. "The guy left everything but his last name and present mailing address. A little luck and we'll have him by tomorrow lunchtime."

"Witnesses?"

"No. None that we know about, anyway."

"Murder weapon?"

"No. Apparently she was beaten and knifed. No blunt instrument found. The assailant, this fella I'll tell you about, could have used his fists. We'll know when we get the coroner's report. The wounds were caused by a knife. That much seems fairly certain. Some of the marks were slashes, some were punctures. But no knife. The usual assortment of knives in the kitchen, but nothing with any blood on it. It isn't likely the murderer used one of them and took the time to clean it after."

"True, but we'll check them. It isn't easy to wash a knife of all traces."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, lieutenant. Who's the fella? I assume you have some definite ideas."

Lt. Terrance crossed the room and indicated some lavender writing paper on the desk. The captain read what was written on the stationery without touching it. It was a note addressed to a "Dearest Richard." Presumably it was written in the hand of the deceased; that could be verified. The message was brief and to the point. The Bennett woman was calling their romance to a halt. She hated to do it, but it was for the best, etc. All the expected cliches.

The captain nodded. "Okay," he said, "that's evidence, if this Richard Whoever and the Bennett woman were fighting and we can prove he was here. So far that just gives one man a motive."

Capt. Ruiz was a seasoned detective and he was skeptical of almost everything, especially if it looked easy. This seemed easy. A woman is murdered and not ten feet from where the body is found is a "Dear John." Very few murders were that easy. They weren't often as complicated as those on television, but once all the details were in, the stories were reasonably complex.

"Anything else?" the captain asked.

"I know, I know," Lt. Terrance said. "I shouldn't jump to conclusions, and I'm not. But that note tells me Miss Bennett was breaking off with a guy named Richard. Maybe they were fighting, I don't know that. But I do know they were pretty close."

"Oh?"

The captain liked the lieutenant, but he was new in the department. He was enthusiastic almost to a fault. In his two months as a detective he had shown a talent, a real talent, but also an eagerness to wrap up a case long before all the facts were collected.

"Like I said, captain. The guy left everything here but his last name and address." He started out of the living room. "Let me show you what I found in here."

The two detectives walked the length of the narrow hallway and into a small, pink bathroom. Lt.

Terrance flicked the medicine cabinet open with a thumbnail and nodded at what it contained.

The captain saw the traces of a man's living with the Bennett woman or, if not that, the traces of a man's staying there pretty regularly. Next to a bottle of nail polish remover was a half-empty bottle of after-shave lotion. On another shelf was a razor and blades, a can of shaving soap, and a wrinkled tube of man's hair cream. Near that were two tooth brushes, both of them frazzled with use.

The detectives completed their revealing tour fifteen minutes later. There had been men's pajamas under one of the pillows on the bed, two pair of freshly laundered men's socks in the woman's dresser, a pair of cufflinks in her jewelry case, and a necktie draped over a hanger in the closet. On the bedtable was an opened box of cigars, with all but three of them missing.

"He has good taste," the captain had said, looking at the cigars. "Those things cost fifty cents apiece."

Then they returned to the living room.

The captain stood by the door. "What do you know about this Bennett woman? Have a chance to talk to any of the tenants here?"

"Only the manager, fella named Abelard. He found the body."

"I know."

"Well, he says she was a perfect tenant. Quiet and she paid her rent on time. In her middle thirties, kind of pretty, he said, and she worked for an insurance company. Other than that, the guy said he didn't know too much. Says she stayed to herself. Says she never went out, so far as he could tell. Polite, but kind of reserved."

"What about callers?"

"I don't know," the lieutenant said. "Abelard says he never saw anybody come here. But that doesn't mean anything. It's a big apartment building."

"You're right. But don't convict this Richard guy yet. It could have been an intruder, you know, somebody who pushed his way in."

"Not likely. You can see the chain lock on the door. Abelard says she never unchained the door until she was sure who it was. And if she didn't know who it was, no matter what he said, she never undid the chain. Of course, there's always a first time. And that still leaves the delivery boys and Abelard. She'd open the door for them, I guess."

"Okay, lieutenant." He reached for the knob of the door. "The first thing we check is this Richard guy. I agree he seems the most logical candidate. The fingerprint guys are on the way. They shoulda been here some time ago. You're careful when you go through a place, so I guess there's no harm done. You stay here until they leave, then come back to the office."

The captain left and Lt. Terrance walked through the apartment

again. The way he saw it, Miss Bennett was writing the "Dear John"—"Dearest Richard" in this case—when the guy knocked at the door. Softly, so no one would hear except Miss Bennett. She went to the door, saw who it was and let him in. For some reason, he didn't see the note. They had a fight and he killed her. Then he was too panicky to remove any traces of his being there, that night or the nights that preceeded it. Almost open and shut. Lt. Terrance wasn't being cold in his deduction. Nor was he lacking in feeling for the dead woman. It was just that most murders fell into a pattern, and this one seemed to fit the pattern of a lover's quarrel.

The following day the fingerprint report came in and Capt. Ruiz called the lieutenant into his office.

"Sit down," he said. "I think you're gonna be surprised." He tossed the report toward Terrance, who scanned it quickly, then went back and read it carefully.

The lieutenant *was* surprised. The report said the only prints on the after shave bottle, the cigar box and so on, were those of Alicia Bennett.

He returned the report and said, "No other prints at all?"

"Well, that's just part of the report. But that's right: No other prints on the stuff. There were some other prints—yours and Abelard's. Abelard opened the front door when he discovered the body, and you apparently got a little careless when you opened the medicine cabinet the first time."

Lt. Terrance opened his mouth to say something. The captain waved a hand and went on.

"Except for those, every print in the whole damned apartment was the woman's. There were some others, but they'd been there for weeks or months. We're checking them, naturally, but I don't expect much. The important thing is, there weren't any strange prints on the man's things."

"It doesn't make sense."

The captain pushed his chair back against the wall and dropped his feet on the desk. "Maybe it doesn't, maybe it does," he said. "Let's go over things again. We found a man's stuff all over the place and we assumed a man was a regular guest. Right?"

"Right."

"But we didn't find anybody's fingerprints on the stuff except those of the dead woman."

"Right."

"That means one of three things," the captain said. "Either the Bennett woman cleaned everything each time the guy left in the morning, or *he* wiped the stuff clean, or there wasn't any guy at all. What's your guess?"

"Well, it doesn't seem likely any woman would clean that thoroughly, no matter how meticulous a woman she was. And it doesn't make any more sense he would do it. If he wanted to cover up, he'd have taken

the stuff out, and he'd probably have seen the note."

"So that means there wasn't any man. Do you agree?"

"I don't know. I'm confused, frankly."

The captain nodded. "Forgive me, lieutenant, but you been married how long? Six years? And you probably been with other women before you met your wife, am I right?"

The lieutenant didn't see what this had to do with the murder.

"That's all right," the captain said. "I been around, too, before I got married. But there's always something new we can learn about the ladies, remember that. They're strange sometimes and you have to consider every angle. You never knew a woman like this Alicia Bennett. I did, once. I'll explain, but let's see if you can follow me. Let's consider the Bennett woman from another angle. Let's say she didn't wipe the man's prints away, let's say the man didn't do it, and let's say there wasn't any man. What's that leave us?"

"A man's things in a woman's apartment."

"Right. And do you know why?"

The lieutenant said he didn't.

"That's okay, Terrance. Like I said, you never knew a woman like this. I did. You see, there *was* a man, but the man was in the Bennett woman's head. It was a fantasy she had, a dream. I had an aunt like this once. She cluttered up her house with all the stuff a man likes. My aunt never had a man in her life. She died a virgin. But to look at her house, you'd think she was one of the swingingest broads in town. The way I see it now, this Bennett woman was like my aunt. She bought shaving soap, razor blades, after shave, cuff links, even pajamas and a necktie . . . then stashed them around her place. She even bought an extra toothbrush and used it every other day, to make it look like a guy stayed there."

"And the note?"

"Part of the dream. No woman likes to think there is only one guy who wants her. Alicia Bennett decided this Richard had been too possessive, too jealous, I don't know. It doesn't make any difference. So she was writing him a note telling him not to see her any more. Maybe if she hadda lived, next day she would be writing notes to Bill Somebody and she'da laid in a new stock of toilet goods and a different brand of cigars."

Lt. Terrance sat there silently. He was thinking of poor Miss Bennett. It was sad. A woman in her thirties and alone. A woman so lonely she fabricated a man from her daydreams, constructed a lover from what she read in magazines. Every night she went home to a pair of cuff links and slept with a man's pajamas. Every night she got rid of one cigar and every morning she emptied a little of the after shave, dumping it down the drain.

It was sad.

Lt. Terrance felt sorry for the woman and wondered how many others there were like Miss Bennett. These other women, he thought, were alive today. And tonight they would be going home to other toothbrushes and cigar boxes, to walk through similar fantasies.

"So that leaves us back where we were when we got the call from the apartment manager," the captain said. "We know something about the deceased, but we have a murder and no murderer."

The lieutenant felt a little ashamed. He had, in his mind, pinned his hopes on a ghost. "I know," he said. "It's up to me to find him."

"Don't be a hero, lieutenant. Any help you need, I'll try to get it for you. But I suggest you start talking to people—starting with that Abelard fella and all the neighborhood delivery boys."

Terrance left the office and started hitting the bars and shops. It was slow going. He had to wait until the clerks weren't busy and could talk, and then had to describe Miss Bennett because many of those he interviewed didn't know the woman by name. She had lived in the building five years, but she was only a face in a crowd. She had come into a shop, she had bought what she needed, and she had gone out again.

All he learned was she probably didn't drink out, and bought enough food to cook in. At the laundry, the dress shop on the corner, and a lingerie shop he learned only that she always paid cash. At the drug store Terrance talked with a clerk who remembered, if rather vaguely, selling Miss Bennett some shaving soap. But that did little more than confirm what the captain said, and didn't mean anything anyway; women used shaving soap, too.

The delivery boys he talked with said they seldom made trips to that apartment. And when they did, the woman usually kept the door chained. They'd leave the package in the hall and she'd retrieve it after they'd gone.

At each stop, Lt. Terrance asked about a boyfriend, but no one ever saw a man with her, or knew of one.

Abelard was even less helpful. Miss Bennett was the perfect tenant, just as he'd said before. She hadn't caused a single complaint in all the time she had lived there. Maybe there was a boyfriend, but Abelard said he never saw him. As for himself, he was in his basement apartment the night she was killed. He said he was watching television and except for giving him a long quiz about what was on that night, there was no way of proving he wasn't. In any case, that would have to wait.

It was a long day and an exhausting one. The detective had interviewed fifteen people. He had talked with Miss Bennett's sister in Detroit, who expressed little interest in the woman's death except to inquire about insurance. He had

talked with seven shopkeepers and bartenders, three delivery boys, four clerks, and Abelard.

The second day the lieutenant interviewed Miss Bennett's boss and those she worked with. To his meager fund of information he added only that she was diligent and responsible. She never missed a day at the office, never was late for work. That was why they had called the first morning she didn't arrive on time. When Miss Bennett didn't answer, they called the apartment manager. And—no one knew of any boyfriends. Terrance didn't think there was a boyfriend, but he wasn't ignoring the possibility, no matter how slim it might be.

Two elevator operators in the building and seven tenants on the same floor contributed no more. Miss Bennett was, from all appearances, an ordinary woman who lived an ordered and ordinary life. The evening of her death no one had seen any strangers and no one had heard any noise.

Two days and the lieutenant had come up with zilch. Zero. Nothing. No leads.

"Tired?" the captain said as Terrance slid into a chair in his office.

"Tired of not getting anywhere."

The lieutenant reported his second day's findings. He was discouraged.

"I wanna apologize for not giving you any more help," the captain said. "I'm short-handed, you know, and . . ." He finished the sentence with a characteristic wave. "Hell, you know my troubles. I'm sorry they have to be yours."

"That's all right," Terrance said.

"Okay. Let's go over everything again." The captain had seen the faintest glimmer of light in the daily reports. Together he thought they'd make the light a little brighter.

For half an hour they discussed the case. The old prints found in the apartment, the captain said, were most of them smudged and useless. Several were Abelard's, but that wasn't unusual. It's often the manager of a building enters an apartment to fix things. Besides, the most recent were six weeks old. The murder weapon hadn't been found. No one had heard anything, or seen anything. And the lab boys hadn't found any useful dirt, ashes or hairs in the place. Miss Bennett had died without putting up a fight, so there weren't any fibers from clothing, nor any bits of flesh under her fingernails.

As they talked, small pieces did begin to fall into place. Who would the Bennett woman invite in when she saw him, or her, at the door? If not the delivery boys, who? Whose fingerprints *did* they find, other than the woman's and the lieutenant's? Even if they were six weeks old or on the door? Who reported finding the body? Who could be seen in the vicinity of the apartment and not arouse any suspicion?

Each time the answer came up Ernest Abelard. The lieutenant thought he'd better have another talk with the smallish, heavy man. He felt he was grasping at straws and knew they had only the weakest of circumstantial evidence, if it was evidence at all. But he had to do something.

"Mr. Abelard," Terrance said, "I hate to bother you again, but I have a couple more questions."

Abelard seemed nervous. "Sure," he said, "sure. But I don't know nothing I didn't tell you."

"May I come in?"

"Why? Ask me what you want, but here at the door like before."

The lieutenant thought there might be something behind this nervousness. He might be jumping to conclusions again, but he decided to take a chance. He stepped into the apartment and looked around. He knew Abelard could ask him to leave and he would have to. He had no warrant and it was Abelard's right. Lt. Terrance took the chance Abelard wouldn't ask him to leave.

An hour later Abelard had been booked for the murder. He'd signed a confession and two patrolmen were searching a vacant lot where Abelard said he'd discarded the knife.

It was luck that resulted in the arrest. When Lt. Terrance entered the suspect's apartment, he saw a photograph of Miss Bennett. At first, Abelard said he was an amateur photographer and had liked the picture so much he had had it framed. Ten minutes later he confessed. That was where the luck came in. It only took ten minutes.

At the station house, with a stenographer in attendance, the captain asked, "Why did you do it?"

His story came out in a flood. He said that he had loved her.

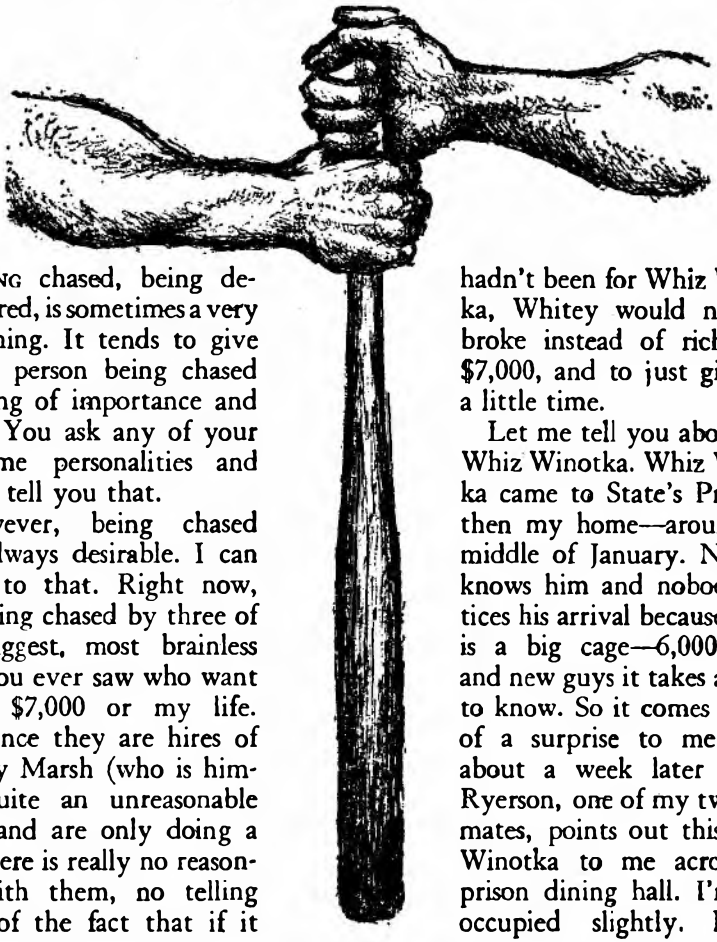
"I really did," Abelard said. "She was living alone and seemed lonely and so was I. I never could tell her how I felt, though. I don't know why. I just couldn't. Then, about six weeks ago, I let myself into her apartment. Just that once. I never do that sort of thing, but I had to see her things. I saw the cigars and the necktie. I saw a lot of things. I never did see the guy coming or going, but I knew he had been there, all right. I couldn't stand that. I was jealous. I thought about it for a long time, and I killed her. If I couldn't have her, nobody else could have her, either."

Abelard dropped his head and laced his fingers together. The lieutenant looked at those fingers. They were fingers that left no prints. And why should they? They hadn't been in the apartment in six weeks, except when they killed Miss Bennett. And then they hadn't touched anything except the woman and the knife.

The man Miss Bennett had created in her mind was as real to Ernest Abelard as he was to the woman who created him. Somehow, the lieutenant felt things might have been different if she had known.

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

He was a ballplayer's ballplayer . . . loyal and dedicated. There was nothing that could keep him from seeing his old team play ball.



BEING chased, being desired, is sometimes a very nice thing. It tends to give to the person being chased a feeling of importance and value. You ask any of your big-name personalities and they'll tell you that.

However, being chased isn't always desirable. I can attest to that. Right now, I'm being chased by three of the biggest, most brainless men you ever saw who want either $7,000 or my life. And since they are hires of Whitey Marsh (who is himself quite an unreasonable man) and are only doing a job, there is really no reasoning with them, no telling them of the fact that if it hadn't been for Whiz Winotka, Whitey would now be broke instead of richer by $7,000, and to just give me a little time.

Let me tell you about this Whiz Winotka. Whiz Winotka came to State's Prison—then my home—around the middle of January. Nobody knows him and nobody notices his arrival because State is a big cage—6,000 cons, and new guys it takes a while to know. So it comes as sort of a surprise to me when about a week later Rocks Ryerson, one of my two cellmates, points out this Whiz Winotka to me across the prison dining hall. I'm preoccupied slightly. Dessert

BY

JERRY JACOBSON

was fish-eyes which is tapioca pudding and it's my favorite. But I'm polite about it, because it's always good to answer people I've heard. "Whiz Winotka?" I say to Rocks. "Big deal."

"Who's Whiz Winotka?" Hobart asked then. Hobart Queen was my other cellmate. Put the two of them together and just maybe you got a deal with the Smithsonian about donating one, complete brain to science. If you don't dicker too much over gray matter.

Rocks sipped off some coffee, then said: "Whiz Winotka—happens to be a very famous person."

"Funny," Hobart was mumbling under his breath as he scanned his supper tray. "It was here when I came out of the line."

Whiz Winotka, I thought to myself. Big celebrity? I'd never heard of him. I slipped Hobart's empty tapioca dish back into his tray and threw Rocks a frown. "Whiz Winotka," I said, "is neither here nor there. Can he get me that plushy job in the library? Can he get me another blanket from Linen Supply? Can he get Warden Phelps on the next flight to the moon? Can he do me any of those favors?"

"He can throw a baseball like nobody's business," Rocks offered as an alternative. "He once pitched a no-hit game for Yakima in the Northwest League. I read about it in a Seattle newspaper."

"How many years ago," I said. "That's all we need around here. Another oldtime pitcher telling us all about the time he struck out Babe Ruth in a sandlot game."

Rocks shook his head and dug into his tapioca. My mouth began to water slightly. "He pitched it just last year. He's still just a young kid."

"Oh, yeh?" I hummed. I was thoughtfully considering both Whiz Winotka and Rock's fish-eyes with the same interest. "How'd he finish the season?"

"In jail," Rocks said. He swept up the last spoonful of tapioca and popped it into his mouth. My heart sank. "Three weeks from the end of the season, he tries to knock off the ticket booths in Salem, Oregon. It's the seventh inning of the second game of a doubleheader. They don't pay too good in the Northwest League, you know."

I nodded, politely, but my heart wasn't with it. Discussing baseball in the middle of winter was about as lively a topic as, say, what my plans were for next Tuesday. Further, ever since the summer before, baseball had become with me a touchy subject. I was the coach of the A-Block baseball team, a cap I wore with dubious distinction. State's Prison has four cell-blocks, hence the four-team Intra Prison League. We finished the season dead fourth, with a record only a statistician or Ripley could love: 1 win, 19 losses. At one stretch we lost fifteen straight games and two outfielders who (it's the truth) collided on an infield pop-up.

As if that didn't make our season long enough, during a pre-season temper clash with Whitey Marsh, D-Block's manager, over the respective merits of our teams, I unwisely told Whitey to "put his money where his mouth was." He did—in the amount of $8,000, put up in varying sums, on paper, by the six-hundred odd-members of D-Block.

I immediately fired up a A-Block with team spirit and in less than twenty-four hours, had Whitey's $8,000 matched. That was my second mistake. My first was not making a pre-bet appraisal of A-Block's team strength. We lost that opener 13-1 and with it a good chunk of the nest-egg I'd been saving, not to even mention the thick swath cut through the nest eggs of my fellow A-Blockers. They were only recently beginning to speak to me again. I didn't want to lose that.

A staccato of bells rang out, signalling the end of evening chow and we filed back to A-Block and Cell-1220. Rocks fell to writing a letter to his best girl; Hobart began whistling show-stoppers from hit Broadway musicals, with eight bar breaks to ask the ceiling if it could tell him who he'd like to have a date with, and then answering. Doris Day . . . Carol Channing . . . Carol Baker . . .

I tumbled onto by bunk and immediately began to wrestle with my current problem, the current problem being my immediate future. Come September, if I kept my nose clean, I would be walking out the front gate a free man, but not a very solvent one. I still owed Whitey Marsh $2,000 from the baseball bet the previous season, and that settlement would leave me close to bankruptcy. And there was no getting around it, either. Marsh probably had his welcoming committee all lined up to meet me at the gate. My mind was cooking with a fresh idea, a new job . . . but it would need working capital, and working capital I hadn't.

Funny how the human mind can hold only one thought at a time. You take an apple and an orange, for instance. You think about the apple, then you think about the orange . . . but it's impossible to think about the apple AND the orange at the same time. So that's how it was when my mind went blank for a moment . . . and suddenly into my brain popped the orange. Whiz Winotka. I bolted to a sitting position on my bunk. Whiz Winotka was the answer to all my problems!

"Rocks," I said, a tremble of excitement showing in my voice, "tell me more about this Whiz Winotka."

"Sure," Rock said. He looked up from his letter and wedged his ballpoint pen next to his left ear. "What do you want to know about him?"

"He played baseball," I said. "Not just any kind of baseball, but professional baseball."

Rocks nodded.

"And he's good?"

Rocks nodded.

"How good?"

Rocks pondered, stroking his solid chin. "In three, four years—the majors, maybe. Triple-A for sure."

I sank back onto my bunk, my mind buzzing with what could very easily turn out to be truly the man with the golden arm. With any luck. Whiz Winotka *was* bedded down in A-Block. That was a start. I asked Rocks: "Who knows he's a former pro? Anybody?"

"Not likely," Rocks said. "The Northwest League is small potatoes, and the box scores only make the local papers. Unless you actually lived in a town that had a team . . ."

"What cell's Winotka in?" I asked.

"He's in 1224," Rocks said. "Four down from us."

I got up abruptly and went to the front bars and paged Lennie Holland in 1221 and told him to pass the word down to 1224 and ask Winotka if he'd told anyone he was a former professional baseball pitcher. A short minute later the word came back. No.

I asked Holland next to relay to Winotka if he wanted to make a bundle of money. And the word came back. Yes!

And finally I asked Holland to get the word down to Winotka not to tell anyone about his baseball career, especially anyone who wasn't an A-Block resident. If anyone went out of his way to pump him, he was to tell them he played "just a little in high school."

And the final word came back. Sure. Just a little in high school.

Next morning I beat dawn up by a clear hour, relaying the word to A-Block cons that we had in our midst one first-class, top-notch professional baseball pitcher. I mentioned further that the first guy to let the news leak to the other blocks would be the principal figure in a shoe-string hanging at midnight. I got no dissenters.

It was going to be a big job making this re-match with D.-Block a sure thing, but we had four months with which to work and six hundred eager, dedicated cons to help gather information.

First we needed access to hard facts. Was Whiz Winotka really the best pitcher at State's Prison? The only way to learn the answer to that question was to make a thorough check into the pasts of 1800 inmates. We had three men in our block working as clerk-typists in Administration and Records. We put them to work immediately making an A to Z check. If there was a con who did nothing more than coach a little-league team, I wanted to know about him.

Next, there was the touchy business of Whiz Winotka's short, local stay at the state prison at Walla Walla, Washington. We had to make sure no one at State's Prison had

done time at Walla Walla between August and December, 1964. A small point, but all it took to kill my plan was one, familiar face suddenly recognizing another familiar face. Our three boys on minimum-security in Administration and Records took care of that, too.

Meantime, I took up the task of personally seeing to it that Winotka got assigned work in the Prison laundry. I was a steam-presser there myself and having Winotka close by where I could make sure he didn't wander into any sports discussions would go a long way toward insuring a big, successful betting victory against the unsuspecting likes of Whitey Marsh. The Prison Laundry forman obliged my request. He said he did need another hand in the laundry as a matter of fact—and the three cartons of smokes I gave him, as well.

After that it was all waiting and watching and keeping Whiz Winotka from mingling or talking with cons in the other three blocks, or chucking snowballs in the exercise yard during breaks. February came and went. In March the weather began to warm. The snow became soggy slush, then pools of water, and finally invisible vapor lifting away to leave rough, dry pavement.

Soon the prison began assigning work crews to the ballfield to cut grass and re-surface the infield in preparation for the upcoming season. An occasional ball-glove began to appear during smoke breaks and lunch periods. Restraining Winotka was difficult. The smell of spring grass was in the air and he had got a good, heady whiff of it. All he talked about was what kind of pitching-rubber the pitching mound had, and whether it was packed with red earth or brown clay, and who wanted to go out into the yard for a little catch? But restrain him we did.

It was along about this juncture that Whitey Marsh began to make noises like a baseball manager laden with talent to burn. Nearly every day he would make at least one chow-line stop to gloat to me about "this new third-baseman from Joliet, doing one-to-five for hanging paper," or "this new left fielder up from "Q" doing one-to-ten for armed-robbery, right up his alley because that's just the way he cuts down opposing base-runners." But no mention about pitchers, no mention because Marsh *had no pitchers*, just the same old boxfull of Shorty Verplanks and Pete Oldiss's leftover from the year before.

By April the sun was definitely here to stay and each cell-block began practicing at the ball-field on its assigned days. A-Block practiced on Mondays and Wednesdays, under the critical eyes of inmates scouting the talent for their respective blocks, just as we ourselves did when we weren't practicing.

By this time all the administrative checks on pitching talent and former residents at Walla Walla had been completed and all had proved nega-

tive. I was brimming with confidence, so much of it that after the second week of practice began, I trotted Whiz Winotka out to let him get a look at the field and work his legs into shape. I had him down on the roster as an outfielder and immediately set him to shagging fly balls during batting practices. But no pitching. I didn't let him get within a good thirty feet of that pitcher's mound.

One warm Wednesday, Whitey Marsh himself showed up to spy on our talent. I saw him leaning against the chain-link fence running along the first bass side and went over. A faint smile of secret confidence bent his lips.

"So this is the great A-Block ballclub," he said slightly derisively. "Where you hiding your talent, Sport?"

"Right under your nose, Whitey. All right there under your nose."

He gave off an animal grunt. "Same old bunch far as I can see." He raised a hand and pointed it toward Winotka camping under a fly ball in center. "Except for the new guy out there in center. Who is he?"

"Name's Winotka," I said.

"Winotka," Marsh repeated, dully. "Funny name. Don't play funny though. Stands out like a sore thumb, if you know what I mean."

I ignored the barb and said, "Kid pitched some in high school, but I got him in the outfield for us. We need outfielders bad."

"You're telling me?" Marsh said. "I was there when those two fly-chasers of yours bumped heads on that infield pop-up last season. Funny stuff. Where they now, Barnum and Bailey?"

"They're still around," I said.

"Good," Marsh said. "I like 'em. I get down in the dumps, I'll come over and watch 'em chase down pop-ups. I'm a patsy for a good laugh."

Marsh chucklde and I chuckled with him, then eased onto another tact. "You gonna give us a chance to get our money back this year in the opener?" I asked.

"You mean . . . put my money where my mouth is, again?" Marsh goaded. "Uh, isn't that the way it goes?"

"Any way you want it, sure. Well?"

"Why not," Marsh hummed. "Just so long as I don't get another five years slapped onto my sentence for taking candy from babies, sure."

"How much?"

"I'll talk it over with my block leaders," Marsh said, "but for you, sport, I'm sure the sky's the limit."

"Good," I told him. "A guy always likes a chance to get even."

"Get even? You'd be smarter to quit while you're still ahead, sport . . . or should I say not so far in-a-rears? You'll be lucky if you stay on the same field with us, even with this new guy, this Swabotka."

"Winotka," I corrected.

"Winotka. Sure. See you 'round,

Sport. Uh . . . don't let any of those guys hurt themselves, okay? Funny ballclub. Funny."

Marsh wandered off and I wandered into loose reverie. It was in the bag, a cool fortune was in the bag. True, we didn't have much of a ballclub, but we did have Winotka and with Winotka, who needed a ball club? Just eight other bodies to abide by the rules, one run somewhere along the way and we were in.

Though the bet wasn't yet official, it would be in a few days, so I began collecting our end of it. It looked like a sure thing. Money came in from everybody in the block. Lifers were prohibited from betting for obvious reasons, but the rest of A-block was a different story. They bet as if there were no tomorrow.

I went in for five-thousand. At first I hadn't planned on plunging in quite so deep, just a couple thousand to break even with Whitey Marsh and a little bit extra to keep me going for a while when I was out and setting up the new job. But after I saw Winotka throw a baseball, all that changed. I kept him around late after practice one Wednesday, took him out behind the cinder brick equipment shack for a work-out at sixty paces. Up to then, I was going strictly on Rocks say-so about the kid, but I wanted to make sure for myself.

I'll never forget that little work-out. Nor will my swollen left palm. Sharp-dipping curve balls, crazy knucklers, fast-breaking sliders—Winotka had it all, plus a fast ball that coming at you looked like a speeding white bullet. So that was why the five thousand.

The second week of April began with my transfer to the prison library coming through. Turning it down would have looked a bit phoney, especially since I'd been bucking for it nearly a year, so I bid the boys in the laundry goodbye, turned in my steam-press and left them with an order to keep a close guard on Winotka. I wasn't worried. Winotka was now a corporate investment worth nearly $30,000 and that was a cooperative deal no one wanted to queer.

The following Wednesday, I met Whitey Marsh in the exercise yard and finalized the bet. He was compassionate. He even gave us odds, 4:3, our thirty G's against their forty. It was still three days before game-time, he said. Did I want to back out? I shook my head and told him, no; it was the principal of the thing.

That was the scene then when late Friday afternoon rolled around. I was let off early from the library feigning a headache, so I could spend some extra time in my cell going over my line-up for next day. I had twenty-five players, all of equal talent, which was a bit below par, and I had to place the eight best where they'd do the least damage. Not that I was worrying about our chances. I wasn't. With Winotka winging in those fast-balls and

fancy curves, not many balls would be hit out of the infield, if hit at all, but I wanted to insure him every break.

As I sat there alone, manipulating names on a sheet of paper, there came that sound every con knows from the day he enters stir until the body he dies. I call it the Pandemonium Sound, a shrill profusion of clanging bells, wailing horns, and shrinking sirens. You know it from those old B-movies as a jail break.

At first I merely sat stock still and listened, my mind hooking on the usual first thought. Who? Somebody with half a brain, that was sure. It didn't narrow down the possibilities much. It's a damn fool stunt, any way you look at it. The odds of cracking out of a place like State were about as steep as say a sardine coming to life and breaking out of its tomb. I just hoped whoever he was he had sense enough to give up peaceably.

With the coming of the break, work had been stopped and everyone was marched back to his cell for the usual head-count. I stretched out on my bunk as Rocks and Hobart were ushered inside. Rocks thought he'd write a letter to his girl. Hobart whistlingly into *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, which under the circumstances was not an appropriate number.

"Who want out?" I asked into the room.

"Got me," Rocks said. "How do you spell *crummy?*"

"Depends on how you use it," I told him. "You mean like—"The cake we had for lunch today was crumby?"

"No, I mean like—what another crummy day it's been," Rocks said.

"Use rotten," I suggested. "It's got more taste." I spelled it for him.

Solly Moran, one of the blockguards ambled into view and looked into our cell with a suspicious leer. "One, two, three . . . check."

"Who went out, Solly?" I asked him, civilly. I'd suddenly gotten civil. I was under a year. Fear does that.

"If I knew the answer to that, do you think I'd be checking bodies?" he said. "Stupid . . ."

Moran passed out of sight. When it was safe I stuck out my tongue. I told Hobart he was playing rightfield tomorrow. He moaned and said something about right field I can't repeat here.

Suddenly I heard commotion down the line. Solly Moran's voice boomed bloody thunder and in another second he was stomping back past our cell with an enraged, little child's walk huffing, "my block! It has to happen in my block!" He shook his pint-sized fist in the air. "You guys are gonna get it . . . just you wait . . . no smokes . . . no free-time . . . no ping-pong . . . no . . ."

Lennie Holland next door in 1221 was paging me. I got up and went to the front bars and asked him what was up.

"D'ya hear? Three guys. Went out in the laundry truck, Bim, bam, right out the front gate."

My heart did a sickening dip. A-Block had only one con working in the laundry and one A-Block con had gone out. "Not . . ."

"Yeh," Holland said. "Winotka."

I fell against the bars and began to cry. I'm not a weak man, but under the circumstances, I believe I had every right. My ace pitcher, my road out of debt . . . gone. "Why?" I said. I said it over and over again as I pounded my fists on the bars.

"Somebody heard him say he had to see a ballgame," Holland said. "Something about the Northwest League starting and he had to be there for Yakima's opener." Holland rolled his eyes. "Where's this Yakima place, anyway?"

"Who knows," I said. I said it quite weakly, as a matter of fact. "Just—who in the world knows."

Well that's pretty much the size of things and pretty much the whole story. While I don't blame Whiz Winotka too much because what he did, he did on impulse—I do blame Whitey Marsh for being such an unreasonable man.

The bus I have a ticket for is outside revving its engines, but I don't think I'll board it. Right now what I need is security and time to work this problem out. Across the street from the depot there's this ritzy looking department store. It has a ritzy looking plate-glass front a mile wide. My plan now is to go over there and take off one of my shoes and give it a hurl. Under the circumstances, it's really the only safe thing to do.

to each his own

Dixon tried to change. He really wanted to. But in the end . . . he served his calling.

BY TOM COX

DIXON laid the snub-nosed .38 revolver beside him long enough to fumble a cigarette from his shirt pocket and get it lit. Then he picked it up, loosely, again and balanced it thoughtfully in his right hand. He was lying on the bed fully clothed and watching the pattern of weird designs dancing on the ceiling. A pattern created by the flashing neon light of the drugstore directly across the street. His bedroom window also afforded him a view of the street below, now glistening in the fall rain. Occasionally, when a car cruised slowly by, his grip tightened on the gun. The room was in darkness except for the intruding neon light and the red glow of his cigarette. He turned on his side, had to stretch to flick ashes into a tray on the dresser, and looked at the illuminant dial of the clock. Ten-thirty. He licked dry lips and wondered how much longer before they got there. They'd be coming fast, checking off the miles of highway in Banelli's limousine. Dixon's mouth became a tight, grim line as he thought of the man sworn to kill him, and was glad the waiting was almost finished.

The cigarette burned his fingers, and he mashed it out and stood up. He tucked the gun in his belt and went into the lighted living room. The two suitcases he had packed with Vicky's clothes were by the door. He double-checked the small one to make sure he had put in the envelope containing the thousand

dollars they had managed to save over the past four years. He glanced around at the other envelope resting against the lamp that contained money and a note to the landlord and nodded, satisfied with his work. Then he went to the closet and took his topcoat and hat and draped them over his jacket pocket and lit another cigarette. His hand was steady, and that pleased him.

The door rattled, and Dixon froze until he heard the woman's voice. "Dix! I don't have my key. Unlock the door."

He exhaled deeply, aware for the first time of holding his breath, and let her in. Vicky saw the suitcases at once and stopped short. "What's this, Dix?"

"How was the movie?"

"Awful. Answer me, Dix."

He locked the door again and went to the telephone. "You're going to visit your sister in Columbus for a few days. The money's in the small one."

Vicky frowned. "Why?"

"I'll join you later. We have to find a new place."

"What's wrong with this one. We're safe here. You said so yourself. I don't understand, Dix."

The cigarette had a bad taste, and he ground it out. "I can't stay in one place too long. I've had it here."

"So that's it. That's why you insisted I go to the movie alone. So you could pack. Very well," she said resignedly, "I'm with you."

He picked up the phone and dialed the cab company, wondering how to frame the words to tell her the truth.

The sleek, black car purred smoothly along the highway just inside the speed limit. Large drops of rain began to smack the windshield, and Fiske switched on the wipers. Tully turned around from the front seat and looked at the fat man huddled in the back corner with his topcoat up around his neck and hatbrim low over his eyes. "Thirty miles according to that sign," he said.

Gino Banelli smiled with the corner of his mouth and reached forward to prod the driver on the shoulder. "Shut 'er down. Don't be gettin' us a ticket."

Fiske grinned. "I'll drive real careful."

"You do that," Banelli said. "I been waitin' a long time for this."

Tully chuckled. "Fiske is in a hurry. He don't know Dixon like we do."

Fiske shot a hard look at Tully. "He ain't no goddamn superman, is he? I ain't afraid of him. It's you that didn't wanta' come."

The other man was silent. Banelli leaned forward again. "Virg had his reasons. Him and Dixon used to work together as a team. So lay off. I don't want you two at each other's throats." He sat back and pulled a pack of cigars from his inside coat pocket. "I don't expect no trouble

from Dixon because he don't know we're comin'. But I ain't forgettin' how he used to be." He unconsciously let one fingertip trail along the white scar beneath his left eye.

Fiske glanced at his boss through the rear view mirror and grinned. "You can relax, Gino. I'll take him, and you don't need to get outa' the car."

Tully laughed. "That attitude can get you killed."

Fiske scoffed at him. "You damn near slay me, Pop."

Tully nodded soberly. "That may be. If there's anything left after Dixon gets through with you. I think you should have first crack at him."

Banelli grumbled something under his breath and then said, "You talk like he's expectin' us."

Tully had hoped he hadn't caught it. "I shouldn't let Fiske rub me. If he shoots like he talks, he'd be tough."

"Can that stuff," Banelli said and settled back to light his cigar.

Dixon replaced the phone and had to make an effort to face the girl. "Take a fast look around, Vic, and see if I forgot to pack something important."

He sat on the couch and smoked another cigarette until Vicky returned. "What's the hurry," she said, "to leave tonight? You could at least have let me stayed here and clean the apartment. I don't think you're telling me the truth, Dix."

"If you don't trust me . . ."

"All right. Forget I said anything."

"Ready?" He rose and put on his coat and hat.

"I—I guess so." Vicky took a last glance around the room, as the cab honked in the street below.

Dixon carried the suitcases down and helped her into the back seat. She sat quietly on the way to the station until he reached over and took her hand. "It doesn't seem like almost five years ago that we met."

She forced a smile at him. "No, it doesn't. It's like yesterday to me. That night you and Tully came into Banelli's club and sat at the table with us."

Dixon remembered it too well. "I thought then that you're too good for Gino. Not like his other women."

He noticed that she was relaxing, and her smile was more genuine. "And I couldn't take my eyes off you. I couldn't get over how quiet and distant you seemed, and it surprised me that you wouldn't drink with us."

"I drank coffee," he said.

"That's right. Banelli said that you and Tully never took a drink. Afraid it might interfere with your one great talent."

Dixon was trying hard to keep it light, not to hint at what he would have to tell her later. "I wonder about that 'great talent', as Gino called it."

She tucked her arm through his and leaned her head against his shoulder. "Believe me, you have it."

"He wasn't talking about *that*."

"No, I am."

After a moment, she straightened up and looked at him seriously. "Dix, we have a good life, don't we?"

"It hasn't been too bad. I never figured myself as an eight-to-five man before. Always wondered how the other half lived. It gave me a chance to catch up on cars. I'm a pretty good mechanic."

The smile disappeared from Vicky's face. "You talk like it's all over."

"We're here," he said, looking the other way. The cab stopped in front of the station.

Dixon carried her bags through the waiting room, out the double doors at the back to the loading ramp. Then he bought her ticket while she waited outside. When he returned to her, he could hear the shrill whistle in the distance. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around to face him. "Vic, I wanted to, but I can't let you go without telling you. This *is* goodbye for us."

There was no change in her expression, only the tears that welled up in her eyes. He felt her weave a bit under his grasp. "Why?" She almost choked on the word.

"I tried, honey," he said, making an effort to get the words right. "I tried to change, but I can't. A man's got to be what he is. I'm going back to Chicago. I still got connections, and it's the only life I know."

"I—I'll go with you."

"No! You couldn't stand that kind of life. I know how hard it's been for you to try to forget my past as it is. I've got to go it alone."

She tried to brush the tears away. "I'll follow you, Dix. I won't let you go like this."

He shook her gently. "Don't make me kick you out, Vic. Don't let it end that way."

She was pleading. "Don't let it end, Dix."

"I don't need you, Vic. It was a fool move on my part in the first place."

"You can't mean that," she gasped and leaned against him for support. "I don't believe it."

"You better believe it," he told her grimly. "It's all you got to hang onto now."

The train screeched to a halt near them. He held her there, while she was crying softly, as other passengers milled around. She lifted her face to him. "You can't go back, Dix. Banelli will find you and kill you."

He shook his head. "Gino's influence is declining. He's on his way out, and I'll help him that way."

"You really *mean* it. Your eyes glow when you think about it. You want to kill . . ."

Dixon put his hand over her

mouth. "I mean it, kid," he said gently. He backed away from her, watching her standing with her head down. It's better this way, he thought. She'll hate me, but at least she'll be alive. Then he wheeled and walked away quickly.

The black limousine glided to a stop in the parking lot outside. Gino Banelli was unwrapping another cigar as the two men twisted around to face him. He was peering toward the depot. "Virg, go inside and see if the agent can tell us where Joseph Smith lives."

Tully nodded and paused long enough to light his pipe. Fiske was looking around, mildly amused. "This is a swingin' burg all right. The sign said twelve hundred. Your Dixon sure knows how to pick 'em."

"That's good," Banelli said, "for us too. He won't be hard to find."

Tully went toward the station around the back way along the ramp. He had to sidestep an old lady who was hurrying toward the train, and bumped into a young woman with two suitcases. He tipped his hat to apologize when their eyes met and held. He blinked twice and raised an eyebrow as the recognition took effect. The woman paled. "Going somewhere, Vicky?" he asked gently.

"What—what are *you* doing here?"

Tully smiled. "I think you know." He nodded toward the train. "Taking that one?"

She didn't answer, and he lifted the suitcases. "I'll put these on for you."

When he stepped down beside her again, he was knocking the loose ash from his pipe against the heel of his hand. She was staring at him with wide eyes. He tamped his pipe with one finger and relit it. "I don't suppose," he said, "you'll tell me where Dix is?"

She shook her head, and he nodded. Then she said, "How did you find us here?"

"Didn't Dix tell you? One of Gino's friends saw him at the garage a week ago. Just by chance. That's why we're here. I'm still with Gino."

"Dix doesn't know," she said slowly.

"He knows. I can see that you didn't. I called him this afternoon, to warn both of you to leave. Figured I owe him that much. But *both* of you aren't leaving, are you. He's still here, waiting for us."

Vicky gasped, and Tully took her arm. "It's a smart move, gettin' you outa' the way. Gino never had a woman walk out on him the way you did. And I never saw a man hate as much as he hates Dixon." He helped her up the steps where she looked back at him, a combination of fear and disbelief in her face. "Go on, Vicky. He'd like it that way."

Tully turned and walked quickly into the station. After checking with the ticket agent, he went back

to the car and slid in beside the driver. Banelli leaned forward, crooking his arm on the back of the seat. "Well?"

"Couldn't learn anything. But I have a feeling he won't be hard to find."

"Yeah?" Fiske said. "What makes you so sure?"

Tully grinned. "What Gino said. This town's too little for anybody to hide in long."

"I could see you out back, tryin' to make out with that dame. You go for these small town hicks?"

"Who was she?" Banelli asked.

"What Fiske said. A small town hick."

Banelli punched the driver's shoulder, and he turned to light Gino's cigar. "You talked like old friends. And carryin' her bags for her."

"I apologized for bumping her. Just combinin' a little pleasure with business. That's all."

"Don't!" Gino snapped and settled back in the seat.

Fiske switched on the ignition. "What the hell, let the old man make out, Gino. We don't need him. I can take Dixon myself."

Tully laughed shortly. "Don't miss. There's no second chance."

"I never miss."

Tully smiled and pulled on the pipe. "Neither does he."

"This is one time I'm pullin' the trigger," Banelli growled. "Somebody in this dump can tell us where to find him. Try a gas station."

Dixon had walked the few blocks to Main Street through the alleys. Main Street, barren of all traffic at this hour and lighted by five single street lamps, was the town's only business route. He knew they'd find him quickly once they arrived. But they wouldn't expect him to be ready. The town was asleep, and the setting would be perfect. Even the rain, which had now lessened into a chill drizzle, would help. Nobody'd be out in that. But he liked the rain. It washed the air clean, the way he felt inside now.

He turned into *Molly's*, the all-night cafe across the street from the public park. *Molly's* large front window allowed him a view of the street and its traffic. Another reason was that Sammy, on night duty, made good coffee, and Dixon decided he could use a cup. He selected the first stool near the door and glanced at the worn clock on the wall. It was eleven-thirty-five. Sammy swiped at the counter with a greasy rag. "Evenin', Mr. Smith. Out late tonight, ain't ya?"

"Later than usual."

"See a menu?"

"Just black coffee, Sammy."

Sammy drew the coffee, spilled some as he set it down, and wiped his hands on his apron. "I can't see why Molly insists on stayin' open all night. Why, I bet I ain't had half a dozen customers all week between eleven and six. An' all of 'em travelers who git off the main highway, or want some java. Hell, there ain't

nobody in this town 'at stays up all night."

"Any strangers here tonight, Sammy?"

Sammy chewed a toothpick. "Naw. That new boy from the Shell Station came in about twenty minutes ago for coffee. You're the second customer I got."

"Yeah," Dixon said absently and turned his eyes back to the street.

"Dammit! I wanted to stay away from the lights," Banelli growled, as Fiske swung onto Main Street.

"Makes no difference," Fiske said. "It ain't exactly jumpin' with life."

"A real hot one, all right," Tully said.

Fiske made a motion with his hand. "There's a joint open." He indicated *Molly's.*

"No," snapped Banelli. "Drive on to that gas station."

When they stopped by the pump, Tully climbed out and went into the station. "Fill it with ethyl," he said to the young attendant.

"Want me to check under the hood?" The boy obviously admired the sleek, black car.

"No."

In a few moments the boy was back. Tully paid him and said, "Do you know a Joseph Smith?"

"Uh, lemme see. Yeah. I think he works at the Ford garage."

"That's the one. Know where he lives?"

"Naw, but I saw him walk by here just a few minutes ago. Probably went to *Molly's.* Might still be there."

Tully thanked him and walked outside. Fiske was leaning against the fender. He straightened at the other man's approach. "Find out where he is?"

Tully nodded, and Fiske hurried around the car to the driver's side. "You're in a helluva hurry."

Fiske stopped with his hand on the door and smiled slowly. "Yeah, Pop, I am. Don't worry, I'll take care of you. I wouldn't let anything hurt you, Pop."

Tully took his time lighting his pipe, to irritate the other man. "I'd watch that mouth, *Sonny.* You could get it slapped shut, you know."

Fiske's eyes narrowed, and he licked his lips. But he didn't reply, and after a second jerked the door open and climbed in. Tully smiled and got in the other side. Banelli was leaning forward, chewing the cigar. "Well?" he demanded.

Tully exhaled smoke slowly. "At the cafe we passed."

Banelli nodded and sat back. He took a small calibre nickel-plated automatic from his topcoat pocket, checked it, and put it away again. Then he leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder. Fiske turned and lit his cigar. Tully's eyes were fixed on the street thoughtfully. "Let's go," Banelli said. "Take it easy, and drive on by. We can see him if he's there, and we'll wait for him to come out."

Dixon had been watching the street when they went by the first time. He had just finished the coffee and shoved the empty cup across the counter. At first he wondered if it was his imagination. It was a big car, and the two men up front had their hats pushed forward with the brims down, concealing their faces. He wasn't sure about seeing someone in the back. Then he smiled to himself and accepted that he hadn't imagined it, that it was no coincidence. A sixth sense, that he'd relied on in times gone by, told him that. Now he had to pick the place, and his gaze fell on the shadows of the park across the street.

"Refill?" Sammy was standing before him.

Dixon shook his head and placed some change on the counter. "I think I'll take a walk through the park."

Sammy grinned. "It'll be awful dark. The light by the statue's out. Good place to take a girl." There was no reply. "Well, good night, Mr. Smith."

"Goodnight, Sammy."

Dixon crossed the street quickly, noting that it had stopped raining although the air was heavy. Two blocks away he could see the big car at the service station, and one of the men in overcoat and hat standing by the front fender. No one else was in sight. He paused at the winding path between the trees that led into park. The nearest street lamp cast weird fingers of light through the bare trees. He looked at his hands again. They were dry and steady. And he was curious if his eyes really glowed as Vicky had said. The thought of Vicky brought a mild touch of regret. He wondered how long it would be before he could no longer picture her face clearly, and was surprised at the difficulty of it now.

The car moved away from the station, and Dixon dropped the cigarette butt and ground it under his heel and stepped back into the shadows to watch. His whole body was tense, disciplined, alert and ready, and he knew he was complete. He smiled unconsciously when he saw the car move slowly past *Molly's* and pull to the curb. He could see the three of them now. There was Gino in the back seat, puffing his black cigar, slick and confident. He recognized Tully beside the driver whom he didn't know. The two men up front climbed out and walked back to the cafe. When they came out again, Banelli was getting out to join them. They huddled for a few seconds and then looked toward the park, and the driver unbuttoned his overcoat, letting it hang open. Tully was shaking his head, and Dixon knew he wasn't anxious to come into the park. But he'd come. He was that kind. The driver was ready, and he led the way across the street, Tully a little behind and to the left, and Banelli bringing up the rear.

Dixon moistened his lips, nodded

to himself and backed deeper into the shadows. Then he turned and walked along the path to the statue of a man on horseback that bulked grey in the dimness. His eyes had accustomed themselves to the dark and took in the details of the statue. He felt it was odd that he'd never taken time to look at it before. There was a small clearing around it, and he followed it halfway before leaving the path to wait behind the curved base of a huge tree. He decided this would give him a better angle, and he hoped Tully would stay out of it.

Then he could hear someone coming, moving cautiously, and he leveled the .38 toward the path. The moon was full through a break in the clouds that were moving with the rising wind, and the area was lighter than he had desired. And when the man stepped into the open with his gun drawn, Dixon caught a clear view of his face. He didn't know the man, but he saw in the briefest instant what Vicky had meant about the eyes. The man was alone, and that meant they'd separated to look for him. Dixon stepped softly from the shadow. "I'm here," he said evenly.

The stranger wheeled and dropped to one knee. Both men fired simultaneously. Dixon stood, firmly planted on both feet, and the other sprawled backward as though smashed by a giant force. The pistol flew from his grasp. Dixon stepped forward and looked at the man's contorted face, but the eyes were pinched shut. Then he heard the sound to his left and whirled. Gino had stumbled on him unexpectedly, but this time Dixon was in the light. And he hesitated a split second, blinking into the shadows, as Banelli fired. Dixon felt the searing flame bite his side, and he was spun almost completely around to his knees. His vision blurred, then cleared, as Banelli squeezed another shot, wildly, and then another that whined off the base of the statue. Dixon smiled in spite of himself. Gino was scared. He hadn't expected a fight. Dixon took his time and shot once into the other man's chunky middle. Banelli was jolted back against the tree, but didn't fall. Bubbles appeared at his mouth, and the shocked expression was frozen on his face. His gloved gunhand dropped to his side, and Dixon shot him again, low in the stomach, and he went down.

Shoving hard with both hands, Dixon stumbled to his feet. He held his left hand tight against the place, feeling the blood between his fingers, and took a shaky step forward. He felt strangely detached, as though it couldn't be happening to him and he was watching some ridiculous drama unfold in another world. He crossed slowly to where Banelli lay. Gino twisted his head to look at him, and his lips moved but gave no sound. The eyes didn't close when he died.

"Dix!"

Dixon tried to turn, too fast, and the sudden scalding pain brought him to his knees again. When he lifted his head, Tully was standing near the statue, holding his revolver at his side. Dixon was breathing with difficulty. "You shoot real good," Tully said.

Dixon shook his head to clear his sight. "It's all over, Virg."

Tully nodded thoughtfully and returned the gun to the shoulder holster. "I was going to take you just then."

Dixon dropped his gun and doubled forward. Tully knelt beside him, grabbing his shoulders, and straightened him. "I always wondered," Tully said, "if I could do it."

"Help me up."

When the other man had him on his feet, the pain was replaced by numbness. From somewhere came the sound of other voices, among them Sammy's. Tully released his hold and backed away. "Get outa' here," Dixon said between his teeth.

Tully nodded. "You're on your own, Dix." Then he was gone.

Dixon made his way slowly through the shadows of the park, surprised that he could walk at all. A teenager and his girl-friend confronted him as he came to the sidewalk. "What's going on in there?" the boy demanded excitedly.

Dixon shook his head. "I don't know. Sounded like shooting."

The kid eyed him curiously, and then half dragged the reluctant young miss into the park. Dixon crossed the highway to where the big car was parked and slid in under the wheel. For a moment he rested his head back against the seat. Then he felt for the key and started the engine, pulling out onto the highway. He didn't hear the woman calling his name.

Tully came out of the park from the other direction, a full block away from the parked car. But he could see Dixon crossing toward it. He stepped into the darkness near the row of buildings and watched. The sound of a woman running turned his head, and he just had time to reach out and grab Vicky before she was past him. She struggled and tried to call to Dixon, but Tully held her firmly. When the car was gone, her struggles ceased, and she cried in his arms. "Let him go, Vicky," he said gently.

She didn't reply, and he took her arm and started walking in the opposite direction. She didn't resist.

Dixon drove slowly out of town. The rain was coming down again, but he didn't think or care to turn on the wipers. He only knew he was bleeding badly and was suddenly very tired. He almost fell asleep once, but jerked erect when he realized the groan he heard came from him. It was difficult for him to see, and he pulled off at the first "rest spot." A truck was parked

just ahead with the driver napping in the cab. He switched off the ignition and leaned forward against the wheel. He winced suddenly, and then grinned to himself. It was a damn good try, old boy, he thought. Then it saddened him to think that he wouldn't *really* know what Vicky had seen in his eyes. The thought of Vicky made him smile again. He concentrated. He was certain as he let himself slip into sleep that he would dream of her . . . forever.

It was all a mistake, an accident, a coincidence. But it started him back on the long lonely road toward the place from which he'd come.

NIGHT BUS

BY

DON LOWRY

TED SLOAN waited in front of the Blue Bird Restaurant admiring the '65 model Plymouth parked at the curb . . . from its rooftop red flasher to its chrome-plated siren. The police department markings no longer gave him cause for alarm. He'd been on parole for over a year and every cop in the precinct knew he worked six days a week at the Northside Garage. He hadn't even moved away when the cruiser had braked to a quick stop and its two cops had rushed into the River Bar. He ignored them and what they were after in the bar. Bar brawls were no novelty, he thought, and what he didn't see wouldn't make him a state witness. He looked at his watch and smiled. In ten minutes his girl friend would doff her waitress' uniform and come smiling to him from the Blue Bird. He listened to the cruiser's crackling police calls.

". . . about five-eleven, well-built, grey suit, blue sports shirt, no hat. The suspect was last seen running west on River Street; armed with .38 automatic; signal 99 . . ." the announcer from headquarters dispatch room warned. Ted Sloan thought momentarily of "signal 99", recalling from the old days its meaning. Then it came back . . . an armed robbery call.

And then the suspect's description came back to him. He was five-eleven, well-built, wore a grey suit and a blue sports shirt. He had no hat and he was standing on the west end of town . . . on River Street. The only difference between himself and the heist suspect was that he carried no automatic and had committed no robbery. But did the town's trigger-happy law know the difference? The police knew he was a parolee from an armed robbery sentence. And here he was stupidly waiting to bé picked up as soon as the two cruiser bulls came out of the bar and checked in their car's location.

He moved across the sidewalk and into the Blue Bird to an empty back booth. Nita Hein saw him and came laughing to the booth. "Coffee, darling? I'll change and be with you in a minute."

"Wait, Nita." He spoke in a whisper and told her of the police call.

"But it couldn't bé you, Ted. You've been out front for ten minutes. I saw you."

"And that payroll heist was three blocks away," he whispered urgently. "And you're my girl friend."

Nita now shared Sloan's panic, and the knowledge that he'd be picked up by the first cop who saw him on River Street. "Stay here, Ted. I'll go to your place and get you a change of clothes . . . and a hat."

"The law will be looking around here in a couple of minutes, Nita. I'll go through the kitchen and down the alley."

"No, Ted," the blonde girl reasoned impatiently. "If you're seen sneaking down an alley dressed like the hold-up man you'll get pinched or shot." She gripped the edge of the table. "I know," she whispered. "Hide in there." She pointed to a door marked, "Ladies." From the knob hung a printed sign, "Out of Order". She pulled at his arm. "Come on, Ted. Please. Get in. I've got the key. The plumber won't be here till tomorrow. I'll hurry back with the clothes."

Ted Sloan disconsolately drew on a cigarette, not caring about the possible embarrassment if a female diner were to ignore the sign and get the cashier's key. He worried frantically about more possible embarrassment . . . that of accurately fitting a description on the police radio of a heistman who had got away with a score in his own neighborhood. With his record, he wouldn't stand a chance. He chain-smoked until Nita returned with the clothes.

"Hurry, Ted. I've got a cab waiting."

"To go where?" he shrugged as he changed into a brown suit. "By now the hold-up squad will be at my apartment. And the local precinct cops will steer them to your place . . . and here."

"Never mind, darling. Hurry!"

the blonde whispered, looking furtively out the door. She packed Sloan's discarded clothing into a shopping bag. "Alright, honey," she whispered. "No one's looking. Let's go."

They walked from the Blue Bird to a Checker Cab without being seen leaving the ladies room. The cashier looked up from her magazine and smiled. "Night Nita; night Ted." She was used to seeing them leave together.

"Where to?" Nita asked as they crossed the sidewalk.

"Wyandotte, out West Fort," Sloan said to the driver. He settled low in the seat and whispered into Nita's ear. "I know a quiet bar out there. We can sit around and figure out my best move. Or we can find out if my double who knocked off that payroll gets picked up."

When the cab passed West Grand, Sloan rose to a normal position and pulled Nita to him. "We'll get rid of this cab in a couple of blocks and take a bus. No point in leaving a trail from the Blue Bird to where we're going."

"Drop us off at the next light, driver. Want to do some shopping."

Ted and Nita walked the half block from the bus stop to Gene's Bar in the Detroit suburb. They ate, talked, drank beer and worried until the first edition of the morning Detroit Free Press hit the streets. When they scanned the paper's third page, their worry changed to stark fear. Under a photo of Ted Sloan the caption read: "Parolee wanted for questioning in River Street payroll robbery. Theodore Sloan, 26, of 4404 West Jefferson was paroled November 26, 1963 from Marquette Branch Prison after having served seven years of a ten-to-thirty year sentence for an almost identical crime in the same west-side neighborhood eight years ago . . ." His description followed io the news story. The report concluded, "Investigating officers report Sloan was seen in the neighborhood of the crime immediately after the robbery, dressed exactly as several witnesses described the gunman."

"Guess where I'd be right now, baby, if I'd hung around that neighborhood?" Sloan answered his own question. "Up on the ninth floor at headquarters . . . booked as a P.V. and robbery suspect." He folded the paper and dropped it to the floor. "Two more Tivoli," he told the waitress as he pushed two empty beer bottles across the table. When the girl left he turned to Nita. "You're going home alone tonight, baby. You'll be picked up when you get there. Say nothing and they can't hold you. Everybody in the precinct station knows you've been working at the Blue Bird for over three years. There's no crime in being my girl friend. But don't try to lay any story on them about where you've been tonight. Just say you saw me earlier in the afternoon and that I left. And say no

more, or they'll trap you in more lies and crack you to pieces."

"What about you, Ted? Where will you go?"

"For tonight, baby, I'll ride a bus. That's the last place they'll look for me. I'll phone you at the Blue Bird . . . on its pay phone . . . at ten in the morning."

"I want to stay with you, Ted," the blonde whispered, leaning close to him in the bar's dim light.

"There'll be other nights, baby." He pulled Nita close, feeling her warmth and the pressing force of her body. For a moment he reached to caress smooth, satin skin and to kiss her passionately. Then he forced her away and picked up his Tivoli. "Get a cab in front . . . and change a couple of times before you get home. I'll call you at ten!" He saw the beginning of a protest in Nita's face. "Go on, baby. It's the only way. You don't want to see me locked up on a bum rap. Get going!"

Ted Sloan boarded a suburban bus and sighed as he settled down. He let his hat drop over his eyes and thought rather than slept. "One year out of the pen and I'm on the lam for a crime I didn't commit." He wondered if the bandit's appearance, so identical to his own, was a coincidence or a deliberate ruse on the part of some sharp ex-cellmate to take the heat off himself. ". . . if I were to give myself up? To take a chance on a line-up down on Beaubien?" He laughed at the last thought and tipped up his hat as the lights went off when the bus driver reached the expressway. He was the sole passenger remaining on the bus. "It's a brief respite at worst and a safe hideout at best," he thought as he looked through the darkness of the night bus. He fell asleep to the hum of huge bus tires on the expressway concrete.

The green and white highway sign, "Grand Rapids Exit" glimmered through the shadows of breaking dawn when Ted Sloan rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The bus had filled with early-morning, work-bound passengers. He felt conspicuous and kept his head turned toward his window. He envied his fellow passengers. They left the bus at factory gates. Ted left at the bus sation, risking arrest if a state-wide alarm were out for him. He boarded another Detroit-bound bus. "Living from bus to bus," he thought.

He called Nita from a north-end suburb. "Can you talk, baby?" he asked. He heard sounds of a phone booth door closing.

"Yes, darling."

"Any news? Anyone knocked off for that score?"

"Not in the papers, nor on T.V. But I was questioned last night, Ted, by the hold-up squad. I told them we'd had a fight, darling . . . that I'd left you downtown. Was that alright?"

"Perfect, baby. You sure no one's watching you now?"

"There's only a few regulars in the dining room. I know them all. Where are you now?"

"Outside the city. Let's skip the questions. That line might be tapped. What did they say last night?"

"Just that I should turn you in if I heard from you . . . 'for your own good'. And Ted," Rita Hein lowered her voice, "they're sure it was you who took that payroll. I said I didn't believe them but I couldn't argue unless I told them I'd helped you get away from the Blue Bird. I think we were wrong, Ted. We should have gone to headquarters instead of to Wyandotte last night."

"And let your word contradict the identification of eight witnesses ready to swear I was the bird who snatched that payroll? They're all waiting to pick me out of a line-up. You're getting marbles in that pretty head, baby."

"Well, what will we do now, Ted? You can't come around here."

"I'll see what happens today. If they arrest anyone for that heist I'll go home as soon as it's in the papers. If there's no pinch, I'll see you tonight. Remember the theater we went to on New Year's Eve?"

"Yes."

"Go there for the late show and sit in the same part of the theater. I'll watch you go in. If you're followed, I won't show. If you're alone I'll meet you there. Okay?"

"I'll be there, Ted. Be careful."

Afternoon papers and telecasts carried Ted Sloan's picture rather than hoped-for reports of the real bandit's apprehension. He sat in a quiet neighborhood tavern reading a scathing editorial condemning a parole board which, ". . . let such men loose to once again pick up guns." Insufficient sleep and food, too much bourbon and the editorial's last three words, motivated Ted Sloan. In a phone booth he dialed a number.

"Lefty in?"

"Who's calling?"

"Ted."

"Ted who?"

"Just tell him 'Ted'."

In a few minutes another voice spoke to Sloan. "Man, when you foul up, you do it right. Clue me."

Ted's voice was sufficient clue and Lefty Evon interrupted his identification.

"How can I help?"

"I need a piece."

"You need a piece? What the hell did you use yesterday on that payroll heist . . . a water pistol?"

"That wasn't me on that score, Lefty."

"Save it for your jury, Ted. I read papers."

"Alright," Sloan continued, "believe the goddam papers. I still want a piece."

"What caliber . . . automatic?"

"Anything," Sloan snapped. "As long as it shoots."

"Got the price?"

"How much, Lefty?"

"Fifty . . . cash."

"I got it."

"Where do I deliver? You sure as hell can't come around here."

"You know the Windmill . . . out Woodward?"

"I know it."

"I'll be at the bar. And make it fast, Lefty."

A short swarthy man walked up to the Windmill's bar and sat next to Ted Sloan. He ignored Ted until the bartender left. "Got the fifty?" Sloan passed five folded ten dollar bills to him below the bar top.

"I'll leave it in the can. Good luck, boy," he said without moving his lips. He added in a whisper, "Get out of town. They're really turning heat on to pick you up."

Sloan watched to make sure no one followed Lefty into the men's room . . . then gave Lefty a minute to leave. He picked up a black automatic and a box of shells. The paper bag in which he found the pistol bore a slogan, "The Supermarket Where Cash Means Bargains." Sloan noted the store's address before crumpling the bag. "I'll find out about the 'cash' part of that bargain," he said to himself as he left the washroom. Over another bourbon at the bar, he thought, "They're giving me the name. I might as well play the game."

Nita Hein read a late edition of the News on her busride downtown to the Fox Theater. She turned white and gasped at the front page headline. "Lone Bandit In Second Robbery." She read the account of a late afternoon supermarket robbery in suburban Birmingham.

"A tall, heavy-set bandit, dressed in a brown suit and needing a shave, robbed the Acme Supermarket on Woodward of its day's receipts at 5:05 P.M. today. Manager George Brown said the bandit was among customers still shopping when the entrance doors of the store were locked. He was the last 'shopper' to reach his checkout counter. The bandit, Brown told police, pulled a black automatic from his coat and ordered him and two remaining girl cashiers to 'clean out' the registers.

"When Brown partially turned toward the door a shot was fired by the bandit, narrowly missing the manager. He then casually threw a shopping bag to each cashier and ordered them to, 'move fast.'

"The bandit fled through the one remaining unlocked exit door after ordering Brown and the two girls, 'to get down on the floor,' the manager told police.

"Brown estimated the amount of cash and checks taken by the armed bandit to be over $2,000.

"Police arrived three minutes after the thug fled, in answer to an alarm telephoned in by an employee who was at the time at work at the back of the store and who had witnessed the robbery.

"Witnesses agree that the bandit, who was not masked, closely resem-

bled the same man suspected of yesterday's River Street payroll robbery. The bandit is alleged to be Theodore Sloan, a parolee from Marquette Prison."

Once more Nita Hein looked at her boyfriend's picture accompanying a reported robbery. "Damn whoever is putting the blame on Ted for all this," she cursed to herself as she got off the bus.

On a different bus, riding south on Woodward to downtown Detroit, Ted Sloan gradually breathed normally. It had been touch and go, a two block run to a bus stop. He had been on the verge of commandeering a car when the bus stopped to pick him up. No one paid undue attention to another passenger carrying a filled shopping bag. Cartons of cigarettes protruded from the top, and Sloan made sure no one glimpsed the currency stuffed beneath the cartons. In a back seat he removed the bills from the bag and filled his pockets. On a downtown side-street he dumped the bag with its checks and cigarettes in a trash can. He took a cab to a quiet, residential bar and grill on Detroit's east side, waiting there until nine o'clock. In a service station washroom he shaved with a razor purchased near-by.

From a lobby chair he watched Nita Hein enter the Fox Theater. He followed her when it was obvious no one had tailed the girl.

"Hi, baby!" he whispered when he sat down beside her.

Nita's hand went up to caress his freshly-shaved cheek before she answered, "Oh, it's good to be with you again, honey. I was so afraid. Did you read the News?"

"No. Did they get anyone for the payroll heist?"

"It isn't that, sweetheart. Now they think you held up a supermarket."

Sloan watched the screen, trying to hide his own fear of being identified as the supermarket bandit by his girl friend.

"But I know you didn't, Ted. The paper said the robber had a beard. You haven't. What can we do, honey?"

"I'm going to leave town . . . tonight, Nita. Then," he glibly explained, "if my double keeps on trying to frame me, I'll have a real alibi. If I'm two thousand miles away when this guy goes on another heist, I'll be able to prove it wasn't me."

"If you leave, Ted, I'm going with you. I want to be with you . . . no matter what happens."

"No matter what happens, baby?"

"No matter what." Nita repeated.

"Got your driver's license with you?" Sloan asked.

"Yes."

"Go down to the Hertz office just south of the Statler on Washington. Here's enough for a deposit." He handed her five twenties. "I'll be waiting just inside the lobby. Pick

me up when you get back. If I'm not there, or if I don't get in the car, pull away and return the car tomorrow. It will mean I'm pinched."

"But . . ." Nita began to protest.

"We haven't much time, baby. We'll talk later."

Sloan gave his girl the twenty minutes he calculated it would take her to walk over to Washington Boulevard, sign a rental contract and drive back to the Fox. From the theater exit he watched the street, seeing only newsboys and a patrolling harness bull. He turned his back on the uniformed officer when a passing cruiser stopped. At that moment a theater employee began locking the exit doors. Sloan walked to a newsboy and bought a Free Press. He wondered if the cruiser cops had eyes on him, but didn't turn to look. He struck up a conversation with the newsy about the Tigers' inability to win ball games.

"Ted," Nita called from a Chevy sedan parked at the curb. He had to hold himself back from rushing into the car. As the girl drove away he looked across the street at the police cruiser. The three policemen were laughing . . . paying no attention to the Chev.

"Where to, Ted?"

"Get on the Expressway, baby. I want to be outside Michigan by morning. And don't get a traffic ticket."

"You sound cross, honey," Nita said with a note of concern as she carefully turned onto the expressway entrance.

"Not cross. Just tired, baby. Maybe a little tense from dodging the law in the last two days."

"Put your head on my lap and sleep, Ted." She reached over to pull him toward her. "Might be a good idea anyway in case some snoopy policeman pulls alongside us."

Sloan let his head slide to the girl's lap and soon slept soundly. Nita drove steadily, watching the speedometer needle carefully and maintaining a speed just below the legal limit. From time to time she stroked Ted's head and, when her right arm became tired, she rested her hand inside his coat on his chest. It was then that she felt the hard outline of the automatic in Sloan's inside coat pocket. She withdrew her hand with a shocked rapid jerk that woke Sloan. He sat up.

"Where are we, baby?"

"Almost to the Ohio line, Ted."

"Tired?"

"No."

"I'll take over and drive when we get into Ohio," he yawned. "Stop at an all-night diner when you get across the line. We can do with some coffee. You better go in and get it. We're still too close to Detroit for me to get careless."

The blonde drove without speaking, wondering why Ted Sloan had

a gun in his pocket. She loved him, passionately and unselfishly, and she wanted him free of any crime. The gun itself, she reasoned, was a crime on Ted's part. He was a parolee. The state line and an open truck stop took thoughts of the gun from her mind.

"Want anything to eat, Ted?" she asked as she switched off the headlights.

"Might be a good idea to get a bag of hamburgers or sandwiches. I want to drive all night if we can stay awake and take turns driving. Heavy on the coffee too, baby."

Sloan saw the State Police car pulling into the truck stop before its officers saw the Chevy. When the cruiser lights hit the car, he was lying down on its front seat . . . with his hand on the automatic. He reached over to lock the door, and feigned sleep. One officer looked in, tried the door, and walked away. As Nita returned, Sloan heard the conversation.

"You driving that sedan, lady?"

"Yes."

"Left your directional signal flashing."

"I must have forgotten. Thank you, officer." She tapped on the window and Sloan, who had moved to a sitting position, opened the door.

"You better drive it out of here," he whispered. "Just in case they're curious. I made like I was asleep."

Sloan had been driving for an hour when Nita Hein decided to question him about the gun.

"Ted?"

"Yes, baby."

"Are you carrying a gun?"

He wondered how she had discovered the automatic, if she had, and how much he should tell her. He had known her for only six months. While their friendship had bloomed into an affair . . . with a vague understanding of a future marriage . . . he realized she was still a dame. In the old days, and in the pen, he had come to learn that a thief of any kind lasts longer when no woman knows his business. "I am," he answered with no further comment. "Why?"

"I felt it when you were sleeping on my lap. It frightened me, Ted. Do you have to keep on carrying it?"

"I do, baby. I've no intentions of going back to the pen."

"But won't the gun itself get you there, Ted? Won't possession of it make you a parole violator?" she asked with feminine persistence and logic.

"What's the difference? P.V. for packing a piece or a bum rap for a heist I didn't pull?" he shrugged.

He drove across the Indiana line and watched for a motel vacancy sign. Nita slept while he checked in.

"I'll find the unit," he smiled at the lone night manager. "Don't bother coming out." He wasn't anxious to reveal their lack of baggage while driving a car from two states away.

"Where are we, Ted?"

"At a motel, baby. We need some sleep."

But they didn't sleep. While Sloan was showering, Nita accidentally knocked his suit coat off its hangar in the closet. When she picked up the coat she saw the roll of bills that had fallen from the pocket. Curiosity rather than suspicion moved her to frisk the coat. She found bills in every pocket . . . and then discovered that the gun was a black automatic. She recalled the Detroit News report of the bandit who used a black automatic in the Birmingham supermarket robbery. When Sloan came from the shower he found her dressed, sitting in an armchair. She was crying quietly.

"What's the trouble, baby?"

"Nothing, Ted. I just can't go with you. I'm frightened." She looked at him with mixed feelings of genuine fear and doubt. Had he actually been the payroll and supermarket bandit? Or was he really a victim of circumstances? Her thoughts ceased when Sloan began to speak.

"If that's the way you want it, Nita, that's the way it'll be. I want you with me only as long as you want to be here." He had thought, after crossing the Indiana line, that bringing her along was foolish. In four days the Hertz car would be on the "hot list". When the police were notified, her name, as his girl friend, would soon tie him in with the Chevy. All these thoughts had crossed his mind during the night drive. "Suppose you get some rest and head back to Detroit? Here's some money I have left from what I drew out of my savings account." He returned from the closet with six twenties and dropped them on the coffee table. The lie motivated Nita Hein to leave.

"You'll need it, Ted. Goodbye." She walked to the door. "Will you write me?"

"I can't baby. Your mail might be watched. But drop me a line. You know my sister's address in San Francisco, Write me there. She'll forward it if I don't make it to the coast."

Torn between love and doubt, the blonde hurled herself on the bed and clung to Sloan. She forced herself away when the farewell kiss threatened to grow into one of strong desire. "If I don't leave now, Ted darling, I never will. Be careful." She ran to the door without looking back.

Sloan slept until noon and then called a cab. He flew out of Fort Wayne that night and was in Los Angeles the next day. Like his money from the Birmingham supermarket, his career as a heistman on the West Coast didn't last long. When he held up five liquor stores in the Los Angeles area his description was sent out to every store and carried in every scout car.

His modus operandi, of getting in and out fast, failed at his sixth

store. He had habitually asked for a fifth of bourbon. His sixth victim turned from the shelf with a gun instead of the requested fifth. Sloan didn't have time to get to his own gun. He was held at gunpoint until the police arrived.

Before receiving his life sentence from a Los Angeles court, Ted Sloan received a letter, forwarded by his sister in San Francisco.

Dearest Ted,

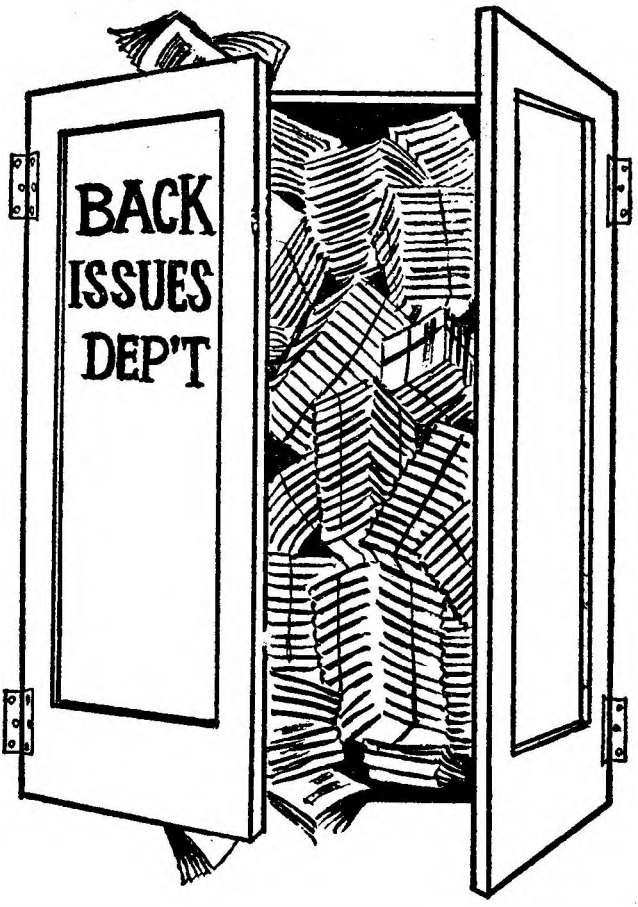
I was so wrong to doubt you. There was another hold-up here yesterday . . . a bank on Grand River. The man everybody thought was you was shot by police. He has been identified by witnesses as the bandit who robbed the payroll clerk and the Birmingham supermarket. It's such a horrible coincidence. His picture in the paper does resemble your own. I telephoned your parole officer this morning and he says you still have another week before your next report is due. And your boss says your job is waiting for you at the garage. Please hurry back, darling. I want you so badly.

All my love,

Nita

The letter was dated the day on which Ted Sloan had committed his first holdup in Los Angeles.

On another bus ride . . . in a prison van to the penitentiary . . . Sloan mused. Another brief respite on a night bus. Tomorrow the hell of prison will begin all over again. He slumped dejectedly in his seat. Then he laughed. "It's just one damned bus ride after another. But the last stop isn't far from here."



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DAMN YOU

. . . DIE!

She snarled and clenched her teeth, and clutched tightly to Hobart's shirt. She could take this. Hell, yes . . . and a lot more!

BY JEREMIAH SOMMERS

HARLEY stared at the hand. It was enormous . . . sunburned red on the back, the palm calloused hard as wood. He watched the thick square fingers tremble and he felt inept and brutish.

The breast was so white, so delicate it seemed translucent. It was incredibly soft. He stroked it with such gentleness that he couldn't feel it through the horny callous of his palm. He knew he touched it only because he saw it yield, as though cringing beneath his fingers.

"Christ," he breathed. It was incongruous . . . the brutal red hand and the delicate white breast. He conjured up the hand as it should be . . . seal-sleek and coppery tan, without the deep stained cracks, a slender tactile hand that could feel without crushing.

Mercy winced. Harley jerked his hand away. An ugly, raw, burn desecrated the tender flesh beneath her right breast. He'd forgotten.

"God, he done that?"

Mercy murmured assent and squirmed under him to indicate another burn on her thigh near the groin.

"Yes, and there too."

They lay on burlap feed sacks thrown over some soured bales of hay in a corner of the tractor shed.

"Son-of-a-bitch!"

The spell was broken. As if on cue they heard the pick-up shift gears and whine in second up the potholed dirt road toward the house.

"It's Hobart," Mercy whispered. "He'll want dinner."

Harley looked into her dark, bottomless, fawn's eyes and saw the fright. He rolled off her. Suddenly embarrassed, he turned away and covered himself with a burlap sack. He didn't watch as she slipped on her dress and darted silently into the blinding midday heat.

Harley sat up, aware now of the heavy palling heat. He was bathed

in sweat. Loose grain from the feed sacks stuck to him and itched. Horse flies sawed about his head and lit on him with maddening persistence, drilling through the dream and exposing the nerve of reality. Harley looked at his hands again and at the heavy red arms matted with sandy hair, the muscles lumpy and corded. What the hell . . . he was a red-neck. He'd never be anything else.

The wonder of it was that Mercy loved him.

The cab of the pick-up crossed the high sill of the shed window. He glimpsed his uncle and winced as the truck slewed on the rutted road, its tail-gate banging. It was the guilt that hurt most. It clutched his bowels and twisted, leaving his mouth dry and his knees watery. The road was a thing of pride . . . a vanity really. On a farm that was ultimately practical, unwavering in its hard-nosed efficiency, the road was singularly impractical. Casually indifferent, it failed to go straight to the point. It meandered snake-like through the farm, using up five times the distance necessary to get from the highway to the house. It was a boast. Anyone who drove it must note the clean geometry of the fields and pastures, the straight lines of fences, the neat edges of the wood-lots and the soul-satisfying beauty of a farm well-tended . . . a farmer's farm.

Harley had cared for the road since he was ten years old. *He* had built up its shoulders, filled its pot-holes, dragged it smooth, repaired the devastation of winter and proudly shared its boast with his uncle on sweet summer evenings.

But six months neglect can deteriorate a farm and a dirt road. For six months Harley had not held up his end. He'd skulked about the house and barn, hiding in dark corners and sniffing like a horny hound at a bitch in heat. He had grown sullen and dangerously quiet as he'd fallen more and more hopelessly in love with his uncle's wife.

"Christ, it's hot." The sweat rolled off Harley's forehead and down into his eyes. He wiped his face with his shirt and squinted out from the darkness of the tractor shed and watched his uncle climb wearily out of the pick-up. His denim shirt was black with sweat and plastered to his broad humped shoulders and the deep creases in the back of his neck burned fire-red.

Harley looked at his uncle and saw a projection of himself in thirty years. They looked a lot alike. People who knew both said that Harley looked more like his uncle than he did his own father. Harley didn't remember his father. When Harley was five, his father, pregnant mother and younger brother had bounced onto the highway, enroute to the hospital in Jessup . . . and into the path of a high-balling trailer rig. They'd all been killed.

His uncle had raised him. Hobart had rejoined the shares into the original farm that had been divided between the two brothers when Harley's grandfather died. Over the years, the boy and his uncle had worked the farm up into one of the finest and most successful in the county.

It was while Harley was in the army that Hobart had married Mercy. Harley was in Alaska, a heavy equipment operator in the Army Engineers, with three more months to pull till his discharge. He had got a post-card saying his uncle had "taken the step" and that Harley could look forward to "woman cooking" when he came home.

Mercy had been a surprise. He'd expected an older woman, a red-neck like himself and his uncle. But Mercy was 26, just four years older than Harley and nearly thirty years younger than Hobart. Though she had come from a farm out on the other side of Jessup, she couldn't have looked less like a farm woman. Slight and fragile, soft and pale white with her thick black hair and deep dark eyes, she was a disturbing blend of helpless innocence and wanton sensuality. There wasn't a man around, young or old, who didn't look on Hobart with open envy. Harley felt a warm, if somewhat nervous, pride in his uncle. And, if he was sometimes belligerently protective, it was because Mercy engendered that feeling in her men. When the three of them went to town, or out to "Goldie's" on a Saturday night for a few beers . . . Mercy so white and soft and willowy, flanked by those huge, florid, blue-eyed men . . . there were no intimate winks, no soft suggestive whistles. Instead, it was, "Hullo, Mrs. McCabe, Hobe, Harl," and an easy tipping of the hat.

Mercy was not the cook Hobart had promised. The house was no longer barracks-room clean and ordered as it had been. It gradually grew fussy with dime-store bric-a-brac and Sears-Roebuck dressing. But the atmosphere was heady . . . warm, mysterious and intimate. Hobart and Harley wallowed in the scent of Mercy's presence like two lathered Percherons rolling in sweet clover. Mercy was, in a way, like the road . . . an impractical, priceless delight.

Five or six months after Harley got out of the army Hobart decided to take out some life insurance, "just in case." He had a young wife to think of now, and *he* wasn't getting any younger, and farming wasn't the easiest kind of work a man could do.

One day, just after the noon meal, an open convertible drove up with an insurance agent from Raleigh. He came to the front door and Mercy let him in. He was tall and lean, with dark eyes and wavy black hair. He was buttery brown like a "just right" flap-jack. In his left hand he held an oiled brown briefcase that shone with importance.

He strode over to Harley and took his hand in a smooth, firm, eminently honest grip. The hand was clean and soft and tactile.

Mercy had giggled, "No . . . *that's* my husband."

As the agent had turned away, he'd given Harley a long, slow, understanding wink.

It had taken all of Harley's self-control to keep from plastering the smart son-of-a-bitch all over the walls. He had walked from the house and into the barn shaking with rage . . . and shock. Shocked by the sudden tightening in his groin at the open suggestion of himself and Mercy together. From that moment Harley began avoiding his uncle's eyes.

He began to invent work that would keep him around the house and barn. He would watch Mercy secretly, furtively devouring her with his eyes. At nights he lay awake, rigid and tense, his ears alert to the sounds that came from his uncle's bedroom.

One morning he stood in the shadows of the barn and watched his uncle leave the house and trudge out to the fields. He waited. Then, cowering in the bright clean morning light, he slunk from the barn to the dim warmth of the kitchen. Mercy had been at the ironing board, her back to him. He stood behind her, silent, trembling, his body exuding what his mind could not put to words. She had turned and drifted into his arms, so openly soft and pliant . . . so unbelievably.

Mercy loved him.

For the first time Harley felt the drunken, dreamy exultation of love And for the first time he felt degenerate, filthy and dishonest. As his love for Mercy grew more intimate and consuming, the guilt accumulated like pus inside him . . . and there was no head to the infection, no spot where it could be squeezed open and purged of the poison.

So he concocted the dream of himself and Mercy. He dreamed the dirt out from under his fingernails, the red neck to seal-sleek-tan . . . a handsome couple, in fine clothes and a yellow Olds' convertible. He dreamed a good farm into a plantation administered with clean hands. He dreamed Hobart out of existence.

"Shit," he breathed. "The goddam heat." He stared out at the kitchen door, rippling in heat waves like a reflection in a pool. It made him nauseous. He closed his eyes and let the sweat roll off him and the flies light on the stink of his neck and shoulders. He'd have to go in soon. He'd have to go in and avoid the hurt, bewildered look in his uncle's eyes. He'd have to eat while his stomach pitched and churned.

"Harl? Dinner, Harl! Harley . . ."

It was Mercy . . . her voice high, breathy, and helpless.

Harley remembered the burns

. . . raw and ugly and brutal. He felt the anger stir and the guilt recede before it. "That dirty old bastard," he breathed. He clutched at the anger and rose with it to rage. "That pervert son-of-a-bitch." The words squirted out of his mouth. He clawed his way up, with the desperation of a drowning man, to the safety of dry, cold, malevolent hatred. His belly tightened and the water drained from his knees. He tensed and glowed in the contained power of his body, in the uncomplicated honesty of his hate. He put on his shirt and strode out into the white heat.

The kitchen was an oven. A low-ceilinged, lean-to wing, it protruded from the square house, absorbing the fierce rays of the sun and retaining the heat of the cookstove. The heavy air was sour with the stink of rancid bacon grease and burned food. Harley staggered into it, slamming the screen door, blind from the brilliance of the sun. He slumped down into his chair at the heavy oak kitchen table his grandfather had built.

Hobart grunted and Harley looked up, his eyes clear now and cold blue, riding the tide of his hatred. It had been a long time since Harley had looked directly into his uncle's face. Hobart had changed. His eyes were no longer quick. They were dusty gray, tired and confused. The huge powerful shoulders were weary and bowed and the ruddy weather-beaten face now looked like dried cracked leather. There was an innocent, uncomprehending sadness in his face. This was not the face of a man who ground hot cigarettes into tender white flesh. It was the face of a lonely old man . . . betrayed.

The dry bank of hate began to crumble. Harley felt himself slide back inexorably. The pus was drawing him down. He could feel it lapping at his knees, draining his strength. He gripped the edge of the table with his huge hands and averted his eyes. The heavy oak trembled with tension.

"The cows was out on the highway, Harley. I thought you was going to fix the fence."

Hobart's voice was deep and gruff. He sensed the tremor in his voice and tried to smother it in the hoarse rumble. He'd caught the stony, ice-cold hate in that brief glimpse of Harley's eyes. Hobart was frightened. *He knows . . . that's what it is. Somehow he knows.* Hobart felt sick. *I should have told him. I always figured I would some day. But how could he know? It's been my secret . . . mine and his mother's, rest her soul.*

They were not talkative men. There had been a bond between them; an intuitive sense, an intimate awareness rooted in faith . . . and therefore wordless. But that was gone now. The bright clean space between them, through which they had communicated so clearly,

was filled with something black and secret and terrifying.

"Goddam it, Harley, say something! It's all falling . . . everything . . . the road . . . everything's falling. Why?"

He was terrified of the answer. He sensed disaster. He dug his fork into the greasy plate of fat-back, grits and beans. *It's too late. I'm your father. Can't you see I can't tell you? My own brother's wife . . . oh, Jesus, I thought it was over.* Tears burned in Hobart's eyes. He threw down his fork.

"Hell, Mercy! These damn beans are burned black!"

"Shut up!"

"Wha . . .?"

"I said, shut up, you dirty bastard! Don't yell at her!"

Harley was no longer sure whether it was sweat or tears that blurred his eyes. Whatever it was, it blotted out his uncle's face and he was grateful. Everything had opened on him. He felt he was turning to liquid. His pores oozed. His nose was running and saliva kept collecting in his mouth as though he were going to be sick. He had the horrible feeling he had pissed in his pants. His voice rose high and broke like an adolescent's. He screamed, "I seen it, damn you, I seen it!"

"Seen what? Why, what are you saying?" Hobart was bewildered. Nothing was making sense. Maybe it wasn't what he'd thought.

"I seen what you did, you son-of-a-bitch! I seen where you burned her . . ." Harley couldn't bring himself to say the words, *breast* and *thigh*, so he pounded ludicrously at his chest and crotch. He felt he was blushing. *Good God!* Everything was going backward. It was as though he were getting younger instead of older . . . shrinking back into childhood . . . a snot-nosed kid throwing a fit to cover the embarrassment of having been caught masturbating.

"Why she made them burns herself. She's always falling asleep . . . smoking in . . . why what the hell?"

It was out now. But it was all wrong, backward and incoherent. His uncle had sounded almost relieved. He didn't understand. "No," Harley screamed. "No, no, no. You done it, damn you. I seen you!"

"What the hell . . . you mean that you and . . ." Hobart rolled his eyes from Harley to Mercy. She was absolutely still, tense as a bird-dog at point . . . a doe frozen in the headlights of a car, balanced lightly on the line between flight and death, her deep eyes motionless, looking at nothing but encompassing all.

"I love her." It was so weak, but so final . . . so ineffectual and yet so earth-shattering. Harley cringed . . . a soft wet mass about to be crushed.

"Why you mean that you and her . . . oh, Goddam!"

Hobart rose up from the table in anguish. *That was it. He should have*

known. Harley was himself, Hobart, of thirty-five years ago. He knew the desperate guilt . . . the fear. He should have seen it. It was written all over Harley as it had been written all over him. But, Lord knows, he'd tried to forget. It all came back to Hobart now in painful clarity. It had never come out in the open between his brother and himself. That God-awful deadly ride to the hospital had put an end to it. It would have put an end to Hobart too, if there hadn't been the boy . . . Harley.

"I love her."

The words wrenched at Hobart. He moaned and reached forward across the table, his big, slab-like hand open and trembling with compassion. The only contact now possible between the two was physical. He gently touched Harley's face.

"The sins of the father . . . oh, God . . . the sins of the father."

Harley looked up in terror as his uncle loomed over him. He froze before the face distorted with the anguish of Job, the face of a wild-eyed revivalist . . . the face of God, Himself. The great hand moved forward on the heavy arm, as though holding the wrath of God. Harley recoiled in horror from the gentle touch to his cheek, as though struck by a snake . . . the open palm gaping, like the cotton-white mouth of a moccasin.

Harley screamed and shoved away, tipping the heavy table over onto his uncle, smashing his own chair as he reeled backward. He struck the jamb of the kitchen door with such violence that the whole room quaked.

There was a slide-action .22 calibre rifle propped against the wall next to the kitchen door. It was handy to shoot the weasels that invaded the chicken yard, and the rats that were drawn to the barn by loose feed. It tilted away from the wall. Harley caught it and balanced himself with the barrel.

"I love her!" he screamed. But still his voice lacked conviction. It seemed the louder he roared the weaker the statement became. He lifted the rifle and automatically pumped a shell into the chamber.

"I love her!" Holding the rifle in one hand by the pistol grip of the stock, he jabbed out with it and jerked the trigger. It was an extension of his arm . . . the barrel a long, slim, delicate finger. The report was sharp and clean. It sliced through the heavy rancid air with the biting emphasis of an exclamation point. The bullet punched a hole in the plaster-board ceiling.

Harley pumped the action.

"I love her!" The rifle cracked. The bullet struck the picture that hung above the cook-stove. It was a garrish Nativity scene, with a gold sprinkled Star of Bethlehem, that Mercy had cut from a feed-store calendar. The greasy glass of the frame had $.49 written in blue grease pencil on the lower right-hand corner. The glass shattered and dropped behind the stove.

"I love her!" Harley pumped the action and jerked the trigger with the crazy delight of a kid who's just discovered he can whistle. The bullet caught Hobart in the fleshy part of his left shoulder.

Hobart reared back from the shock. Gripping his shoulder, he dug his head down into the protection of his crooked arm and, bellowing like a fear-crazed animal, lumbered from the kitchen into the sitting-room.

Harley followed, pumping the rifle and screaming. A bullet plucked at Hobart's shirt, nicking his side. The next bore into his right buttock. Hobart stumbled across the room, roaring now for sheer volume alone . . . as though by drowning out the sound of the rifle he was protecting himself from the bite of its bullets. He staggered across the sitting-room to the glass-doored breakfront that had belonged to Harley's mother. In the corner beside the breakfront leaned Hobart's old twelve gauge double-barreled shotgun and Harley's new "over and under". Hobart lurched forward and grabbed up the double-barreled gun. He broke the action and then wrenched open the doors of the breakfront. He pawed among the neatly stacked boxes of shells, found two, and fumbled them into the gun.

A bullet whined off the space heater. Hobart closed the breech of his shotgun and, as though suddenly remembering, turned back and with gentle care closed the doors of the breakfront. Neatly scotch-taped to the inside of one of the glass panes were the post-cards that Harley had sent to Hobart while he was away in the army. Butted side by side were a row of motels in Colombus, Georgia, the Golden Gate Bridge, a view of downtown Seattle, the ice breaking up on the Yukon River and a bull moose feeding in a cold Alaskan lake.

"I love her!"

Hobart turned. The bullet took him in the throat. He rocked slightly, and then stood perfectly still. Suddenly there was silence. Harley stood with the rifle still half raised, not breathing.

It must have struck a carotid artery. The blood that gushed silently from the wound was violently, obscenely red. It was awesomely beautiful. The sunburned face seemed anemic and sickly by contrast. Hobart inhaled a long, slow, deep breath. The gurgle of the blood sucking into his lungs was loud and vulgar in the silent room. His eyes clouded over. It was as if they had twisted about and turned inward, completely self-absorbed. He took two steps forward into the center of the room and carefully sat down, holding the shotgun up and out from his side so that it wouldn't discharge accidently. Then he stretched out flat on his back, rigid and formal, his arms straight down at his sides, the shotgun aligned with his right leg. He exhaled slowly.

Blood bubbled in his nostrils and at the corners of his mouth.

Harley began to sway back and forth. The rifle dangled foolishly from his hand. He moaned softly in cadence with the motion, ". . . God, oh God, Jesus God . . . oh Jesus God, oh God . . ."

A small, swift, silent creature brushed past Harley. Soft and fragile as the wing of a moth, it scarcely stirred the hot, heavy air. It hovered for a moment above Hobart and then crouched down over his chest. It raised the barrels of the shotgun and pressed back on Hobart's hand.

The blast was the roar of doom. No sound could be more thunderous. No action could be more violent . . . no act more final. The range was point blank. The unchoked twelve gauge charge took Harley above the belt and obliterated him.

The recoil of the shotgun had wrenched Hobart's arm backward and his finger was caught awkwardly in the trigger guard. The gun had struck Mercy's cheek a glancing blow. She drew herself up onto Hobart's chest, curling into a fetus and clutching to his shirt as the room rocked.

She stayed that way for what seemed like hours, her eyes tightly shut. The echo of the shotgun blast was wild in her ears, and, just as she began to fear that she had been permanently deafened, the roar and the dizziness began to subside. She forced herself to move. She couldn't wait too long. She had to act while the terror and shock were still genuine . . . evident in her voice.

She crawled to the wall near the door to the kitchen. The telephone was on the wall. She stood up. Her legs were weak and she held to the door jamb for support. She took the receiver from the hook and pressed it tightly to her ear. She listened intently. It was still difficult for her to hear. Then, when she was certain she heard the operator, she screamed.

"Help! Oh God, Hattie . . . help! It's Hobe and Harley . . ."

She dropped the receiver and let it hang by its cord. The scream had helped clear her head, but she was still weak. She dropped down on all fours and crawled back to Hobart. She took up the same position above him as before. Her senses were alert now. She listened to the muffled sounds that came from the telephone receiver.

"Mercy? Are you there, Mercy? If you can hear me, honey, please answer."

It was Hattie. Mercy could hear the worry in her voice. Then it became garbled. Hattie had turned away and was talking to someone else. Mercy could make out fragments: ". . . something terrible . . . Sheriff Conklin . . . McCabe place . . .", then more clearly, "Mercy, honey, do you hear me? Can you answer, honey? What's wrong, Mercy?"

Mercy crouched silently, collect-

ing her thoughts. *They'd come fast, now. She had twenty minutes to herself. It would take anyone at least that long to get to the farm from town.* She erased the telephone from her mind . . . and immediately became aware of Hobart's heartbeat. She started in fright. *My god, he's still alive!* She lifted her head and looked into his face. It was covered with blood. The cheeks seemed sucked in, drained. The eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, had mercifully closed. She could just barely detect his breathing, and the blood no longer spurted from the wounded throat . . . it oozed quietly. Mercy felt the nausea rising. She turned away, her teeth gritting. "Die, damn you . . . die!"

She was aware now of the blood. She was covered with it, soaked in it. The room reeked of it . . . sweet and rich and thick. She remembered the buckets of blood when her brothers had butchered hogs in the fall. She looked back across her shoulder and saw the path of blood she'd dragged across the floor to the telephone. It was smeared on the wall where she'd leaned. Then Mercy saw Harley . . . and she knew she was going to be sick.

She started to get up, to run outside . . . at least to the kitchen sink. *No!* She caught herself. *Be natural! Be pitiful! Be sick!* She let herself go, as she was. She vomited over Hobart and over herself. She fell forward weakly into the mess. She thought she was going to faint.

"No, goddam it!"

She snarled and clenched her teeth and clutched tightly to Hobart's shirt. *She could take this. Hell, yes. Why was this blood and filth any different than the blood and filth she'd lived with all her life? She had lived, hopelessly, for twenty six years in the constant stench of shit. All kinds of shit. Pig, horse, cow, chicken . . . you name it. Yes, and human too. She'd cared for her grandfather for five years. She had cleaned that senile, lecherous, incontinent old bastard while he'd leered at her and pawed over her. And when he'd died, and all the long sad faces were turned away, she had spit on his grave.*

"I can take this, and anything else, for twenty minutes," she snarled. ". . . because this is the end." She rubbed herself savagely into the stink and gore.

"Hey there, McCabe!"

The voice was deep and gruff. Mercy froze.

"Hello, Hobe? Harley? Anybody there?"

Mercy relaxed. It was Sheriff Conklin and his voice came through the telephone receiver.

"Mercy? Will you try to come to the phone, honey? This is Sheriff Conklin." The gruff voice had turned gentle. There was an anticipating silence. Mercy lay still and listened. She thought of moaning once, but decided against it. There was some incoherent mumbling in the background and then the sheriff's voice came through clearly again.

"If you can hear me, Mercy . . . just stay where you are and don't worry. I'll be right out."

There was silence on the line. Mercy was aware of the monotonous drone of insects in the sun-drenched fields. She was exhausted from the tension. Her body was heavy and languorous. She dozed.

Mercy awoke with a start. She was frightened and confused. She felt as though she'd slept for hours. Something tickled her cheek. She shivered, and the fly buzzed away to light almost immediately on Hobart's blood-smeared hand. Mercy rolled her eyes and followed the fly. It crawled down a sausage-like finger and probed at a thickening puddle of blood.

Hobart was dead. The huge chest was perfectly still. The blood had stopped pumping from his throat and was already beginning to coagulate. Mercy could feel it drawing and tightening about her face and arms. She felt a sudden surge of panic. Suppose it dried and glued her tight, like a living scab, to the dead body of her husband? *My God, where were they? How long had she slept? Why weren't they here?* The heat lay heavy and motionless over the room. She found it difficult to breathe. She had an almost uncontrollable urge to run from the house. She was losing her nerve. She rolled her eyes about, looking desperately for something in the room that would take her mind off the blood and the heat and the smothering claustrophobia.

They were on the floor next to the space-heater, worn and soiled and dogeared. There was a Sears and Roebuck catalogue and a Montgomery Wards. If only she had them near . . . just to riffle the pages. Mercy closed her eyes and concentrated. She discovered that she didn't need the books. The pages that interested her, the ones she'd pored over endlessly, were engraved on her mind. She could see the jewelry, the dresses and gowns, the underwear and stockings. The pages appeared in minute detail, down to the prices and varieties of colors . . . sexy sounding colors that she couldn't really picture, but the names of which made her skin crawl.

Mercy shivered pleasantly and giggled. The catalogues said black was the fashion this year. She looked wonderful in black . . . the black hair, black eyes and milky white skin. And black was the color of mourning. *Oh, she'd wear black all-right . . . black lacy underwear you could see through and long black stockings with garters that tickled, and tight black dresses that showed off her milky white breasts. She'd be the blackest, mourningest, sexiest goddam widow that ever wiggled after a hearse. She'd have every sniffing man, son-of-a-bitch who laid eyes on her rooting at her feet like a pig.*

Twenty thousand dollars. That's what the insurance policy was for. Then there was the farm. Old Walt Farnum, from over in Jessup, had offered Hobart and Harley "top

price" for the farm anytime they decided to sell. Mercy remembered Old Walt's fat gut rubbing against her as he squeezed out the door. *He'd damn well pay top price, and then some, to this poor little helpless widow.* All that money! Mercy could see her brothers, with their washed-out, sun-bleached, sow-like wives. And her father . . . that miserable, phony bastard. She could still feel the stubble of his beard when he'd kissed away "his little girl." He hadn't even bothered to shave for her wedding. How happy they'd all been to marry her off to an old man. She could picture how they would suck around her now. *Imagine that . . . their Mercy, a rich little old widow lady.* They were trash . . . all of them. Yes, even that smooth insurance man from Raleigh. With his clean polished fingernails and his soft tricky hands, the wonderful sweet smell of his armpits . . . he'd thought he was doing a country girl a favor. Well, to hell with all of them. She'd kiss them off, and she'd kick the red clay from her feet for ever. Now she could buy anything and anyone she wanted.

Mercy felt the lassitude creep over her. She submitted to it and allowed herself to relax into a restful, semi-conscious stupor. She heard the big Oldsmobile police cruiser turn off the highway onto the rutted, neglected dirt road. She dozed in the deep, powerful whine of its engine, and in the hot drone of the insects. She was so sleepy.

"My God." The sheriff came gingerly into the house through the screen door of the kitchen and nearly stumbled over Harley who lay, sprawled grotesquely, in the door between the kitchen and sitting-room. He stepped carefully across Harley's body and knelt down beside Mercy. She was breathing easily and deeply, as though asleep . . . probably in deep shock, he thought. He gently touched her face and her eyelids fluttered. He tried to lift her up off Hobart's body, but she resisted. He let her down in horror. "Jesus Christ," he breathed, "she's stuck to him with blood."

"Hey Ben," he shouted. "Hurry up in here, and bring me a pan of warm water and a rag or something."

Hattie called to him through the phone. He went to it and put the receiver to his ear.

"Yeah . . . very bad. Both of 'em. Yeah, looks like they shot each other. No . . . but the poor thing's in shock . . . must've been hell. Look, has the doctor got back to town yet? Good . . . well, send him right out. Look, Hattie, can you get Sylvia to handle the board? We need a woman out here . . . you know. Yeah . . . you can come out with the doc. Before you leave, call the State Police Barracks. They can get an ambulance and the medical examiner from Jessup. Okay . . . make it as fast as you can." He hung up the receiver.

The deputy came into the room and began to retch.

"For Christ's sake, Ben. Get sick later." The sheriff took the pan of water and the cloth and knelt beside Mercy.

"Pry that shotgun away from Hobe, Ben. Go easy . . . there might still be a charge in one of them barrels."

The warm water felt good. He was gentle as he bathed her face and arms, softening the caked blood. Through her half-closed eyes she saw Ben's fat face, pale and wide-eyed, staring down at her in horror.

"Good gawd, Conk', I ain't never seen nothin' like this."

"Me neither, Ben. They must've been a couple of wild men."

"Look at her, Conk'. Ain't she pitiful . . . like a little girl. Enough to make you cry."

"Yeah, the poor little thing. It's going to take her a long time to get over this."

The sheriff slipped his hands into her armpits. His right hand jerked self-consciously as it came in brief contact with the side of her breast. Mercy laughed to herself. Even in the midst of this carnage they were aware of her, disturbed by her body, conscious of her sex. She relaxed completely, became dead weight, forcing his hands to be intimate as he strained to lift her. The sheriff carried her upstairs and laid her gently on the bed. She sneered to herself as he nervously drew her skirt down, trying not to touch her legs with his big fumbling hands. *Yes, big man, you're afraid. Every goddam, wild-eyed, horny, lusting, man-jack of you is scared to hell and gone . . . of me. You're all, every last one of you . . . guilty as hell!* The sheriff covered her with a blanket. He was embarrassed. He moved awkwardly, trying to hurry, making much more noise than was necessary . . . assuring himself, as well as his deputy downstairs, that his actions were beyond reproach. Mercy listened to the heavy feet descend the stairs. She heard the mumbled voices of the two men in the charnel house below.

"I am not afraid," she crowed softly. "I am not guilty."

She lay on the soft bed, her body heavy, aglow with the sense of her power. No . . . there was no remorse, no sense of guilt. She felt a certain saddness for Harley. He had loved her. The touch of tragedy deepened and enriched her triumph. Hobart had loved her too. But she had despised him. Old men who lusted after young girls disgusted her. They deserved what they got. No . . . her mind was clear, her conscience at rest. A situation had developed around her. She had sensed it, nurtured it and watched it grow. She had anticipated its climax and reacted to it instinctively, naturally, and honestly from her guts and soul. True, she had lied to Harley about the burns. But Harley had needed the lie . . . had desperately needed the hate her lie had provoked, to wipe away the guilt that was destroying him. And

when she had discharged the shotgun she had saved him from himself . . . from the horror of what he had done.

Mercy had read about it once in a movie magazine. They called it, *that certain something*. All the great ones had it. Beyond beauty or talent or background, it was innate in those who had it, as natural to them as the economic, coordinated flow of motion was to the natural athelete. It was an absolute faith in intuition, in the senses, in feeling. It was not encumbered by reason, not complicated by thought. It sensed, and seized, with uncanny precision.

Mercy had dreamed of *that certain something*, sensing it within herself. But she had thought about it too much. She had strangled it in her mind. For twenty-six sordid, hopeless years it had lain, dormant, within her . . . a sleek black panther, crouched, awaiting its prey. She had it. There was no place to go now but up, up, up.

Mercy slipped off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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National Association for Mental Health

BY

FRANK GAY

They were brothers . . . with a twisted Biblical variation.

fra-ter'ni-ty

For those of us who gathered our coal from the railroad tracks, the best times were right after sunrise or before sunset. The rail police were least likely to be around then.

Of course, other guys besides my brother Joe and me were out walking the tracks scrounging for coal too, specially in the afternoon, and sometimes there were fights. The worst fights I ever saw involved Joe. He was only 17 when he was murdered in one.

Joe and I did our coal picking in the afternoon mainly or after work when we could get work, although it was the Depression and we didn't get it often. We'd each take a burlap bag and walk along the rail bed dragging the burlap beside us, stooping to pick the pieces where they had fallen from the freights. Sometimes we'd gather up some for Beverly, Joe's girl. It was dirty work, and cold in winter. You'd get to sniffling and wipe your nose with a sooty hand and then you were a mess.

With our Old Man drunk so often, we had no other way to get coal in those years. But I'm not kicking. It wasn't so bad for us because the tracks ran right in front of our house and we didn't have far to lug it.

We'd seen the Redhead a number of times before the first fight. He used to come into our section of track and into everybody else's too whenever he felt like it. But we stayed out of his. He was king of the tracks around our way.

There wouldn't ever have been a fight if Joe hadn't challenged him. But Joe was 17 and tall and muscular, and it kept gnawing at his manhood that some other guy was king. Besides, Joe was trouble without half trying, and when he worked at it, there was nothing to do but go away from him. Even me, his brother. Or maybe especially me.

I was a year younger than Joe, and just about as tall and strong. It could be I was stronger. But there was no monkey on my back. It didn't matter to me who or how many was king.

The day of the first flight was no different from a dozen other days involving the Redhead except that on this day Joe decided he could take him. It was sometime in January, late in the afternoon. It was cold, and your breath was a cloud in front of you.

We had each filled better than half a bag when we first saw him. He came along with his own burlap empty. He stayed on the other side of the tracks, but walked to a point directly opposite us before he started filling. He showed his contempt by ignoring us. He didn't even spit in our direction.

He was bigger than Joe and maybe 20 years old. He had a large nose, a lot of freckles and too much jaw. He was broad and square in the back and shoulders. He had a jacket on, but no hat, and he needed for somebody in his family to cut his red hair.

Joe stared at him a while, then started across the tracks toward him. The guy straightened up with a lump of coal in his right first and waited. They didn't say a word, either one of them. As Joe stepped over the last rail, they crouched a bit, leaned forward from the waist and sprang at each other.

Only one blow was struck, and it was the Redhead who landed. He caught Joe square in the mouth with his fist and the piece of coal. I can hear the sound to this day. I never saw blood run like that before or since. Joe stood there weaving dizzily. Then he sat down on the rail bed, stupid with pain and shock.

The Redhead picked up his own almost empty burlap, walked across the tracks to near where I was, shouldered first Joe's bag of coal and then mine, and went on down and across the tracks on his way without a word. He never looked back.

I half-carried and half-walked Joe home. I sent a neighbor kid for Beverly. I hoped she would know how to stop the bleeding because I sure didn't, and the Old Man was drunk and out cold on the bed in the other room, and no good at all again.

Beverly did stop the bleeding after a while, and she stayed with us for the next two days nursing him. We were able to borrow a couple of cots from the neighbors and we put them, one for him and one for her, in the kitchen near the cook stove where it was warm. I got more coal from the tracks, and we kept a roaring fire going.

I never saw any girl as lovely as Beverly. She had olive skin, black hair and enormous brown eyes. She was slender with large breasts. I knew even then because I'd once seen her naked. We didn't make much use of locks in that neighborhood, and one day, hunting for Joe,

I walked into her kitchen and there she was taking a bath in a tub near the cook stove. She took my breath, she was so beautiful.

I could never understand why she went with a mucker like my brother. He abused her regularly, even slapped her around sometimes. Once, when he was drunk, he grabbed her father by the shirt-front and threatened to beat him up. The thing about Joe was, he could do it too.

I wondered if Beverly's feelings about Joe hadn't changed since the incident with her father, and if she wasn't too scared of him to let it show. But if I was right in this, you couldn't tell it from the way she nursed him for those two days.

Joe was a mess. Six teeth were missing. His lips, gums and tongue were badly cut and swollen. He was dirty with coal dust, and he was as mean as ever, both at first when he was half-conscious and later as he came out of it. Despite his injuries, I knew how it would be—only a matter of time until his mouth and jaw healed and he went after the Redhead again.

Beverly's mother and father came around to plead with her to come home that first night. They kept saying, "You can't stay in this house all night with these men." Beverly was 16, and they had a point, but she refused them. I got the idea—maybe it was the way they looked at us and the house—that their real reason was something else. It had to do with what they thought of us as a family. They didn't own much of the world either, but the father was sober, they were respectable, and we weren't, not even in that neighborhood.

Our mother was dead. The house we rented was the worst in the block. The upstairs had burned out before we moved in, and was blocked off with boards. We had only two rooms on our floor—the kitchen and one other, where the three of us slept—and the john was in the back yard. No wonder they wanted her to go home that night.

Joe sure didn't help things any. He woke while they were there and cussed Beverly out—sore, swollen mouth and all—and then when he saw them, he yelled threats against her father. I wished I could find me a hole somewhere to crawl in and hide, even though, with Joe working on them, it wasn't long til they left.

All we needed to make the party complete was for the Old Man to rise from the drunken dead in the next room and stagger in. But he didn't. He either stayed asleep or stayed passed out, whichever he was, and we didn't hear from him.

The Old Man was a day laborer for the City when he was sober. He was a strapping man, and he swung a maul for the Bureau of Highways. He was useless, but gentle, and he provided for us when sober and did not when drunk. Then we'd get soup and such from the

neighbors. Afterwards he would ask us to forgive him and he'd swear off forever, though it didn't amount to anything and we knew it.

We left school as soon as possible, and we learned to pick up odd jobs early. We got ourselves a big wagon and collected and sold old cardboard and newspapers. Later on we bought wire brushes and cleaned the white stonework on the front of the red brick row houses.

Two years before, Joe began to be hired by Mr. Mooney, a neighbor who was in the moving business. It wasn't much of a business in those days, but whenever the guy got a job to do, he took Joe on as a helper. Now he was starting to hire me too. Joe and I were strong and cheap, and we liked that kind of work.

The second day after the fight, Mr. Mooney came looking for Joe and ended up taking me. I managed a full day out of it, and I was glad to get the money.

I was heading for home that evening, knowing Beverly was still there and hoping Joe was treating her better, when I ran into the Old Man at the corner of our block. I was surprised because I didn't know he had even come out of the other room.

He was drunk again, staggering along the street. I put his arm over my shoulder and supported him the rest of the way home.

Joe was awake lying on his cot in the kitchen when we arrived. Beverly was at the stove. The Old Man stumbled in, leaning all over me. Nobody said anything, but I could see the anger flare in Joe's eyes.

As we headed for the other room, the Old Man's foot caught in the leg of Joe's cot, and he slipped off my shoulder and fell to his knees, striking his head on the edge of the cook stove.

Joe swore, climbed out of the cot, yanked the old Man up by the back of the shoulders and spun him around. He was bleeding from a gash across his forehead. Joe hit him full in the mouth, and the Old Man fell again.

Beverly took Joe's arm, saying, "He's hurt."

"He deserves to be hurt."

"He's your father."

"Why don't he act like it then? If that's what a father's like, I don't need one." He pushed her aside, and she fell on the cot. He kicked the Old Man in the ribs and then the stomach.

He turned back to Beverly, still on the cot where she'd fallen. Her dress was above her knees. He flipped it up farther and ran his fingers up her leg. She grabbed his hand and resisted. He twisted free and smacked her hard with his open hand across the mouth.

I got to my feet, pushed in between them and held him back. "That's all," I told him.

He exploded. He was a wild man. The punches came from every direction. I retreated fast, blocking most of them. Out of the corner of my

eye, I saw Beverly run out the door.

I was trying to hold him off until he tired. He'd lost a lot of blood, and he'd been flat on his back for most of the last two days. But he kept coming, and I wasn't sure that I wouldn't have to start fighting back to protect myself. His mouth was already a wreck and if I hit him there, God help him.

Then he collapsed. He just fell down and that was it, like some animal at the end of a fit. I picked him up, put him in the cot, and covered him. Next I put the Old Man in bed in the other room.

Finally I dug my hands deep in my pockets and went for a long, sad walk.

It was two months almost to the day from the first fight with the Redhead to the second. In that period Joe was tougher to live with than usual.

He told me the Old Man would come home drunk one night too often, and he was going to beat him to a pulp. Another time he said he was going for a walk and that if he ran into Beverly, he'd give her my regards, only this time he'd do it right.

We had a heavy iron bar we'd picked up somewhere which we kept around the house and used as a barbell. Everytime you saw Joe during those two months, he was lifting the bar.

He'd always been powerful, but now you could tell it just by looking.

Late one afternoon he said, "I'm going after the Redhead, and I want you along. Bring your knife, but stay out of it unless he's got friends with him."

It was March, and a fairly warm day. We went along the tracks for maybe a mile, but no Redhead, so we turned back.

The sun was not far from going down as we got near our own neighborhood again. Then, about a block from the house, we saw him. He'd started working in our territory while we were down in his section looking for him. He had a bag nearly full of coal.

He just stood watching us from the other side of the tracks. Probably didn't really believe Joe would come looking for more, which shows he didn't know some of the things I knew. As Joe started toward him, he again bent over and got a lump of coal in his right hand.

Joe did the same and kept on advancing. It was almost a repeat of the first time. As Joe crossed the last rail, they crouched a bit, leaned forward from the waist and sprang at each other.

Only this time it was Joe who connected. He caught the Redhead toward the back of the jaw, not far from the ear, and the guy went down. It was a good, solid blow, though nothing like the destruction Joe had got last time out.

The guy jumped to his feet and reached into his dungaree pocket. He brought out his knife, and I

knew then that somebody was going to die. Joe was suddenly holding his own knife. I dragged out mine, opened the blade, and crossed the tracks.

The two of them circled to the right with the knives in their right hands, hunting for an opening, but not committing themselves.

I got near and Joe hissed at me, "Stay out of it, I told you." I stopped and waited, but all of a sudden I wanted in, not out.

The break came when the Redhead lost his balance momentarily on the roadbed. Joe struck just beneath his ribs. He was starting to drive in deeper when the Redhead regained his balance, lurched free of the blade and swung his own knife deep and hard into Joe's stomach.

I saw Joe's eyes bulge almost until they popped. He wrenched away, clutched his stomach, his knife still in his hand, and fell to his knees. The Redhead, bleeding heavily from the gash in his side and unsteady on his own feet, moved in on him.

The Redhead jabbed at Joe and caught him lightly in the shoulder, but Joe's blade flashed up in a desperate arc and entered the guy's chest. Then the two of them fell together in a thrashing, stabbing, grunting, moaning heap.

They did not move for long, either one of them. I looked up and down the tracks and saw no one else in the growing nightfall. I went forward to examine them, my own knife ready in case the Redhead lashed out at me.

But the Redhead would never lash out again. He was dead. I looked at Joe. He was still breathing when I rolled him over, but he was dead by the time I straightened up. He had one hole in his stomach and another in his heart.

I got out of there.

All that was nearly 30 years ago. Joe's gone, the Old Man's gone, and the Depression and two wars and a thousand other people and things are gone with them.

My life has changed so much you wouldn't believe it. I have my own moving and hauling business, and it has grown to fair size. I'm not wealthy, but I'm doing well. I've been to night school, and I stayed long enough to learn most of the things I should have learned as a kid.

Best of all, I have a happy marriage and a wonderful family—three fine sons who have no equal anywhere. One of them has been to college, one is there now, and one is yet to go. Each is tall and muscular and has some spunk about him, but not one of them is a brawler. That's my doing. I learned long ago that some brawlers die young, and I love my sons too much for that.

As you might expect, my wife's name is Beverly. She is still lovely, and she has been a great wife and mother.

But there is one thing I have never shared with even my family, keeping it absolutely within myself. Sometimes it devils me. But when it does, I think upon the kind of person my brother Joe was, and I am not troubled for long.

You see, the Redhead gave Joe a bad wound in the stomach, but it was I, leaning over him, who finished him off. I put the knife in his heart.